

Videoconference brings soldier home for the holiday

By [KELLYN BROWN](#), Chronicle Staff Writer

Tuesday, December 28, 2004

In 63 days, Army Reserve Maj. Gary Metzer may or may not be on his way home from Iraq. His tour could be extended, but for now he has the date marked on his calendar.

Stationed about 10 miles north of Baghdad, Metzer ate pizza for lunch on Christmas day, fell ill and missed the holiday dinner.

The 36-year-old did, however, receive presents from his family and friends. One he opened Monday -- in the form of a videoconference call with his wife and her family. The service was provided by the Montana State University's Burns Telecom Center.

The present was actually given to Metzer's wife, Jen, from her sister on Christmas day. But Gary said during the conference call it was a pretty good gift for him too.



Gary puts a virtual arm around his wife Jen from 11,000 miles away

Gary was shipped to Iraq almost a year ago as part of the 416th FET #9 engineering unit from his home state of Wisconsin. He has now spent more time in Iraq than he did with his wife following the couple's marriage in July 2003.

Despite that, he appeared upbeat during the conference call. He laughed when his father-in-law, Gary Deutscher, told him he won some money over the weekend because the Green Bay Packers beat the Minnesota Vikings and was nearly stuck with an exercise ball during a gift exchange.

Gary Metzer, an engineer from Sullivan, Wis., has relatives in Bozeman. One of them, Sara Deutscher, works at the New Services Department at MSU and learned that the school was providing videoconference calls for soldiers' families.

It is a relatively new technology that soldiers across the world have come to enjoy. In Montana, access to the "Freedom Calls Network" is increasing. And Monday it was first time the videoconferencing technology was used at the school. And the service, although still somewhat limited, is expected to be in high demand in the coming months. Recently nearly 700 members of the Belgrade-based 1-163rd were sent to Iraq.

It gives local families a chance to see a loved one's face along with hearing their voice, which is often needed during the holiday season.

"For families, it can be really hard," Jen said. "It's the stress of the holidays."

That stress was amplified for Jen recently when her grandmother died. And then she came home to find a dead mouse in her home. Either a large or small crisis can make her miss her husband.

"When all these things came crashing down I wondered why he can't be here," Jen said.

At the same, Jen is used to her husband leaving. When the two were still dating, Gary was deployed to Bosnia.

During the videoconference call Monday morning, the Army Reservist did say Iraq is a bit different.

"I think people in Bosnia were tired of war and really wanted us there," he said. "Not that I don't get some of that here. It's just different."

Gary said little about the state of Iraq to his family. He said his projects, mostly building roads, are coming along very slowly.

He keeps up on the news, which is often the only way he'll know what happened when he hears an explosion or sees smoke. It is an environment Gary finds hard to like, other than the friends he's made and the consistent sunny days.

Sara said Gary drops subtle hints that things are tough in Iraq. "Sometimes just heading off the base can be dangerous," she said.

But Monday, Gary just seemed pleased to catch up with his wife and her family during the holidays. His brother-in-law, Dale Deutscher of Bozeman, said he will take Gary snowmobiling and on a trip down the river when he returns.

At one point, Jen stood next to the large videoconference screen and her husband put his left arm out. It looked like Gary had his arm around his wife, even though he was thousands of miles away. One of the couple's relatives snapped a picture.

Gary wasn't home for the holidays this year, but he seemed closer than Baghdad for about one hour at MSU Monday morning.

He misses his wife and he misses ice cream, but he loved his Christmas present.

"I have a great sister-in-law," Gary said. "Thank you Sara."

For the next three months, Gary said, he will just try to stay busy. In Iraq time moves slowly leaving too much time to worry.

"You look forward to your next meal and mail call," Gary said. "You're always looking forward to something new."

For more information on the "Freedom Calls Foundation" videoconferencing network at Montana State University, call 994-6550.