

## "He's Our hero"

High-tech link gives some families, soldiers at Iraqi bases some face time

By [GARY GRAY](#)

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The Stinnett family reacts as Michael appears on the video conference screen Tuesday afternoon.

BRISTOL, Tenn. – Kelly Stinnett and her four children sat scrunched tightly together Tuesday on the front row of an otherwise empty auditorium, waiting to see and hear their hero.

Her 19-month-old twins fidgeted and swung their legs to and fro, cooing “Daddy. Daddy.”

Just then, the soldier appeared on the large screen in front of them. The U.S. Army engineer was wearing fatigues and had a wide grin on his face as he sat at a long, brown table.

“Hey – how’s it going,” Michael Stinnett said to his wife and children. “Greetings from Baghdad!”

His wife; stepdaughter, Kaitlyn Oliver, 13; son, Jordan, 7; and twins, Jacob and Jenna; had waited patiently inside Bristol Regional Medical Center’s Monarch Auditorium for the chance to spend 30 minutes with their loved one, who is on a 15-month tour in Iraq.

“I’m just a couple streets down from Saddam’s palace,” said the beaming soldier. “What are you guys doing?”

“Having lots of fun,” answered Jordan, who was dressed in a T-shirt bearing an American flag as he also held a Teddy Bear. “Come home and go swimming.”

The private, 30-minute video conferencing calls between personnel currently deployed in Iraq and their family and friends was made possible by a private firm and a non-profit organization that both specialize in telecommunications.

The calls were arranged in honor of the July 4th holiday and because of the sacrifices made by men and women of the U.S. armed services.

The Stinnets allowed the Herald Courier a few moments of their private time at the beginning of their exchange.

“You look so good,” Kelly told her husband.

Not bad for a man getting “three to four hours of sleep a night,” her husband replied. “There’s just an endless list of things we have to do.

“I’m real busy. I’m building lots of stuff for the soldiers. But it’s really hot, and sometimes it’s like being in a big sea of brown,” he added about the Middle Eastern sand and dust.

The family calls Jefferson City, Tenn., home, but they’ve been living at Fort Polk, La., where Michael Stinnett is assigned.

When his wife asked him about the living conditions at Camp Victory in Baghdad, the soldier just smiled.

“I’m OK here, but it can get pretty bad out there,” he said. “Imagine having to live in a trash dump – that’s what I saw people doing a few days ago.”

Kelly Stinnett said she learned of the opportunity to speak with her husband through a friend living in Greeneville, Tenn.

“He’s our hero, and I’m really proud of him,” she said. “Not everybody can do what he’s doing. Me – I’m a proud stay-at-home mom.”

The two stay in touch mostly by e-mail, or by telephone, and the couple has been apart only 23 days – so far.

“It’s his first tour, and he’ll be gone for 15 long months,” she said. “After that, they have to be stateside for 12 months, so at least I know he’ll be here for that long. After that, I don’t know.”

After the private conference, the family left the auditorium and Kelly Stinnett, trying to keep her kids near, said this about her husband: “He may be a big, macho guy, but he’s got a big heart. He did tear up on me a little bit there.”

BRMC was one of 31 sites nationwide where local families of U.S. military personnel placed the free video conferencing calls.

The electronic face-to-face meetings included troops at five military installations in Iraq with Freedom Calls centers: Al Asad Airbase, Camp Taji, Camp Fallujah, Camp Victory, Baghdad and Camp Taqaddum.

A private firm, a nonprofit group and BRMC teamed up to provide the conferences.

TANDBERG, with dual headquarters in New York and Norway, designs, develops and markets systems and software for video, voice and data.

The Freedom Calls Foundation provides video conferencing, telephone, and Internet services to U.S. troops in Iraq and Afghanistan.

[ggray@bristolnews.com](mailto:ggray@bristolnews.com) | (276) 645-2512