

Area families see dads in Iraq

By: DEIRDRE NEWMAN - For The Californian
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TEMECULA ---- Even with the marvels of modern communication, families separated by a military deployment in war zones can still ache to see their loved ones.

Sunday, that yearning was muted a little bit for 17 Marine families who were able to see their loved ones face-to-face through videoconferencing. All the Marines are from Camp Pendleton and stationed in the infamously violent Sunni Triangle in Iraq.

For children, it was a chance to wish their dads a happy Father's Day. For wives, it was a chance to tell their husbands how much they missed them.



Mika Biagi, 34, of Murrieta, and her children, Shayne, 4; and Shance, 3, and Shanon, 9, wish Marine Capt. Greg Biagi, 40, the family patriarch stationed in Iraq, a happy Father's Day as they see him displayed on a screen in a videoconference Sunday at the Hypnosis Center of Southern California in Temecula.
Edward Hannigan

For Katleynn Jones, 11, it was a chance to tell her dad how she excelled at an accelerated reading program at her school in Murrieta. Her dad, Master Sgt. Lorenzo Jones, left for Iraq in February and she set some goals to achieve in honor of him.

One goal was to earn points at her school by reading as many books as she could. She ended up setting a record, reading about 85 books, she said.

Sunday, she got the chance to see her dad's face as she told him of her achievement.

"He was really happy," she said.

The videoconference was put on by the Freedom Calls Foundation at the Hypnosis Center of Southern California at their Temecula locale on Winchester Road. The families could see the unique features of their loved ones' faces on a TV monitor via satellite hookup, free of charge. Each family had about half an hour to talk to the dads.

Freedom Calls works to bridge the lonely divide caused by troop deployment to war zones by uniting military members with their families, said Steve Sikorski, a volunteer coordinator for the foundation's California branch. It provides services to more than 30,000 soldiers and Marines 24 hours a day. The Army has requested that Freedom Calls install eight more facilities in Iraq and two in Afghanistan in the coming months, according to a release issued by the foundation.

While most of the public's attention focuses on the soldiers fighting in Iraq, their families deserve a heap of praise as well, Sikorski said. They have to deal with pressures such as financial obligations, child-rearing and car problems, he said.

"We always think about deployed Marines as heroes," he said. "The heroes are also the families."

The center became involved in providing videoconferencing after a request was made for such a facility at a recent Murrieta Chamber of Commerce breakfast, owner Laurence Miller said. The video interactions can overwhelm people with emotion, he said.

"Some come in all happy and go out in tears," he said.

That's what happened with Mika Biagi, 34, of Murrieta, who got choked up as she talked to her husband, Greg, 40, a Marine captain.

"I miss you so much, sweetie," she said, as tears welled up in her eyes.

Their three kids ---- Shanon, 9; Shayne, 4; and Shance, 3 ---- wished their dad a happy Father's Day and barraged him with information on what they had been up to lately. Shanon recently earned a yellow belt in karate and she held up a certificate of her achievement while her mom held up a picture of her.

"Daddy misses you guys," he said.

Kristi Meharg, 22, traveled all the way from Simi Valley for a chance to see her husband, Johnathan, a 21-year-old corporal. They had gotten married in January just before Johnathan was transferred to Camp Pendleton and received notice he would be sent to Iraq.

Meharg said she was looking forward to seeing him after five months apart, but was a little nervous.

"It's very emotional," she said.

For Katleynn's mother, Colleen Jones, the opportunity to see her husband was priceless.

"I just wanted to look at his face," she said. "It really does a lot for your heart to see their faces."

She also said she was grateful for the community's effort to bring the family members together.

The hypnosis center plans to offer the videoconferencing every two months, although the date for the next event has not been set yet, Miller said.