



Somerset family reunites via video

By DAN DiPAOLO

Daily American Staff Writer

Monday, February 20, 2006

JOHNSTOWN - Kathy Mowry held her son up to the camera and 8,000 miles away, a proud father grinned.

Army Lt. Chris Mowry was seeing his 16-month-old son for the first time since December 4, thanks to the collaborative efforts of a local university and a charitable foundation.

Mowry, of Somerset, is currently deployed in Iraq and his wife, son, father and mother sat at a conference table in Johnstown as the flat-panel wide screen television screen broadcast near-instantaneous sound and video around the globe.

"He looks tired," his mother Liz, said.

"It's after 10," wife Kathy said.

The boy, John, was content to suck his thumb as his uniformed father beamed at him.

The teleconference was being held at a Saint Francis University's Center of Excellence for Remote and Medically Under-Served Areas (CERMUSA) facility located at the Hiram G. Andrews center in Westmont Borough, Johnstown.

"Our goal is to bring technology into the hands of rural Americans," Michael Shanafelt, a senior information technology advisor for CERMUSA, said.

The teleconferencing unit uses an Internet2 connection that is faster by means of higher bandwidth capabilities and a more directly connected network hubs in order to broadcast high-resolution video and sound to a military satellite serving three camps in Iraq.

There was virtually no lag-time to the broadcast. John smiled back at his father's image almost instantly.

"It really is amazing," his father Bill Mowry said about the quality of the interaction between the parties.

The connection and equipment on the ground in Iraq is funded in part by the Freedom Calls Foundation, a New York based charitable organization dedicated to bettering communications between serving armed forces personnel and their families.

The Mowry family was the first of many teleconferences CERMUSA is hoping to hold for local servicemen and their loved ones.

"We're looking for families that would like to participate," CERMUSA Director Jay Roberts said. The facility, known by its acronym for National Telerehabilitation Service System (NSST) can accommodate a large number of families for the visits.

Now that the hardware is in place, scheduling is the biggest obstacle to letting families chat, Shanafelt said. "The limit is on the military side. This is a turnkey technology," he said.

Conferences would likely run for about an hour, because it's hard for servicemen to spare more time than that while on duty, Shanafelt said.

The family sat at the table as a camera mounted between two screens broadcast them across the world at 25 megabits per second. The screen on the left showed their son, in the second month of a year-long deployment with the 4th Infantry Division, seated at a table in his battle dress uniform. He looked well-scrubbed, healthy and a little pale around the freshly shaven high-and-tight haircut.

A second screen broadcast the image the soldier was seeing in Camp Taji, somewhat north of Baghdad, in the Sunni Triangle.

"Say 'I'm hungry' to him," Kathy said to her son.

The NSST is also used for a number of other programs, said Barbara DeMuth, CERMUSA assistant telehealth director.

Since the CERMUSA was started in 1994 with funding help from Rep. John P. Murtha, it has featured programs like live educational seminars and telemedicine clinics, DeMuth said.

The technology gives CERMUSA the ability to interact with up to nine other facilities at once, making distance learning a reality at the NSST. "We had a wound care project that was excellent," DeMuth said.

The only down-side to the program seems to be there is no way to overcome the 8-hour time difference between the countries. "He looked good, other than being a little tired. He'll sleep good tonight," the officer's father said.

Families interested in contacting a loved one serving at either Camp Taji, Camp Fallujah or Al Asad Airfield can reach Michael Shanafelt at (814) 472-3389 or mshanafelt@cermusa.francis.edu

More information about CERMUSA can be found at <http://www.cermusa.francis.edu>.

More information about the Freedom Calls Foundation can be found at <http://freedomcalls.org>.