

# The Fayetteville Observer

## Help sought to keep families connected

By Nancy McCleary  
Staff writer

The picture was fuzzy and sometimes distorted, and the sound wasn't clear at times, but for Patricia Beal it was as good as gold.

The image on the screen Friday at the Airborne & Special Operations Museum was of her husband, Staff Sgt. Michael Beal, coming to her live, via satellite video, from Camp Tiji in Iraq.

Despite the technical difficulties, Patricia Beal was thrilled.

"It was awesome," she said.

Beal exchanged small talk with her husband while holding their son, 9-month-old Logan, on her lap.

Then Michael Beal gave her some good news. He may be reassigned to a position that won't require him to deploy.

He's in his sixth deployment, Beal said. It's the second since they were married two years ago on July 16. Her husband was home for the birth of his son.

Beal beamed and was on the verge of tears as her husband talked to her.

"Oh, my God!" she said. "Are you for real, baby? That is just too good to be true."

Then she looked down at her son.



Staff photo by Nick Pironio  
Patricia Beal holds 9-month-old Logan at the Airborne & Special Operations Museum as she speaks with her husband, Michael, who is in Iraq.

“You know what that means? It means it might be the last time Daddy has to be so far away,” she said.

The video conferences are a lifeline for military wives, Beal said afterward. This is the third she’s had with her husband and this one wasn’t expected, she said.

“It’s really special for us and for other wives,” she said.

The 30-minute video conference was set up through the Freedom Calls Foundation, a New York-based nonprofit that operates a satellite network that provides video conferences for military families at no charge.

The foundation has four facilities in Iraq, according to the organization’s press release.

John Harlow started the group in 2003 after hearing about a soldier who ran up a \$7,000 cell phone bill just staying in touch with his family.

“The cell phone company wouldn’t give him any relief,” Harlow said Friday via the satellite hookup. “It just didn’t seem right to me.”

The organization arranges video conferencing by working with 10,000 partner sites in the country, including the local museum, Harlow said.

Since its inception, Freedom Calls has provided video conferencing to let soldiers talk with their wives or parents, hear a baby’s first words, watch their children being born or visit with dying relatives, Harlow said.

Military couples have gone through marriage counseling, attended children’s birthday events and married via satellite, Harlow said.

A Marine even watched his wife go through in vitro fertilization.

But Freedom Calls is running out of money, meaning it may have to scale back its work or stop altogether, Harlow said.

“It’s not a position we like to be in,” he said.

Harlow is hopeful that people will donate to help keep the video conferences going.

Twice each month, the video conferences are set up at the Airborne & Special Operations Museum with 10 to 16 families communicating in one day.

“If we could get one million people to give \$30 — the cost of a dinner — couples could talk every day,” Harlow said.

For more information, go to the organization’s Web site at [www.freedomcalls.org](http://www.freedomcalls.org).