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## Soldiers get virtual home visits

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"I'll be home for Christmas, if only in my dreams," soldiers used to sing. But thanks to videoconferencing technology, soldiers can do more than just dream about their loved ones back home.

Last week, 10 soldiers in Iraq met face-to-face with 100 family members through a videoconferencing system set up by the Freedom Calls Foundation of Brooklyn Heights, N.Y. The nonprofit foundation provides free Internet communications for U.S. troops in Iraq and Afghanistan to keep in touch with family at home. The foundation operates a videoconferencing and communications center at Camp Cooke in the Sunni Triangle north of Baghdad. Polycom Inc. of Pleasanton, Calif., last month donated its VSX 3000 video systems to the camp.

"There's a world of difference between talking on the phone and sitting face to face with someone," said Maj. Richard Durost of the Army's 593rd Corps Support Group based in Fort Lewis, Wash. Currently serving in Iraq, Durost has been on six deployments with the group, including Operation Desert Storm. "Back then, we maybe got to a phone once a month," he said.

By the mid-1990s, communications had improved so a soldier "got one 10-minute morale call a week," Durost said.

Now about 1,100 soldiers use the facility each day to make free phone calls anywhere in the world.

The foundation's videoconferencing center has brought soldiers together with spouses and newborn babies in hospital rooms and also held a wedding ceremony by videoconference. [See GCN coverage [here](#).]

For the Nov. 20 videoconference, family members gathered at Raytheon Corp. headquarters in Waltham, Mass. Using the Polycom equipment, they visited with soldiers from the 118th Medical Battalion of the Massachusetts National Guard stationed at Camp Cooke.

Expedite VCS Inc. of Westbury, N.Y., is providing technical support, network gateway services and broadband connections for the reunions.

Durost described the video and audio as very "fluid and clear." The only real problem has been some interference caused by thunderstorms in Baghdad.