

## Merry messages

**National Guard soldiers send hi-tech greetings home**

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LENOIR - It was the next best thing to being there.

Even through the small laptop computer screen and eight-second delay, the message from the troops and their families got through loud and clear. The families said they miss their loved ones in Iraq, and the soldiers said they are doing fine.

"Basically, we're doing OK," said Lt. Brian Castle of the Lenoir-based 630th Combat Sustainment Support Battalion on Sunday. "We have our moments like everyone else does, but morale is great, we're doing our job and making a difference."



Kim Castle, 39, gets updates on life in Al-Asad, Iraq, from her husband, Lt. Brian Castle, as her two children, Taylor, 6, and Dylan, 2, listen in.

ROBERT C. REED (RECORD PHOTOGRAPHER)

The teleconference was set by satellite and high-speed phone lines. The greetings were arranged by the battalion and the Freedom Calls Foundation, a New York-based nonprofit organization that allows soldiers deployed in Iraq to communicate with their families and loved ones at home free of charge.

"The practicality of us doing this without this company would have been impossible," said Warrant Officer David Vaughn.

Families were given about 30 minutes to talk to the soldiers from the unit's home base in Lenoir. Families were also treated to a Christmas party, and were surprised with portraits of the soldiers created by a Hickory-based graphics company. The Castles moved to Hickory from Florida in 1999. Castle joined the Guard in 2000 after a four-year stint in the Navy. He left for Iraq in July for a one-year stint, leaving Kim to care for their two children, Taylor, 6, and Dylan, 2. Kim says community support helps, but the household dynamics changed when he left for Iraq.

"It's been really hard," she said. "The routine has to change from a two-parent household to a one-parent household. I realize he's missing out on a lot of stuff."

Castle says he feels family support from his own troops, and that helps. "I volunteered for this, I love the Army," he said. "In the long run, it's worth it."

DETAILS:

For more information about teleconferencing troops overseas, e-mail [schedule@freedomcalls.org](mailto:schedule@freedomcalls.org)

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