



Iraq video conference connects students to the front lines

Six soldiers in Iraq fielded questions from a Lehigh audience on the sixth anniversary of the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

When asked how he was commemorating the sixth anniversary of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Sgt. Charles Dutton—one of six soldiers speaking to a Lehigh audience live from Iraq—replied: “This is the most special thing I have done all day, and I can’t imagine doing anything better than this.”

Lehigh’s [Global Union](#), working with the [Freedom Calls Foundation](#), invited the community to an hour-long, live university-to-battlefield video conference Tuesday at Whitaker 303. This marked the third video conference from Iraq hosted at Lehigh. During the event, students and community members could see and speak directly with U.S. soldiers, who were projected on a large screen.

When asked where they were on Sept. 11, 2001, the soldiers gave a variety of answers that showed how much their lives had changed in the intervening years. 2nd Lt. Rebecca Ponver, 24, was taking notes in a microeconomics class during her first year in college. Dutton, 29, was stationed in South Korea. Cpl. Rhonda Cruz, 20, from Allentown, had just begun her first year of high school.

And Hospital Corpsmen 3rd Class Ian Miles, 24, had recently graduated from high school when he watched the Twin Towers in New York City fall. “Seeing that, I wanted to help,” he said.

“They are doing this for us”

During the conference, the soldiers—including Cruz and Interior Communication Electrician Jeremy Harakal, 28, both from Allentown—described their life at Al-Asad Air Base, the same base President George W. Bush visited last week.

Jessica Lowe ’10, a Global Union intern, moderated the event. “This is the closest we can get, as students, to the front lines,” she said.

Lowe attended a similar video conference last semester and remembers thinking, “Wow, their lives are so different than mine, and they are doing this for us.”

Lowe hopes that other students can likewise benefit from talking with the soldiers.

Although the soldiers did not answer questions about missions, locations, or politics, they provided details about their personal lives and their daily activities.

Dutton and Miles sleep only a couple of hours a night and are frequently awakened at night to complete missions. Others, such as Ponver, an engineer, work at a desk. No matter what their workday activity is, all of the soldiers participate in daily physical training.

The soldiers were passionate about serving their country. Dutton said his duties remind him daily of why he enlisted.

“This is what I want to do,” he said. “You have to love your country to do it.”

Ponver echoed his enthusiasm. “I really love my job,” she said.

A new perspective

However, the troops did not mask their longings for home. They try to stay in touch with family and friends through emails and phone calls.

“I like to call home, and I do so whenever I can. It helps booster me when I feel like this deployment is never going to end,” said Nicholas Lutte, 28, who is eager to see his two sons, who are 4 and 10 years old.

“I like to hear my rug rats running around saying, ‘Daddy, I miss you,’” said Dutton.

The soldiers miss simple amenities which most Americans take for granted. Cruz, for example, craves a Butterfinger candy bar, while Miles wishes for white socks. Hair conditioner, a bar of soap and a Mac3 razor were also on the soldiers’ wish lists.

Jay Shipper ’07 left the conference room with a new perspective on the Iraq war that he studied in his international relations courses.

“To hear about it from themselves and hearing them talk about it sincerely and truthfully adds an extra dimension to it that you don’t get when you read the newspaper or listen to a report,” said the presidential scholar and international relations major.

A learning experience for high school students

For the first time, local high school students attended the video conference. Bill Hunter, director of the Global Union, was seeking a community group to invite when he entered [Nazareth Area High School’s Web site](#).

Immediately, he noticed the red, white and blue bordered box reading “We support our troops! We miss you, Mr. Hall!” Randall Hall, the school’s drivers’ education teacher, is deployed in Bagdad with the army.

Hunter approached the principal, who opened the invitation to all of the school’s teachers. “This

will help (high school students) understand what their freedom costs,” Hunter said.

Kim Bast, a high school psychology teacher, eagerly brought her gifted class, which is beginning to study the media and Iraq. Several other Nazareth Area High School students joined her class, making a total of 10 high school students.

“I really want the kids to hear from the ground what’s going on,” Bast said. She also hopes her students learn to appreciate the sacrifices the soldiers make.

Tonya Amankwatia, a doctoral candidate in learning sciences and technology, rarely misses an opportunity to educate her children.

“It was Sept. 11 and this provided us with an opportunity to interact with the military personnel,” she said. She wanted her sons to see the military personnel they pray for weekly at church and to whom they’ve written letters. The conference also allowed her sons to see satellite and video technology in action.

Her son, Scott, 13, said he will remember “personal things about (the soldiers) and how they react to being there and how they are willing to do their job.” Daniel, 10, said he realized “how much they miss America and how much work they do.”

Sarah O’Neill ’10 gained a deeper appreciation for the soldiers serving in Iraq. “I realized that I could be in Iraq fighting the war,” the international relations major said. “Instead, I’m at college doing my own thing, while these people are dedicating their lives to this cause.”

The Freedom Calls Foundation, which primarily connects personnel to loved ones at home, facilitated the conversation. Before students spoke with the soldiers, John Harlow, the organization’s executive director, told how the video conferencing around the country has made it possible for soldiers to review their children’s homework, say “I do” to the one they love, and once, even, watch the in vitro fertilization of a first child.

In 2006, Lehigh University piloted Freedom Calls Foundation’s first-ever video conference between students and soldiers. This fall, thousands of other schools, from elementary schools to colleges, will participate in similar conferences.

--Becky Straw