



## Freedom Calls unites troops, family by video

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MOBILE, Ala. — From his post in Iraq, Marine Sgt. Chad Matthews watched by video as his wife, Cynthia, gave birth in a Mobile hospital, a heartwarming connection from half a world away that is becoming increasingly feasible from a war zone for the first time.

Freedom Calls Foundation, a New Jersey-based charity born in the wake of the U.S. invasion of Iraq, is making the video hookups available at milestone events for thousands of military families, including about 100 births a month.

"I felt like he was in the room with me," said Cynthia Matthews, who watched her husband's image on the computer screen as he encouraged her during the March 24 birth of their son, Braxton. "He couldn't physically touch me, but he was there."

Unlike previous wars, satellites have replaced telegrams and long phone lines to share homefront news with fighting forces overseas.

Freedom Calls founder and executive director John B. Harlow II said some calls organized by the charity are for small things — a 4-year-old girl wanted to show her father in Iraq that she had learned how to tie her shoe laces.

And there are sad calls. A soldier's sister was dying, and she wanted to tell him goodbye.

Other recent events connected by Freedom Calls include a surprise proposal and a wedding on Valentine's Day, an Army ROTC graduate who was able to have her husband administer her oath of office from Iraq, and a Marine who participated from the front lines in the in vitro fertilization of his first child in Texas.



LYLE W. RATLIFF / PRESS REGISTER VIA AP  
Marine Corps Sgt. Chad Matthews is shown in Iraq on the main screen of a TV monitor at the University of South Alabama Women's and Children's Hospital in Mobile, Ala., Monday, March 26, while his newborn son, Braxton, held by his wife Cynthia, is shown in the smaller picture inset at lower right, during a video conference arranged by the Freedom Calls Foundation. Matthews watched his son being born Saturday via video conference.

Harlow said he began organizing the charity in 2003 after hearing about a soldier with a \$7,000 phone bill for calls back home. He felt the soldiers were being "commercially exploited."

Freedom Calls, which depends on contributions and volunteers, provided its first connections in 2004. Harlow said there are now four call centers in Iraq, with 50 computers and 20 telephones at Camp Taji, north of Baghdad, and video-conferencing operations in two locations in Baghdad.

The Freedom Calls satellite network includes secure high-quality multiparty video conferencing on a computer over a broadband Internet connection. The foundation provides free communications for the soldiers, whose assignments overseas have increased their fondness for laptops and high-speed Internet.

"We're doing about a million minutes a month in phone calls and about 2,000 video conferences a month," Harlow told The Associated Press in a recent telephone interview. He said about 100 births a month are being seen by soldiers and Marines on duty in Iraq.

Pentagon spokesman Navy Lt. Cmdr. Greg Hicks said the work of Freedom Calls has "boosted the morale" of those serving in the military and their family members.

"While we cannot say how easy or difficult the arrangements are, we do hear terrific feedback from those who have had the opportunity to utilize the service provided," Hicks said.

#### **EXPANSION PLANS**

Military officials have asked for an expansion of the video locations, said Harlow, whose foundation, incorporated in New York, is based in Morristown, N.J. Future plans call for Freedom Calls centers at eight more Army camps in Iraq, two Army camps in Afghanistan and eight more Marine Corps camps this year.

Ideally, Harlow said, he would like to expand coverage so that every soldier coming in from a day's duty could talk to his family back home. But expenses are mounting on the charity as demands for its services grow.

"What we really need is cash to run the network. We're in danger of being shut down, leaving thousands of military families in the lurch," said Harlow, described on the group's Web site as an attorney and high-tech venture capitalist. "There is no government funding for this. We'd like to see some."

Harlow, who has not been to Iraq but has received a handshake from President Bush and military commendations for his work, said the charity's annual budget of \$400,000 doesn't allow it to help everyone who requests a warfront connection back home. He said about three out of four requests are turned down.

The military has video links back to their bases, with time restrictions on use, but it's hard for soldiers to use that if their families are not located on the base. Military units have family support groups that assist in aiding family members to come onto the base to use those facilities, Hicks said.

The base-to-base service offered by the military also does not encompass milestone family events such as weddings, births and graduations, which don't take place on installations, Harlow said.

USO spokesman John Hanson in Arlington, Va., said his organization doesn't offer video conferencing like Freedom Calls.

He said the USO, which distributes 300-to-500-minute phone cards to soldiers, plans to open a center in Iraq soon that will allow soldiers to e-mail a message home for free. It will be similar to others USO has worldwide.

The Red Cross, in an emergency, has a service that keeps military personnel in touch with their families following the death or serious illness of a family member or other key events, such as the birth of a child.

Harlow said Freedom Calls also offers services on Okinawa, Japan, and to wounded military at Landstuhl Regional Medical Center in Germany so they can conference with their families in the states.

“And, we hope to be offering services from Walter Reed [Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C.] in the near future,” he said.

Volunteers work with the foundation to get families together for the video connections while commanders and the Red Cross in Iraq locate the soldiers involved.

### **GREETING A NEWBORN SON**

On March 30, Army Col. Jim Close was located in Iraq and allowed to see his 2-day-old son, Ryan, in an hourlong Freedom Calls video conference link to a Peterborough, N.H., hospital. Close hadn't seen his family in eight months; his 10-year-old daughter Megan played an Elton John tune on her saxophone for her dad, and his 4-year-old son Connor showed off his toy light saber and some karate moves.

“The connection is just unbelievable, and it's more than you can really explain,” said his wife, Kerry Close.

In Mobile, Dawn Hicks, manager of telemedicine programs at the University of South Alabama hospital, said she set up the video conferencing equipment for Freedom Calls that was used by the Matthews couple. The equipment makes the link to an Internet address on a secure Web site.

On the opposite end of the state, Robert L. Middleton, a NASA retiree and senior research engineer at the University of Alabama at Huntsville, took the video clip and put it online, using UAH's “streaming video server” that's used for distance-learning teaching.

Middleton, an adviser to Freedom Calls, said the difficulty in Iraq in making the connection is that there are only four sites that have the satellite Internet connection.

Harlow said that's the expensive part of the endeavor: satellite costs.

He commended several corporations for their contributions, particularly Lenovo for computers, Logitech for webcams and FedEx for delivery of equipment to Iraq Freedom Calls Centers.

The technology was in place when Cynthia Matthews arrived at USA's Children's & Women's Hospital at 1 a.m. on March 24. The video equipment was set up at 3 a.m., Dad appeared on screen about 4 a.m. and remained on until about an hour after the baby's 9:19 a.m. arrival.

The couple routinely stays in contact by e-mail and voice mail. But to witness the birth?

“He's just thankful for Freedom Calls,” she said.