

Midland Reporter-Telegram

Operation Freedom Calls connects soldiers, families

Video teleconference service comes to Midland-Odessa

By Stephanie A. Miller

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Photo: Alec Richards
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Operation Freedom Calls is a free service to families and their loved ones overseas provided through a partnership between companies and New York non-profit the Freedom Calls Foundation. The video teleconference calls became available Tuesday in the Midland-Odessa area where they will be made once a month.

It's a service to help keep families connected, said Suzanne Fletcher of Southwestern Bell Corp., which helps coordinate the video teleconference calls in the U.S.

"Communication is our business" and that's our goal, to link as many families as possible to their deployed loved ones, she said.

The Region 18 Education Service Center is a partner with the phone company for this project in the Midland-Odessa area.

"We know that the soldiers are sacrificing their time away from their families," said Steve Welch, telecommunications specialist with Region 18 Education Service Center. "We do support the soldiers in anyway we can and this is our way of giving thanks to them."

John Harlow, the foundation's founder and executive director, said the service began when he contacted businesses to donate their conference call equipment for the messages.

Harlow said the foundation contacted the U.S. Army in Sept. 2003 and operations began in April 2004. The foundation built a satellite network from the U.S. to Iraq, where soldiers of all branches can make connections at three video conference camps in Al Asad, Fallujah and Taji.

To date, the video teleconference service has more than 10,000 U.S. video teleconferencing sites at locations such as universities, corporations and state government sights, Harlow said. Nearly 1,000 video teleconferences and more than 1 million minutes are used each month, he added.

Fletcher said the service came to the West Texas area in December and began in Lubbock. "We've had just about everything," she said.

One engaged couple discussed wedding plans during their video teleconference call and a mother contacted her son on her birthday, Fletcher said.

During one call, a deployed mother told one of her three boys viewing from Abilene he needed a hair cut, asked another how he was doing in his math class and the third if he got his car repaired.

"It just brings a sense of normality to their lives to see their families," Fletcher added.

Midlanders Elvira and Kenneth Moten were the first Tuesday from the Midland-Odessa area to converse via video teleconference with daughter Dionne Strambler, a WO1 officer with the U.S. Army.

It was "exciting" to see her, Kenneth Moten said following the video Calls. "It's like she's right next to us," he said. "It's real helpful for the family to know that you're a TV tube from your child. It's very uplifting."

Strambler described the service as "a real morale booster." The Midland native has been in the military for 11 years.

Army Sgt. Lisa Hamm, a coordinator for the Camp Taji video teleconference units, said the impact the service has made on the soldiers is moving.

Every time a call is made, soldiers are smiling ear to ear because they were able to connect with their families, Hamm said via a video teleconference.

Elvira Moten encouraged others to contact their loved ones through the video teleconferences. "It makes you feel it's more of a personal visitation with your loved one, that closeness, rather than an e-mail," she said.

The next Operation Freedom Calls video teleconference Calls is scheduled for April 13 with four video teleconference calls scheduled that day. For more information or to sign up for a video teleconference, contact Suzanne Fletcher at gf6825@att.com or (806) 794-2100.