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Family connects with Dad in Iraq

"I'm definitely ready to come home," Staff Sgt. Kenneth Knudson told his family

By JULIA REYNOLDS

Herald Staff Writer

For a few moments, the Knudson family could feel like life was almost normal, even though Rosie Knudson lives in Salinas and her husband, Staff Sgt. Kenneth Knudson, is stationed in Taji, a few miles north of Baghdad.

The jerky images on the video screen were jarring at first, and the audio was slightly delayed. It was hard to hear, and even harder for the family not to all talk at once.

But soon the laughter came more easily, along with smiles and the occasional tease. The family clustered close to a small video screen and wished Sgt. Knudson a happy Father's Day from 8,000 miles away.

Rosie Knudson, her children Kenneth Jr., 8, and Kirstie, 11, and her mother, Rose Diaz, had not seen Sgt. Knudson since November.

They gathered in a conference room at the Monterey Hilton, where the nonprofit Freedom Calls Foundation set up the free Father's Day video conference call, a service the group offers regularly to families with loved ones stationed in Iraq.

A tired Sgt. Knudson said it was 1 a.m. and 125 degrees at Camp Taji.

"I kissed a banana slug at a science camp," Kirstie said.

"Ewww," her father replied a few seconds later.

Kenny drew a picture and held up to the camera while his father laughed.

Kirstie asked her dad if he quit smoking, and he said yes. "Are you sure?" she teased.

Knudson, 34, is on his second tour in Iraq. The family had been living together at Fort Bragg, N.C., where Knudson was stationed. When Kenneth was deployed to Iraq two years ago, Rosie and her children moved back to her native Salinas to stay with her mother until Kenneth's return.

Freedom Calls was founded just over a year ago by two East Coast technology executives, and is funded by donations. The group has set up three Internet call centers in Iraq and plans to expand to more than 200 centers in Iraq, Afghanistan, and other areas. The sites includes video conferencing, video e-mail, and computers with e-mail and Internet access.

More than 1,000 schools, hotels and other businesses have donated the use of their video conferencing equipment. Finding a video site near the family is not always easy, and Rosie Knudson said she originally was going to have to drive the family to San Francisco for the call.

"But then they asked if I could do it in Monterey, and I said 'of course.'"

Ava Freiermuth, catering sales manager at the Hilton, said the hotel donated the conference room and the Internet connection.

Because the images and sound were transmitted via the Web, the video can sometimes freeze, which took a little getting used to, Rosie said. Her husband said he was watching them on a small computer screen. At one point, Rosie offered to turn the camera around to show her husband the blue Monterey skies.

"No, I'd rather stare at you," he said.

Earlier this month, Freedom Calls set up live video feeds from high school and college graduation ceremonies around the country so military parents in Iraq could "be there" with their sons and daughters. The phenomenon even became the subject of a week's worth of Doonesbury comic strips, where a father in Iraq is embarrassed by his son's magna cum laude speech.

One soldier has even used the service to coach his wife through the birth of their baby, the company said.

In Monterey, the Knudson family "visited" for nearly an hour, and most of their conversation centered around Sgt. Knudson coming home. To 8-year-old Kenny, golfing, fishing and bowling were at the top of the list.

Rose Diaz asked her son-in-law if he wanted to eat tamales and chorizo con huevos when he returned, which could be sometime this summer.

"You have to ask?" he said.

"Are you ready to come home?" Rosie asked.

"Yes," Kenneth said. "I'm definitely ready to come home."

Julia Reynolds can be reached at 648-1187 or jreynolds@montereyherald.com.