

## Talkback TV links soldier to his family

By Carrie Coppernoll  
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ENID - Angie Watkins nestled her daughter on her lap and grinned at her son and stepson: "Ready to see Daddy?"

The Watkins children saw their father Friday afternoon for the first time since he was home on leave from Iraq two months ago. This visit was through Freedom Calls, a not-for-profit group that organizes teleconferences for soldiers overseas and their families at home over at a satellite network that the foundation has set up under authority of the Secretary of the Army.

The two Watkins boys - Tabor and Traven - smiled and stared at a television screen as their father, draped in desert camouflage, set down his black rifle and sat down in front of a video camera in Iraq.

"Daddy is cool," Tabor said to his mother, who repeated it louder for her husband to hear. The boy softly rattled on, telling his dad that he was still 3 years old and that he was going to be a Star Wars monster for Halloween. He asked his dad whether he was flying helicopters.



Angie Watkins wipes away tears as she watches her husband, Army SPC Leroy Watkins, talk with their son Tabor from Iraq. Photo by Michael Downes

"No," Leroy Watkins answered, "not flying one, but in one."

Army Spc. Leroy Watkins was deployed in July to Iraq and probably will be overseas for another year.

Angie Watkins and her children used the distance-learning equipment at the Enid Public Schools administration building. They appeared on one television; Leroy was on another. The soldier's image was fuzzy, but he could see his children as clear as a television broadcast, he said.

"It's great," he said. "I love it. They're getting so big."

The call was free for everyone, district Technology Director Michael King said. The phone call was connected through the Internet and Freedom Calls Satellite Network to Iraq, so there was no cost to the school system, he said.

Angie Watkins said she hadn't heard of Freedom Calls before her husband's application had been accepted. School officials and Freedom Calls staff first began making arrangements a few days ago.

Remembering everything she wanted to say was tough, Angie Watkins said.

"Half of it goes out of your head," she said. "You just want to get 'I love you' and 'I miss you' and 'I'm proud of you' all in."