

Journal Star

Soldier gets taste of home

Navy Chief Petty Officer Laurie Cline, deployed in Iraq, celebrates birthday over conference call

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BY KEVIN SAMPIER

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GALESBURG - Despite thousands of miles and a nine-hour time difference, a local soldier serving in Iraq was able to spend her birthday Thursday with her family in Galesburg, thanks to technology.

"We were going to bring a cake, but we didn't know how you'd blow out the candles," said Mike Cline, husband of Navy Chief Petty Officer Laurie Cline.

Several televisions, a computer and some video cameras set up in a classroom at Carl Sandburg College allowed Laurie Cline to talk to and see her family live during a video conference call.

Laurie Cline has been serving in Iraq as a watch supervisor and assistant security manager for about four months. She celebrated her 35th birthday Thursday with her family with help from the Freedom Calls Foundation.

The foundation provides the conference call service to nearly 30,000 soldiers overseas at no charge and allows them to stay in touch on important occasions such as birthdays, anniversaries and even births.

"It's great they did this for us," Mike Cline said during the party with his wife's family.

Laurie Cline told them about the 100-degree heat, sand with the same consistency as powdered sugar and the dust storms that blow through the area.

"It really blows around a lot," she said, wearing her camouflage uniform with her dark hair tied back. She is expected to come home in late September.

While it was 5 p.m. in Galesburg, it was 2 a.m. in the war zone in western Iraq, where she is stationed.

With balloons, party hats and a giant card, her family was able to wish her a happy birthday.

Fritz Archer, audio visual coordinator at Carl Sandburg College, said the conference call was part of an elaborate system but was as easy as the click of a button to set up.

The signal is carried over the Internet from Galesburg to New York then to Atlanta and finally carried to Germany over fiber optic cables. From Germany, the signal is then sent to Iraq via satellites.

"It felt great," Mike Cline said after the call. "Just catching up on things."

Kevin Sampier can be reached at 686-3041 or state@pjstar.com.