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Video visits from far away

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It's been four months since Eric Herrera, a 25-year-old sergeant in the Army Reserve, saw his family. But although he was somewhere in Iraq on Sunday, he was able to see and speak to them back in San Antonio for 20 priceless minutes.

Herrera's wife, Margie, smiled as he waved and blew kisses to her and Isabella, their 2-year-old daughter, via a computer screen set up at the Army Reserve Center at 600 Callaghan Rd. "You look good — still," she said to her husband.

"You don't have to lie to me," he playfully replied.

After reveling in the sight of his daughter eating a Tootsie Pop and blowing kisses back, Herrera finally stood up, picked up his rifle and slung it across his chest.

"I love y'all. I'll call you," he said. He then pulled off his headset and walked off camera so that another soldier in the 980th Engineers Bravo Company could communicate with family members via the secure Internet connection and video conferencing equipment.

Dozens of families and soldiers from the company were reunited in this fashion Sunday afternoon, thanks to SBC Communications, the Family Readiness Group 980th Bravo Company and the Freedom Calls Foundation, a nonprofit group created last year to help put soldiers in contact with their loved ones.

"I think this is neat," said James M. Maddock, an Air Force veteran thrilled to see his son, James C. Maddock, a 37-year-old sergeant in the Army Reserve assigned to Iraq. "I wish we had this in Vietnam."



(Jerry Lara / Express-News)

Denise Shawn and her children, Miranda, 3, and Carlos, 13, say goodbye to husband and father Spc. Robert Shawn who is stationed in Iraq with the 980th Engineers Bravo Company, during a video conference call at the Army Reserve Center. The family drove from Seguin for the call.

The elder Maddock expressed misgivings, however, that his son wasn't back home. "I'm worried about him, and I'm more concerned about why he went and the justification for him going," Maddock said.

The younger Maddock's wife, Sandra, brought along a surprise guest, Shadow, their 3-year-old golden retriever, in part to make up for the absence of their children, Austin, 9 and Victoria, 7, who were visiting out-of-state relatives.

Shadow licked the camera and then bounded out of camera view. "She's excited," Sandra said as her husband laughed.

"It's sure great to see you guys," the younger Maddock said. "I love you so."

Robert Shawn, a 23-year-old specialist, was elated to see his wife and children, who drove from Seguin for the call. He made silly faces and hand gestures to his son, Carlos, 13, who described seeing his father as "the best feeling in the world."

Shawn's wife, Denise, said the videoconference was the next best thing to being there.

"It's horrible to think of them withering away over there, and he's not," she said. "He looks good, and he looks like they're taking care of him."

"Hopefully, he'll be home some time before November for his two-week R & R, and we'll get to see him and hold him and love him again for a little while."

Barbara Robertson wasn't upset that her son Thomas Robertson III, an Army Reserve specialist, could not participate in the video conferencing session.

She learned upon arriving at the center that he was on his way back to San Antonio for two weeks of rest and relaxation.

"It's just a blessing," she said, choking back tears. "You try not to get emotional."



Sandra Maddock has Shadow, her family's golden retriever, nearby during a videoconference call with her husband, Army Reserve Sgt. James C. Maddock, who is stationed in Iraq. Calls were made available to family at the Army Reserve Center.