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Home calls to Marine

By KAMEEL STANLEY
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SEMINOLE - As far as 2-year-old Hailey Gehringer could tell, her daddy looked close enough to touch.

But each time the toddler reached out to her father Monday morning, all she felt was the slippery surface of a large pull-down screen.

"Can you see me?" she asked. "There is Daddy!"

Her father, 24-year-old Marine Pfc. Daniel Gehringer, answered his daughter from a base in Fallujah. "Hi, Hailey, " he said, grinning. "How are you, beautiful?"

In a large, nearly empty technology classroom on St. Petersburg College's Seminole campus, the Gehringer family was united via a videoconference call.

It was the first time Gehringer, who has been in Iraq since February, saw his infant son, Daniel Walker Gehringer, born May 4.

The baby rested peacefully while his father took a good look at him. "He's all you, " 21-year-old Stephanie Gehringer said softly. "His eyes are still blue."

As if on cue, baby Walker started fussing.

"He's supposed to cry for Mommy, not for Daddy, " Gehringer said. "You're right. He does look like me."

The reunion became emotional even for college staff members, who stayed in the room for the first several minutes.

Monday was the college's fourth time hosting such a session - a free service for local families that want to talk face-to-face with loved ones serving in Iraq.

The college initiated the program a year ago after an administrator learned of the Freedom Calls Foundation, a New York nonprofit group that orchestrates the communication.

"It tugs at your heartstrings, " said Catherine Kennedy, director of the University Partnership Center. "I'm so glad St. Pete College is able to do this."

Stephanie Gehringer, who's studying at St. Petersburg College to become a teacher, learned of the videoconference program on the school's Web site.

Like most military families, the Gehringers stay connected through e-mails, phone calls and Web sites such as MySpace.com.

But sometimes that's not enough. "Seeing him is completely different, " she said. "It'll hopefully make the next three months go a little quicker."

The Marine is scheduled to return to the States in September.

Fast Facts:

To call Iraq

Visit www.spcollege.edu or call (727) 394-6200 for more information about St. Petersburg College's free videoconference calls for Iraq soldiers and their families.