

## Live from Iraq! It's a Slidell High grad

### Local man is able to be at reunion via satellite

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By Sharon Sharpe

The Slidell High School Class of 1982 had a surprise visitor to its 25-year reunion. A two-way satellite video connection allowed Army Maj. Clifton Sawyer to attend the reunion -- live from Iraq.

Sawyer was at the reunion, visiting with about 165 of his classmates for almost two hours one recent evening, which was really 4 to 6 a.m. Iraq time. He was able to see and talk to them and they could see and talk to him on a wide screen mounted on the wall at the reunion, held at Palmettos on the Bayou.

The class, which had 10- and 20-year reunions, usually met in June around graduation time, but had pushed back the date to the end of July when Sawyer was expected to have returned from Iraq. When his return was postponed, Gnase Nelson, one of the reunion organizers, remembered seeing news coverage of soldiers from Iraq watching their children graduate from high school last year over a satellite connection. She did some research and found out about the Freedom Calls Foundation.

Freedom Calls is a nonprofit organization that has built a satellite network dedicated to providing state of the art video conferencing, telephone and Internet services to enable troops in Iraq and Afghanistan to keep in touch with their families and loved ones at home. "I thought, 'What does it hurt to ask?' " she said.

Within days, she received confirmation they would set up the call. She also found out there had never been a Freedom Call to a high school reunion before.

The biggest part of the surprise was keeping the call a secret from fellow alum Renee, who is Sawyer's wife. Renee had no idea what the reunion committee had planned, Nelson said.

"When she came in and looked up and saw her husband on the wide screen, her hands went up to her mouth," Nelson said. She was surprised.

"The look on her face was priceless," Nelson said. Renee Sawyer sat most of the time talking to him and "classmates went up one by one to chitchat with him" on the video camera attached to the laptop computer that received the Internet connection, Nelson said.

Sawyer had also missed the 20th reunion because he was in Iraq. "We felt it was important we try to include him in this one," she said.

She said Sawyer's military career goes back to high school. "He was ROTC," she said. The class, which was organizing the reunion via e-mail, had e-mailed him best wishes on Veterans Day, she said.

She said Freedom Call told them what computer equipment they needed to get together for the call, but "it was very tech involved." They got some of the equipment together and Slidell High School donated the projector and wide screen. That was important so the entire class could see him, she said.

"There's no way we could have done this without Carl Fedrowisch," who the restaurant put her in touch with to help with the computer setup. Fedrowisch, whose son, Eric, also serves in Iraq, donated his services to help set up the call. He set up the high-speed link with the software Freedom Call provided and the projection and camera and audio linkups. "He took it and ran with it," she said.

The Freedom Calls Foundation, based in Morristown, N.J., is supported solely by donations of corporations and the American people on the foundation's Web site at [www.freedomcalls.org](http://www.freedomcalls.org).

For information, contact Executive Director John Harlow at [j.harlow@freedomcalls.org](mailto:j.harlow@freedomcalls.org) or call (973) 290-7886. Harlow said the foundation enables soldiers and Marines in the war zone to attend and participate in milestone family events like weddings, first communions and new births. It helps them keep their commitments to their families at the same time they keep their commitment to their country, he said.