

Abilene Reporter-News

Duty calls, video answers

Newlyweds among those reunited via video calls to Iraq military bases

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When James Bennett laid eyes on his wife, April, on Wednesday, he was blown away.

"She's gorgeous," he said.

Although U.S. Marine Sgt. James Bennett was in Iraq and April Bennett was in Abilene, the couple saw and talked to each other thanks to a live video call. It was the first time the newly married couple have seen each other while they talked since James was deployed in January.



Reporter-News photography by Victor Cristales

The Bennetts participated Wednesday in Operation Freedom Call. AT&T (formerly SBC) Telecom Pioneers and the Region 14 Education Service Center hosted the event. Region 14 donated the use of its Video-Link Conferencing facilities. Telecom Pioneers and Operation Freedom Call arranged with the military to allow about a dozen families with relatives serving in Iraq to have a private live video call.

April Bennett sends a kiss to her husband, Marines Corps Sgt. James Bennett stationed in Iraq, through a live video call Wednesday from the Region 14 Education Service Center in Abilene.

The military requires that the deployed person be stationed at one of three bases where Operation Freedom Call has video equipment - Fallujah, Taji and Al Asad.

"It's amazing," James Bennett, 29 said. "I didn't even know this was here. It's really cool."

April Bennett, a registered nurse at Hendrick Medical Center, said she found out about the video call from her grandmother. She said the couple usually communicates through e-mail and gets to talk on the phone maybe once a week.

"It was weird seeing him," she said. "You hear his voice, but when you actually see him ... it's amazing."

Tommy Bearden, distance learning consultant for Region 14, said he did not hesitate to help when AT&T contacted him about using the equipment.

"This is an opportunity to assist community members and let them have a chance to visit with our military members," Bearden said. "It was a no-brainer."

April Bennett said she was thankful to see her husband for about 40 minutes.



The faces of Terry Williams, Randi Williams and Nancy Williams light up as they see Army Pfc. Reid Williams during a live video call.

"I can't complain, I got to see him," she said. "If I would have got five minutes, it would have been worth it."

Other Calls

Operation Freedom Call plans to offer families of soldiers video calls in Lubbock on April 7 and in Midland on April 13. Another date in Abilene has not yet been announced. To sign up, e-mail Suzanne Fletcher at gf6825@att.com or call (806) 794-2100. Fletcher will forward the required form and information. The military reserves the right to postpone or change the date of the call as necessary.