

Free calls home to end for soldiers

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Marine reservist Cpl. Jason Robertson (on television) reads a birthday card for his father, Jim Robertson (center) as Jason's mom, Sherryl Robertson (far left) and Jason's wife Julie Robertson talk with Jason via video conference for the Robertson's Snellville home.

Kimberly Smith / Staff

Jim Robertson posed for an unusual birthday photo Thursday. He wrapped his arm around the television in the family den and smiled. His youngest son the Marine was on the tube - grinning live from the frontlines in Iraq.

It was a birthday party across the miles.

"It's great to see y'all," said Cpl Jason Robertson, a Gwinnett County cop, from his camp in Fallujah. "It's great to see the house. I feel like I'm in the room."

For 45 minutes, father and son were reunited by a 40-inch JVC and a free phone call to Snellville with a satellite feed. The call, compliments of the Freedom Call Foundation, was a gift arranged by Robertson's wife.

"I have a bad reputation for returning gifts," Robertson said. "This is something that I can't return. You couldn't ask for anything better."

Thursday's birthday call home may be the last one the Freedom Call Foundation can cover, however. Officials with the national charity have announced that they have run out of money to cover the expenses associated with the calls. The Morristown, N.J.-based charity has been providing the service for military families for free since 2004.

"We do about 2,000 of these a month," said John Harlow, executive director and founder of Freedom Calls. The calls can get very expensive, Harlow said. "We have to maintain these satellite links which costs tens of thousands of dollars a month."

Harlow said the organization is looking for donations and is planning some fund-raisers to help find money for its \$1,000 a day budget. The organization uses e-mail, phone calls, and video tele-conferencing to connect soldiers with their families. "If we don't find the funds we are going to have to stop operation," Harlow said.

The organization has helped soldiers to be their for births, graduations, weddings and birthdays.

Like the one Thursday for Jim Robertson, a computer network administrator.

Jason got to be "there" in the room as his father open a few gifts. He and his wife Julie, who also was in the room, bought Jim a cutting board for the barbecue grill. Jason's brother, Kelly Robertson, 29, phoned to say happy birthday and hello to Jason. The family sat the receiver on the television so the brothers could chat.

The family sang the "Happy Birthday" afterwards. The tune sounded more like a round because of the 1 second satellite transmission delay. Sherryl Robertson, a Gwinnett County school teacher, baked a yellow cake with chocolate icing and pecans for the occasion.

"I wish you were here to have some birthday cake," she said. "This is the longest we've ever gone without seeing you."

Jason Robertson works in a unit that recovers the bodies of fallen soldiers and sends them home to their families. He has been stationed in Fallujah for four months. Father and son usually stay in touch every week by e-mail or phone calls.

"He has a great attitude," Jim Robertson said of his son. "He never complains. He is a super kid."



Jim Robertson places a phone near the microphone on top of the television, so Marine reservist Jason Robertson can talk with his brother Kelly Robertson who was calling from Albany.

Kimberly Smith / Staff

Before Jason said good-bye he read a card he had bought for his father and promised that he would take him fishing and camping when he returned home.

The Robertsons were teary-eyed when the call finished. The gift of the phone call was one that the family equally shared.

"You can actually see that there are no broken bones, no new scars," said his mother. "You can see your baby."

For more information on Freedom Calls Foundation, visit www.freedomcalls.org or call 973-290-7886.