

Redstone Rocket

Family members see eye to eye with deployed Soldiers

UAH makes offer for teleconferences

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Deployed Soldiers used to rely on mail from home for contact with their loved ones. Modern technology has delivered more ways to keep in touch.

The University of Alabama-Huntsville is offering teleconferences to connect families directly with their Soldiers for face-to-face talks.

The technology has been in use at the university to hold meetings and share class materials around the globe, without costly commuting and travel delays.

"We use it to talk quite frequently with a university in Beijing, China and with a university in Paris, France," Bob Middleton, senior research engineer at UAH, said. "We have teleconferences on a lot of different things. It's a very valuable tool."

Middleton had been looking for a way to reach out to the Soldiers, having been in the military during the Korean War. When a newsletter from a similar video conferencing program arrived telling of Soldier/family conferences, he knew he had found something he could give to those who give so much.

"I was searching diligently to find a way that I could do something. When I saw this thing in the newsletter, I said that puts me there virtually and I can do it from here," he said. "You always feel that you'd like to do something to contribute."

He was put in touch with Mary Breeden, relocation assistance program manager at Army Community Service and the coordinator for Waiting Spouses, an organization for women geographically separated from their Soldier husbands. Breeden included the offer for a teleconference in her newsletter and hoped that some members would take Middleton up on his offer.

"We're thrilled that UAH took the initiative to set this program up to families linked through electronic teleconference," Breeden said. "It's a great morale boost to actually see your loved one. We'll continue to get the word out to use this service."

The connection used to uplink the Soldier with the UAH lab is an Internet 2 connection, which allows for real time video without a lot of the jerkiness commonly associated with streaming video. The snag, however, is that it requires an Internet connection on the Soldier's end that is not a part of the military's network. Currently there are only two such connection sites available, one in Camp Fallujah and one in Camp Cook, both inside Iraq. Middleton is working to establish another connection in Kuwait for a local spouse who wants to contact her husband as well. "We really need more contact points over there," Middleton said. "My big goal is to get into Afghanistan. Most of the people who have contacted me to use this have had Soldiers in Afghanistan."

The equipment and connections needed are provided through Freedom Calls, a non-profit organization which uses donations to set up and maintain the equipment overseas. On this end, they rely upon universities and corporations who have their own equipment to donate their time and the use of their facilities for the cause. They hope to have every Army camp in Iraq equipped soon.

So far, only one spouse has had a video conference at UAH. Several more are in planning. The busy schedule of a Soldier puts a bit of delay on lining things up. Once they are connected, the family is allowed as much time as possible. Middleton hopes that many more families will take advantage of the technology available to them.

"They've extended a lot of people's tours over there. When you extend a guy's tour you ought to be able to give him something in return for it," he said. "It's so much better to have an eyeball to eyeball talk. There's body language and eye contact. You get much more than just e-mail or phone."

He also sees family conferencing as just the beginning of what this system can do. Using a similar system after the troops are brought home would allow for a more widespread exchange of ideas long term, he said.

"This type of thing is a very powerful tool. Continued education to the Iraqi people could be done with something like this," he said.

Those wishing to set up a teleconference can call Middleton at 824-3487 or by e-mail at middler@uah.edu. For more information on the national project or to make a donation, contact Freedom Calls at www.freedomcalls.org.