

## ‘It is an emotional ride’

Altoona Marine receives greetings from home through videoconference

By Greg Bock, [gbock@altoonamirror.com](mailto:gbock@altoonamirror.com)

For an hour Thursday, the thousands of miles separating Lance Cpl. David McConnell from his family in Altoona didn't seem so far.

“It is an emotional ride,” said his mother, Eileen McConnell, after seeing and hearing her 21-year-old son, a Marine serving near Fallujah, Iraq.

Through an organization called the Freedom Calls Foundation, David McConnell got a quick visit home through one of the foundation's six videoconferencing facilities.

Freedom Calls is a nonprofit group that has worked with the military to set up phones, e-mail stations, computers and videoconferencing at a military base in Iraq.

But having videoconferencing equipment in Iraq doesn't mean much unless families have access to compatible facilities close to home.

“I'd do this every day if I could,” said Drew McGhee, who heads up the videoconferencing facilities at Penn State Altoona.

McGhee said he wants to get the word out that families who arrange for the free videoconferencing through the foundation, found online at [www.freedomcalls.org](http://www.freedomcalls.org) won't pay a dime.

Tom McConnell, David's father, said he hoped more families are able to arrange visits through Freedom Calls, and he thanked the people who contributed the tens of thousands of dollars needed to pay for it, as well as Penn State for opening up its facilities for the cause.



Lance Cpl. David McConnell of Altoona, stationed in Iraq, chats on videoconference with his sister Samantha Henninger, her husband, Steve, and their children: Sydney, 5, and Stephen, 1, at Robert E. Eiche Library at Penn State Altoona. To view more photos, go to [cu.altoonamirror.com](http://cu.altoonamirror.com) and click on the We CU tab.

(Mirror photos by J.D. Cavrich)

David McConnell, who got to see his parents' reactions as he broke the news of his promotion of corporal, said he still was getting used to the desert heat after recently being home for two weeks.

McConnell left New Year's Eve, and although his mom is hoping he'll return by Christmas, he likely won't see so many familiar faces again until January.

As they settled into the videoconference, Eileen McConnell told her son how their hour might mean missing "chow."

"I don't even care," David McConnell said.

"He said for an hour he was able to forget where he's at," his dad said afterward.

Peppered throughout the conversations were reminders of where David was and what he was doing.

There was the sheik that presented a sheep's head at dinner so the guests could eat its brains right from the skull, the little boy he befriended but got beat up for the dollar he had given him instead of the usual candy, and the bouts of boredom while waiting between missions.

But mostly they talked about family matters, like the vacations they used to take, and not the duties that go along with being a Marine and a part of Regimental Combat Team Six.

He got to hear about his niece's new frog, look through the latest photos and get updated on who was doing what and even reminisce.

"You were about 5, and your hands hurt so much from holding the controller," his mom recalled as the topic switched to video games and the origin of her unpopular "read before you can play" rule.

"That just made me tougher," David McConnell joked.

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