

Argus Leader

Mary's Little Lamb goes high-tech

Marine in Iraq reads to his baby girl via videoconference

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By Anthony Watt

It sounds simple enough: a father reading his baby daughter a story.

But the logistics of this reading of "Mary had a Little Lamb" involved satellites and high-tech data transmission.

James Frakes, 31, Woodhull, is a Marine gunnery sergeant serving in Iraq. Ava, his 7-month-old daughter, was in a classroom at Black Hawk College's Moline campus.

"That was something we can't do by e-mail or phone," said Gunnery Sgt. Frakes' wife, Missy Vail-Frakes, 31.

The family had about 45 minutes together Monday in a videoconferencing session sponsored by Black Hawk and Freedom Calls Foundation, a charity that sets up conferencing sessions for military families free of charge.

Gunnery Sgt. Frakes is based at Camp Taqqadum, where his platoon provides security for a battalion commander working with the Iraqis. It's his second tour of duty in the nation, which the United States invaded in 2003.



Photo: Todd Mizener

Missy Vail-Frakes, of Woodhull, holds up her 7-month-old daughter Ava Frakes so her husband, U.S. Marine Gunnery Sgt. James Frakes, can see her better during their video conference Monday morning at Black Hawk College, Moline. Gunnery Sgt. Frakes is serving in Iraq and is based at Camp Taqqadum. The family had about 45 minutes to visit during the videoconferencing session.



Photo: Todd Mizener

Missy Vail-Frakes, of Woodhull is all smiles as she and her 7-month-old daughter Ava Frakes visit with her husband US Marine Gunnery Sgt. James Frakes during a video conference Monday morning at Black Hawk College in Moline. Gunnery Sgt. Frakes is currently serving in Iraq and is based at Camp Taqqadum, where his platoon provides security for a battalion commander working with the Iraqis. The family had about 45 minutes to visit during the videoconferencing session sponsored by Black Hawk and Freedom Calls Foundation, a charity that sets up the conferencing session for military families free of charge.

Their daughter is much bigger now and squirmy. She says "Da-Da." She'll be bigger still in September when her father is expected home.

"It (Monday's session) was really important, because he hasn't seen her," Mrs. Vail-Frakes said. "I think, if anything, I wanted this for her more than myself."

She said, if they can, other families should use the service. "I think they just need to definitely take the time and experience this."

The sessions are being set up as part of Military Appreciation Week, and sessions still are available Wednesday, Thursday and Friday for families who are interested, according to the college. The service is available for families with loved one at these bases: Al Asad, Fallujah, Taji, Victory, Taqqadum.

Anyone interested can contact Martha Green at the college at (309) 796-5555, (800) 334-1311 ext. 5555 or at 5555@bhc.edu.

For more information about Freedom Calls, visit www.freedomcalls.org/tech.html

The couple uses e-mails and telephone calls to stay in contact every few days, but they only have time to exchange a few words to make sure things are going all right, Mrs. Vail-Frakes said. "I think it's gotten us closer. You have to explain how you're feeling, how to get your point across."

But, using videoconferencing, they were able to talk in almost real time. The conversation ranged from family to whether mail was getting through, to the weather in Iraq (hot), and of course, Ava.

"Hey baby girl! What are you doing?" the Marine asked his daughter as she chewed on plastic toys and stared curiously around the room with bright blue eyes.

The last time Gunnery Sgt. Frakes saw her was in October when she was born, Mrs. Vail-Frakes said.