

THE SUN

A glimpse, via Webcam, of home for dad in Iraq

Videoconference brings sergeant, family together for birthday

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SUN REPORTER

MARCH 28, 2006

Roger Joseph looked on as his 2-year-old daughter, Evelyn, wearing a sparkly tiara and standing on a chair surrounded by friends, opened a birthday present he had sent from Iraq.

He saw her eyes widen as she pulled a camouflage backpack from the gift bag, and he smiled as her frosting-lined mouth broke into a wide grin at the sight of her new storybooks.

After being deployed in October, Joseph, 39, was sure he would have to learn about Evelyn's birthday through e-mail and photos. But from 10,000 miles away at Al Asad Air Base in Iraq, Joseph - a sergeant in the Army Reserve - was able to watch and participate in her birthday party over a live satellite video feed that beamed his image onto a projection screen at the end of the table.

"How is my baby doing?" he asked. "How old are you, baby?"

Evelyn held up three fingers. "Two," she replied.

"Daddy misses you so much," he said.



Petronella Henry-Joseph (right) of Abingdon feeds her daughter Evelyn a piece of birthday cake as Evelyn's dad, Sgt. Roger Joseph, watches during a videoconference. Joseph is an Army reservist serving in Iraq.
(Sun photo by Justin Fenton)

The birthday party, held at the Higher Education and Applied Technology Center in Aberdeen, was made possible by Freedom Calls, a nonprofit group devoted to linking soldiers with their families at home via videoconference.

Since 2004, the organization has helped loved ones celebrate holidays, birthday parties and graduations, and to get married or see newborn children in hospital delivery rooms. In December, a soldier stationed in Africa got married in Florida via a justice of the peace in Montana, which allows marriages with neither party present.

With easy access to high-speed Internet connections and e-mail, today's soldiers are well-connected. Joseph's wife, Petronella Henry-Joseph, 35, said she communicates with her husband two or three times a week via e-mail, and a few times a month over the phone. But the video interaction was special for the Abingdon family.

"If you go nine months or a year and a half without seeing your family, a phone call's not going to do it," said Freedom Calls Director John Harlow. "To get them on a videoconference, where they can see body language, see they're tanned and fit and looking good, it's a totally different experience."

Yesterday's event was the first for families of soldiers based at Aberdeen Proving Ground, and Harlow said the HEAT Center will host half-hour sessions, all day, once or twice a month.

"It's going to boost morale on both ends for the families," said Sfc. Jen Perry, part of the National Guard's family readiness support group.

More than an hour before the videoconference, Henry-Joseph began decorating a conference room with yellow and pink balloons. In the corner was a mountain of gifts, and a nearby table was lined with soda, cookies and chips. Evelyn pranced around in shiny white shoes with a pink boa around her neck, while sister Sophia, 9, and brother Glenn, 12, milled about with friends.

"It's hard, but I've got to do it," Henry-Joseph said of her husband's absence. "For now, I've got to be strong. If I fall apart, he's not going to be able to do his job."

But there was no holding back emotions when Joseph's image flashed on the screen. He sat down in front of a Web cam, a large rifle around his neck and nothing but a gym locker and a couch behind him, and he told his family how much he missed them.

"I miss my baby, man. I wanna hug my baby right now," he said, putting his head in his hands as he wept. "You have no idea how hard this is, babes."

Seated next to him was Staff Sgt. Paul Hopkins, 42, of Rising Sun, whose wife and daughter were also present for the satellite linkup. They talked about the weather, told him how Grandpa was doing and asked him what goodies he would like them to send.

During a musical interlude, Sophia played a few songs on her clarinet. She had just started taking lessons before Joseph left. Glenn mostly stayed in the background, but acknowledged his father's thanks for "being the man of the house."

Before Evelyn opened presents, Joseph asked favor - he wanted a hug.

Henry-Joseph walked her over to the wall, her body casting shadows as she held Evelyn up to the projection screen and Joseph reached his hands out.

"Being away from you guys is really hard, and I don't think I could handle this without you. It doesn't matter how hard things get. Just knowing you're over there to come home to makes everything worthwhile," he said.

"I hope I can make you and the kids proud of me, like I'm proud of you. I'd be nothing without you, just remember that."

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