

The Recorder

Closer to home

Thursday April 20, 2006

By Amanda Isley • Staff writer

Military families pull together at BCH

WARM SPRINGS – Lori Jones and her two children, Ryan and Emily, seem bursting with anticipation as they wait inside Bath Community Hospital to see their husband and father, Maj. Perry Jones of the Virginia Army National Guard.



Maj. Perry Jones of the Virginia Army National Guard greets his family from airbase Al Asad in Iraq. Pictured (counter clock wise, from front center) are his daughter Emily, wife Lori, sister Sonya Milton, mother Judy, sister Tonya, and son Ryan. (Recorder photo by Amanda Isley)

Soon they are joined by Perry's two sisters, Sonya Milton and Tonya Jones, and his mother, Judy Jones. All try to make conversation but it's obvious their minds are on the approaching encounter.

Maj. Jones deployed to Iraq about three months ago after spending several months in Arizona for pre-deployment training and preparation. He's not injured, nor is he on leave, but he will soon be in the same room with his family, thanks to a new program.

In early March, Jones signed up his family for "Freedom Calls." It had been two months since he had seen his loved ones, and when he learned he might get the chance despite being 8,000 miles away, he took it.

Freedom Calls is a non-profit organization offering soldiers multiple telecommunications services free of charge. Based out of New York, the program was launched in April 2004 to provide soldiers a chance to see and speak with their families — a highly appreciated service, especially during wartime, according to executive director John Harlow.

There are currently three bases in Iraq — Fallujah, Taji, and Al Asad. The group is working on installing eight more facilities on the front lines in Iraq and the Army has requested two bases in Afghanistan. "We do more than 1,000 video conferences a month," says Harlow.

There are 10,000 video conferencing sites in the U.S. Many are located at hospitals, schools, and community buildings. If families have broadband capabilities, Freedom Calls can send software allowing them to use it at home with a serving family member, he points out.

By video conferencing, a broadband connection is routed to a television via Freedom Calls satellite. Jones was able to see his wife and children March 21 and again April 14. The University of Virginia Hospital purchased the teleconferencing equipment and donated it to BCH last year, says nurse and community service coordinator Becky Armstrong. "It's a wonderful program," she adds.

Lori was surprised to learn her family was the first in the area to take advantage of it. Living in Covington, she, Emily and Ryan made the relatively short trip over the mountain in late March.

"It was the first time the kids had seen their dad since Christmas," said Lori. Her husband is participating in the first joint military operation between the Army National Guard and the Marine Corps in history, she says. Pride for her husband is evident in her voice as she offers to explain how the two military branches trained together in Arizona. Jones is a 1987 Virginia Military Institute graduate, and has remained involved with the military in some form ever since.

It only took a couple of phone calls to Harlow and Armstrong to set a date and time for the conference, she says.

Jones is located at the airbase Al Asad, eight hours ahead of Virginia time.

"It's like watching television, and it's better than talking on the phone because there's less of a delay — it's more like a direct interaction," Lori said.

Her young children appreciated seeing and hearing their father and "monopolized the conversation," says their mother. "He (Perry) was trying to describe certain aspects of his life to them and they would ask him questions," she said.

Lori is a part-time nurse in the trauma intensive care unit at U.Va., and despite her tough exterior, she and Armstrong teared up during the conference.

Last Friday, the Jones family again went to BCH for a teleconference. However, communication difficulties meant they had to wait an hour and a half before a solid connection could be established. Emily and Ryan were restless. Ryan shared a bit of man-to-man wisdom his father had left him with — "I'm the man of the house now."

The future of telecommunications continues to affect our world. Harlow hopes the video conferences will continue to grow in popularity and provide families the opportunity to share milestone events over thousands of miles.

"We foresee a time when all war fighters can virtually come home to their families on a daily basis after a hard day on the battlefield utilizing the foundation's state of the art video conferencing technology," he said.

For this area family, that was precisely the boost they needed. Closer to home