



## Video link puts family in touch with soldier

By ED KEMMICK  
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Francine Washington is clearly in need of some comfort food.

In an interactive video conference with 20-some family members Sunday, the 34-year-old soldier serving in Iraq was asked by her brother, Henry Wilson, where she wanted to go for her first meal when she comes back to Montana.

She didn't name a restaurant; she named a food.

"I want deer meat," she said. "I'm hungry for deer meat."

A little later, her father, John Doyle, asked if there was anything her family could send her. Washington said the only thing she could think of was some dried meat that she could take with her on missions in Iraq.

The electronic family reunion took place on Father's Day in a small conference room in the Health Conference Center at Deaconess Billings Clinic. It was the first use of the "Freedom Calls Network" in Billings, though the program has been in operation in other parts of the state and country for more than a year.

The program was devised by the Freedom Calls Foundation, which works to open lines of communication between American soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan and their families in the United States.

In Billings, the program is sponsored by Vision Net in partnership with the Eastern Montana Telemedicine Network at Deaconess and the Partners in Health Telemedicine Network at St. Vincent Healthcare.

Family members - including Washington's sons, brothers, nieces, nephews and other relatives - communicated by watching her on a screen normally used for telemedicine in Eastern Montana, while a camera on top of the TV sent their images to Iraq.

John and Agnes Doyle of Crow Agency were told about a week ago they could have the video conference with their daughter on Father's Day. During the half-hour get-together, several members of the family pointed out that Washington, a corporal in the Army, looked fit, but also very tired.

"Yeah," she answered. "I was out on a mission for the past two days. I need to go to bed." It didn't help that it was a little after midnight in Iraq, at a base in Taji. Nor did it help that it was very hot, even at that time of night. Washington couldn't say for sure, but she thought it was about 110 degrees.

All three of her sons - Walter, 15, Ian, 13, and Sherman, 10 - were on hand, but they were mostly tongue-tied when their relatives prodded them to say something to their mother. They may have

been overwhelmed by the gang of television and newspaper reporters and photographers sharing the room with them.

One highlight of the gathering was when Washington got her first look at her new nephew - her brother Brandon's 11-day-old son.

Washington managed to get a rise out of her boys, and everyone else in the room, when she asked, "Want to see my sniper's scope?" and then disappeared for a moment before returning with a huge, heavy rifle supporting an elaborate scope.

After all the oohing and aahing stopped, brother Henry said to her, "We'll trade you some dried meat for that."

John Doyle said his daughter is serving her second tour of duty in Iraq, having been there in the fall of 2003. She returned to Iraq in January and is scheduled to make a visit home in August.

Doyle said the separation has been hard for the family, especially for the boys. Washington's brother, 31-year-old John III, is also in Iraq, serving with the Kentucky National Guard. The Doyles also have a grand-nephew in Iraq, John said.

It makes them worry, and not just for their own kin.

"We feel for all the families over there," John Doyle said. "We don't want any more of them getting hurt. We want them home safe."

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