



"Freedom Calls' Links Combat Zone Troops

AL ASAD, Iraq
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Keeping in touch with friends and family at home is always a challenge during deployments. Though communications in combat zones have evolved, some still find it difficult to contact people they care about.

Freedom Calls Foundation, a nonprofit organization founded to keep military personnel closer to those they love, is taking the next step in wartime communications.

"Faced with extended tours of duty, our front line soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan are not able to speak with members of their families for months at a time," the organization says on its Web site. "This breakdown of family communication needlessly contributes to the stress experienced by our soldiers and their (loved ones)."

The foundation sets up Internet accessible computers, phone centers and video teleconferencing sites in Iraq and Afghanistan. Currently, it has sites in three areas of Iraq, but it hopes to eventually expand to more than 200 sites.

One of the three sites is in Al Asad, where Master Sgt. Robert I. Borgerding from the 2nd Marine Aircraft Wing communications office has been running video teleconferences with the Freedom Call system.

"We've done three births where Marines were able to see their newborn babies the day after they were born," the Dyersville, Iowa, native said. "To be able to see (a newborn baby) while deployed is unbelievable."



Photo by Cpl. James D. Hamel
Army Cpl. Derek A. Marinaro uses sign language to communicate with his deaf parents during a video teleconferencing session. The teleconference was made possible by the Freedom Calls Foundation, a nonprofit organization dedicated to promoting better communication between deployed servicemembers and their loved ones.

Borgerding said the system is so advanced that Marines have been able to take part in milestone family events as if they were right there.

"One guy got to watch a wedding back home. It was like he was sitting across the table. He was able to see his wife and two kids and chat with his family like he was there," he said.

Army Cpl. Derek A. Marinaro, a team leader with the 109th Mechanized Infantry and Stroudsburg, Pa., native, faces a very rare obstacle in communicating with his family. Both of his parents are deaf, and without video teleconferencing, he wouldn't talk to his parents at all.

"It feels like now there's an even playing field between the deaf community and the hearing side," he said right before communicating with his parents for the first time since his arrival in Iraq six weeks ago.

Marines and other service members interested in taking advantage of communication opportunities, regardless of the provider, should research through their chain of command what is available to them.

As for the Freedom Calls Foundation, Borgerding said the organization can survive and grow only through the support of individual citizens and companies.

"This allows Marines in Iraq to get a glimpse of home," he added. "It's very motivating to them."

By Cpl. James D. Hamel / 2nd Marine Aircraft Wing