



Call center enables Soldiers freedom to hear from loved ones **Blackanthem Military News, CAMP TAJI, Iraq, April 24, 2006**

Thanks to the Freedom Calls Foundation, which sponsors the Freedom Call Centers here and two other locations, hundreds of Soldiers can phone, e-mail or talk to their families through a video-conferencing system for free every day.

The call center at Taji has been around for 2.5 years and is sponsored by companies and organizations who donate money to support the Soldiers ability to keep in touch with their families, said Staff Sgt. Lisa Hamm, an information systems operator analyst with the Combat Service Support Automation Management Office of Special Troops Battalion, Sustainment Brigade, 4th Infantry Division.



Hamm and a fellow noncommissioned officer manage the building, troubleshoot the equipment and schedule the VTCs.

"It is a morale booster," said Pvt. Chase Bouton, a petroleum-supply specialist with Company A, 4th Forward Support Battalion. "You can come in and you don't have to spend \$35 on a phone card. They've got time limits, but as soon as you are done, you can sign up again and get back on the phone."

The Taji center has 14 phones, 26 computers and is open 24-hours-a-day unless there is a communications blackout, said Hamm. There is a 30-minute limit on the phone or computer, but they allow Soldiers to stay on the equipment if there is no one waiting in line to use it.

The center is also capable of running three VTCs simultaneously; however, the center must close down the phones and computers for the duration of the VTC transmission since they share band-width with the other two sites at Al-Asad and Fallujah.

"The VTC is a 100-percent morale booster," said Sgt. 1st Class Perry Reed, an operations NCO with the STB, Sustainment Bde. "It keeps me informed of what's going on back home. It takes me away from Iraq for a minute or two."

Reed has been away from home several times during his military career, but this is the first time he used a VTC for morale purposes, he said, and the experience has brought him closer to his wife.

"She progressively gets to monitor my weight loss," he said, laughing, referring to his wife's ability to see a crystal clear image of him as they talk to each other.

The center is able to connect to five off-post locations in the Fort Hood area and more than 5,000 other off-post sites throughout the United States, Hamm said. Soldiers, or units, may schedule the VTC for special occasions like birthdays, anniversaries or weddings, but need to allow a couple of weeks for coordination, Hamm added.

Hamm said she enjoys her job assisting Soldiers getting in touch with their loved ones.

"The most touching VTC was one we had recently," she said. "It was a lower-enlisted Soldier and he was able to be there for his wife's ultrasound to find out what the gender of his baby was."

The center averages about 700-800 users a day.

"We are definitely being supported through this by the American public," Reed said. "That gives a reason to fight and win, knowing that we are being supported by citizens back home."

By Sgt. 1st Class Guadalupe Stratman, Sust. Bde. PAO, 4th Inf. Div. and Staff Sgt. Monika Comeaux, 207th MPAD