



MWHS-3 Phones Home with Freedom Calls

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One of the biggest challenges for service members deployed overseas is the separation from family and loved ones as well as the drawbacks of a limited communications network in a combat zone.

On March 4, Marines with Marine Wing Headquarters Squadron 3, 3rd Marine Aircraft Wing, received the chance to not only talk to their loved ones, but to also see their faces here with the help of the Freedom Calls Foundation.

The Freedom Calls Foundation is a non-profit organization designed to bring deployed service members and their families together through video teleconferencing.

The VTC calls are held in the Morale Welfare Recreation facility and run by Spc. Anthony Schuman, Freedom Calls administrator for Al Asad Air Base.

"Video teleconferencing is similar to a phone call, except you will be able to see your loved ones," said Schuman, a native of Lincoln, Neb. "The VTC calls allow for one more way to stay in touch with family members back home. It adds to morale to see the people back home, as well as talk with them."

According to 2nd Lt. Kaleb Harkema, signals and intelligence officer, MWHS-3, it's the closest thing as to being at home with his wife that he's capable of while deployed.

"It's a lot different than your average phone call," said Harkema, a native of Kissimmee, Fla., who was the first Marine from MWHS-3 to use the VTC this deployment. "Just seeing their reactions and emotions makes all the difference in the world."



Staff Sgt. Andrew J. Kozain talks to his wife Justine, during a video teleconferencing phone call, in Al Asad, Iraq, March 4, 2006. The VTC allowed families to talk with their loved ones for 30 minutes each. For many, it was the first time they were able to see their loved ones in weeks. Kozain is currently assigned to Tactical Air Command Center Security Detachment, Echo Company, 1st Battalion, 109th Mechanized Infantry, Marine Wing Support Group 37, 3rd Marine Aircraft Wing. Photo by U.S. Marine Corps Lance Cpl. Brian J. Holloran

Although many service members use phone calls, e-mails and letters home, the VTC is another method they can use to contact loved ones, as well as boost their morale.



"Freedom Calls helps boost the morale of the family, as well as the deployed service member," said Schuman. "It helps raise the productivity of the service member, which raises the productivity of the unit as a whole."

However, the VTC calls are not just for the service members stationed overseas, they are also a tool to help those left behind.

2nd Lt. Kaleb Harkema, a native of Kissimmee, Fla., native, talks to his wife, Stephanie, during a video teleconference call in Al Asad, Iraq, March 4. The signals and intelligence officer for Marine Wing Headquarters Squadron 3, 3rd Marine Aircraft Wing, participated in the VTC calls which are arranged by the Freedom Calls Foundation and are used to connect deployed military members with their loved ones in the United States. Photo by U.S. Marine Corps Lance Cpl. Brian J. Holloran

"Personally, I think the calls are more for the loved ones in the rear," said Lt. Col. Jeffery G. Koffel, commanding officer, MWHS-3. "Everyday is the same for us out here, so we stay busy."

Prior to the scheduled VTC time, directions were offered on both sides of the system. During that time one could sense the anticipation of seeing their loved one on video for the first time in more than a month.

"I am very excited! This is our first deployment and I just miss seeing his face," said Logan Fowler, wife of Cpl. Anthony Fowler. "Being able to see his face is the most important part, it's something a regular phone call or e-mail just can't come close to replicating."

Anthony is currently assigned to the Tactical Air Command Center Security Detachment, Echo Company, 1st Battalion, 109th Mechanized Infantry, Marine Wing Support Group 37, 3rd MAW.

In addition to missing loved ones, deployed service members are also forced to miss significant moments in their children's lives as they grow up.

"My kids all had things they wanted to show their dad, nothing earth-shattering in the greater scheme of things, but things that are important milestones in their minds," said Janine, wife of Lt. Col. Koffel. "A fourteen-month deployment guarantees that (my husband) will miss many of these little things and they're tough to capture in pictures or

in writing. Being able to show him the missing teeth, the new rank insignia and work together on the merit badge assignment was just great."

One of the hardest elements of a deployment is the separation from loved ones, but Freedom Calls Foundation brings that touch of home to those who are deployed, and that little bit makes a large difference.

By U.S. Marine Corps Lance Cpl. Brian J. Holloran