

Students connect with soldiers

By Matthew Jacob
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Students spoke to soldiers in Iraq, and the soldiers gave insight on how secure they felt and the media's portrayal of the war.

BJ Shepard

Marines stationed at the Al Asad Air Base in Iraq participated with students, faculty, local veterans and ROTC members in the first-ever university-to-battlefield videoconference Tuesday in Whitaker Laboratory.

The videoconference was moderated by Christine Hannon, '09, vice president of Lehigh's World Affairs Club.

Hannon asked the soldiers questions previously submitted by students and faculty and sent to the Freedom Calls Foundation.

The foundation then obtained approval for the questions from the U.S. Department of Defense. Follow-up questions were permitted, but they could not be related to policy, strategy or position.

Harvard University recently provided family members of troops in Iraq with similar videoconferencing opportunities, but Lehigh is the first university to connect students with troops in the battlefield.

The soldiers, many of whom are the same age as students, said their experience in Iraq has been nothing like they thought it would be.

They said training is different than the job, and bonding with the Iraqi community has developed at a slow pace. But Iraqi citizens are becoming friendlier and more helpful, they said, and the American and Iraqi troops share a strong bond.

The soldiers could not disclose their duties because of potential security issues.

The all-male panel of soldiers, huddled together in a group in front of the video screen in a camp building, said their constant joking and laughing, which the students and faculty might not understand, reflects a high level of camaraderie developed through bonding and shared experiences.

"The little things are the things that we'll remember," one soldier said. "Understand that it means something to us."

Violence has become an accepted part of life, one soldier said.

"[Violence is] like waking up in the morning and hopping in the shower," one soldier said. "It's a part of life we're trying to correct."

One soldier who could be named, Corporal Hughes, of Middletown, N.J., said he feels safer in Iraq than in Center City, Philadelphia, because he is surrounded by people he trusts and works with people from all over the world who are united toward achieving one goal.

"We're all here to make this place a better place," Hughes said.

Soldiers said the United States will have an extended presence in Iraq.

"You'll be collecting social security by the time we leave," Hughes said to the students.

All the soldiers yelled out a loud "NO!" when asked whether the media is doing a good job of portraying the conditions in Iraq.

They said the public must be shown the improvements made in Iraq since the beginning of the war, including improvements to utilities such as water and electricity.

"There's more good being done out there than there is bad," one soldier said.

They said the media prefers to focus on negative news because they garner more attention and earn higher profits.

"It's more shocking," one soldier said. "We see what we do here and then just laugh at it [television news]."

The soldiers were split between whether or not they would reenlist after their initial service is done, but they all agreed that an immediate withdrawal of troops is not an option and that the war must be fought.

They said U.S. troops need to build up the area and then eventually hand over the base to Iraqi soldiers who are responsible for its long-term sustainability.

The soldiers think they are engaged in a different kind of warfare.

In World War II, civilians had a clear understanding of why the United States fought the Nazis, but with the war on terror, the Iraqis do not like us, one soldier said.

Future generations will also learn about our experiences in a different way, he said.

"All of our stories are on DVD for our kids," he said. "There's not a thing we do here that isn't covered by the media."

The troops said the people who buy "Support Our Troops" ribbon car magnets are actually not doing anything to support the troops – they are merely contributing to sellers' profits.

Civilians can best support U.S. troops by sending care packages, pre-paid calling cards or by writing letters as a pen-pal, the troops said.

"That's supporting the troops," one soldier said, "not the magnets."

The soldiers, who voluntarily participated in the videoconference, said they are grateful for the opportunity to share their experiences.

"It shows that you care about what we have to say," one soldier said.

The soldiers said students need to avoid stress and keep their studies in perspective.

"Oh, my God. I've got a paper due in a couple days.' So what? Nobody is shooting at you," one soldier said.

Hannon said the video conference gave students and faculty the opportunity to learn about what goes on in Iraq straight from the troops.

"I feel this is a wonderful opportunity for the Lehigh community because the media does not invent numbers, but it often neglects proportions," Hannon said.

Hannon said: "This videoconference allows the community to hear what is going on in Iraq from the people who patrol those streets every day, the people who are more apt to shoot from the hip rather than paint a sexy picture of life in Iraq. The people who are serving this great nation with pride."

Erik Twombly, '10, an ROTC member, said attending the videoconference allowed him to take a look inside the soldiers' environment, which put him at ease with possibly defending his country in Iraq in the near future.

"It doesn't worry me," Twombly said. "One day I can do something so they [the soldiers] can go home."