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Sweet days for FARAWAY PARENTS

Video technology allows soldiers in Iraq to see their families

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Photo illustration by Elizabeth A. Mundschenk/Buffalo News
In Iraq, Senior Airman Michael McMillon, above, was able to see his new baby, Cincere, back in Buffalo when she was just a day old. Now home from his overseas duty, McMillon gets to hold his daughter for Father's Day.

A fuzzy image from a Buffalo hospital, beamed halfway around the world to the tiny screen of a videoconferencing phone, made Senior Airman Michael McMillon's day.

Sitting in an operations trailer full of wires and computers in the middle of Iraq, McMillon saw his baby daughter, Cincere, one day after her birth. The virtual meeting was set up by McMillon's commanders in Iraq and his colleagues at the Niagara Falls Air Reserve Station, who brought a camera to the hospital.

"I think my main thing was her being healthy and that my wife was all right," McMillon said. "Basically just seeing my family happy."

Unlike the veterans of past wars, who went weeks or even months with nothing but an occasional letter, package or short phone call, today's soldiers have come to rely on a cornucopia of cutting edge technologies to stay in constant touch with their friends and family. With everything from e-mail and cell phones to videoconferences, satellite phones and Internet greeting card services, today's soldiers are more connected to home than ever before.

And though McMillon and his family used military equipment on both ends, much of the technology comes from numerous corporations and nonprofit groups that have donated gear or cash to help troops stay in touch. In a few cases, soldiers have even purchased the equipment themselves.

John B. Harlow II, co-founder of the Freedom Calls Foundation, a New York-based nonprofit that works with donors to provide troops with free videoconferencing, said the latest technology brings a whole new level of communication and comfort by allowing families to see the physical condition and body language of their deployed relative.

"Essentially, it's possible to come home after a hard day on the battlefield and virtually be with their family," Harlow said.

Founded in 2003, the Freedom Calls Foundation operates three videoconferencing centers at large U.S. bases in Iraq. Each center contains 50 personal computers as well as routers, broadband connections and satellite connections.

The centers beam the soldiers' smiles and anxieties back to more than 1,000 videoconferencing rooms in corporations, universities and hospitals across the United States, each of which donates time in its existing facilities. No such centers currently exist in the Buffalo area, but Harlow said he would make an effort to make some available here if there is a demand for them.

"These are just tremendous leaps in technology that have made a positive impact on our troops," said Neil Nolf, public information officer at the Niagara Falls Air Reserve Station. "It obviously boosts morale now that you can be updated on all family circumstances including the good news and even the bad news."