

Live from Iraq

Freedom Calls links soldiers with families

Friday, December 14, 2007

BY CHARITA M. GOSHAY

REPOSITORY STAFF WRITER

PLAIN TWP. As flannel-gray skies gushed buckets of rain, Tom and Marie McNeill barely noticed the dreary weather. All they could see was the sunny smile of their 22-year-old son, Vince.

The Uniontown couple and four of their seven children — Michelle, 17, Luke, 13, Garrett, 12, and Patrick, 8 — visited the Stark Portage Area Computer Consortium at 2100 38th St. NW, where they had a video conference with Vince, a Marine corporal stationed at Camp Taqaddum, Iraq.



FAMILY REUNION The family of Marine Cpl. Vince McNeill of Uniontown chats with him via video conference at the Stark Portage Area Computer Consortium on Thursday, courtesy of Freedom Calls, a nonprofit organization that provides free phone calls and video conferences to military families. Talking to McNeill are his parents, Tom and Marie (front), and his younger siblings (left to right) Garrett, Michelle, Luke and Patrick.

The McNeills are among five local families participating Thursday and today, courtesy of the Freedom Calls Foundation, a nonprofit group that arranges for families to communicate with loved ones serving in the military. Freedom Calls says it offers 1.5 million free minutes a month in phone calls, saving 100,000 military families \$4 million a year in telephone services.

Jim Vincent, manager of technology integration services at for the consortium, said it was the first video conference of its kind in Ohio done in partnership with the foundation.

“Freedom Calls began right after 9/11 because they knew we’d have people (overseas),” he said. “We found out about it as couple of years ago. They rely on donations, so they’re still struggling to get funding.”

Vincent said his office has been spreading word about the video conferences through word of mouth, e-mail and the local Blue Star Mothers group.

The flat-screen TV in the conference room came alive shortly after 8:30 a.m., as the handsome Marine appeared on-screen. In turn, a monitor enabled him to see his excited parents and siblings.

In a morning filled with family small talk, jokes, and laughter, his mother and father remarked on how good he looked. As his mother fretted over whether he would receive his edible Christmas care package in time, Vince gave Patrick and Luke a hard time for wearing University of Texas T-shirts, gifts from a relative.

“What are you doing with that shirt on?” he asked. “I need to send you guys some Ohio State shirts. You can use those for the next bonfire.”

Upon hearing that Michelle had a boyfriend, Vince immediately went into big-brother mode.

“Oh, God! Do I have to come home early?” he asked to laughter.

Because they videotaped the conference, Tom McNeill said they would be able to show excerpts during the family’s Christmas party on Saturday.

“I wish I could be there. It’s going to be different,” Vince said wistfully. “But it’s just one Christmas.”

Marie McNeill said she had not seen her son since September. A second Marine son, Kelly, who’s serving in Okinawa, Japan, is set to be deployed to Iraq.

Vince, who joined the Marines at 18, is on his second tour of duty in Iraq. He will complete his service in 2008.

“It was so good to see him. It was awesome,” she said.

Vincent said other local military families are welcome to contact his office to set up appointments for conferences. He may be reached at (330) 492-6175, or by e-mail at jim.vincent@email.sparcc.org

FREEDOM CALLS

Some other local military personnel participating in FreedomCalls.org video conferences this week:

- Cpl. Joshua Hayes, Al Asad Airbase, Iraq
- Pvt. Thomas Martinez, Camp Fallujah, Iraq
- Lance Cpl. Robert Graham, Camp Fallujah, Iraq
- Pfc. Jason Sigler, Camp Taji, Iraq