

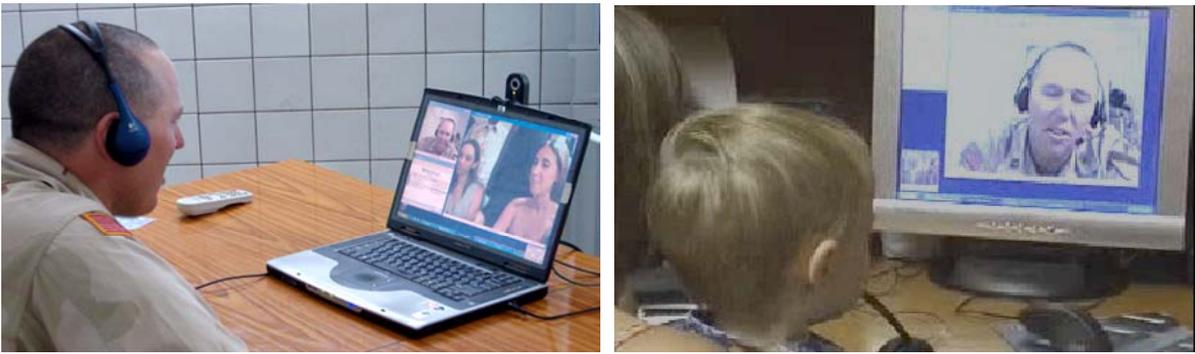
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From Iraq, a smile for folks at home

HIGH-TECH HELLO: Videoconferencing changes the way soldiers keep in touch

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Three-year-old Christian threw out a great big hug to his father at an Army camp in Iraq on Friday. Using technology that has revolutionized how soldiers communicate with faraway loved ones, Capt. Jason Hughes watched with a smile so wide it lit up the living room of his old home in Clayton.

"Here's a hug for you guys," Hughes answered, folding his arms across his chest and flinging them out to the enraptured faces of his wife, children and other relatives crowded around their own computer monitor.

"Oh, we caught it!" his wife, Chrissy, exclaimed as she clung to Christian and their other son, 15-month-old Patryk.

For the first time since Hughes shipped out for Iraq on March 8, the captain and his family saw each other in real time, bringing laughter, tears and expressions of wonder to a comfortable ranch house at the foot of Mount Diablo. Christian, who recently visited Disneyland, kept singing into the microphone "It's a small world, after all" -- the perfect theme for the global videoconference.

Hughes, an intelligence and security officer in the First Cavalry Division, became the latest of thousands of soldiers at Camp Cooke in the Sunni triangle north of Baghdad to use state-of-the-art technology to teleconference with loved ones in America.

Soldiers in Iraq have more ways to quickly communicate with home than ever before -- e-mail, satellite phones and now videoconferencing.

The technology is a great leap forward from earlier wars, when it could take weeks for letters to make it home, and it's raising fears that the trove of letters that became precious to families and invaluable to historians may not exist in the future.

"We're changing the historical way of communicating when you're a soldier, " said John Harlow, executive director of the Freedom Calls Foundation in New York, which won Army approval for the videoconferencing center in Iraq set up in April and now used by 1,500 soldiers a day. "You can sit down and talk to your husband or son like you're talking to him across the dinner table."

That kind of small talk was just what the Hughes family engaged in. They shared stories of friends who were planning to move and joked about whether Chrissy should apply for a dream job as a nurse at Disneyland even though Jason doesn't want to live in Los Angeles. He told her he was working hard in 116-degree heat, and she showed off Patryk's new Hawaiian outfit. Mostly, though, they said "I love you" dozens of times as they stared, smiling, at each other in the computer monitor.

"You look very beautiful today, hon," Hughes told his wife, who bought a dress for the occasion.

"You're not as tanned as I thought you'd be," Chrissy told him. He explained the helmet and goggles he wore during work on fortifying the old Iraqi military base kept his face from browning in the hot desert sun. She asked him to stand at one point so she could see his whole body and not just the close-up of his face, and he backed away from the camera and singled two thumbs up.

"Are you wearing your wedding ring?" asked his sister, Melanie Engel, who was recently married herself. He held out his left hand to show it was where it belonged.

There was a glitch when Capt. Hughes accidentally pushed a mute button, cutting out the sound for about 15 minutes until technicians fixed the problem. But that seemed minor to the family.

"I want to hug the computer," said Hughes' father, Ken, who was overcome with emotion several times during the hourlong call. "It's wonderful. It's like he's right there. We have the ability to speak and see him, and show him we're taking good care of his wife and kids. It feels like he's still here."

The elder Hughes served in the Vietnam War and could telephone home only twice in two years, with the short calls costing \$90. He treasured getting letters, and he and Chrissy said they'd still keep sending letters and packages to Iraq along with enjoying videoconferencing and e-mail.

"Every Tuesday, I send him something," she said. "He needs that something from home. It's more personal. The kids' drawings -- you can't do that on e-mail."

In fact, some historians worry the instant communication could spell the end of war letters, which can remain treasured decades after they're written. Andrew Carroll, who wrote the book "War Letters" and runs the Legacy Project in Washington, D.C., has collected 75,000 letters by soldiers from the Civil War until today.

"We have a letter from the Civil War that's bloodstained," Carroll said. "We have a letter from the Battle of the Bulge that's smudged because of the snow. There's something about the tangible quality of holding the letter. It's a connection to the past."

Carroll has encouraged soldiers to keep writing letters even as technology allows them to talk to their loved ones with webcams. Letters can be taken anywhere, read and reread, kissed, caressed and folded into a helmet or a pocket close to the heart.

"What they're doing sounds terrific, but I would encourage the families to every once in a while sit down and handwrite a letter," Carroll said. "I promise them in years to come, they will look back on those letters, and they will realize how important they are."

Chrissy lives at Fort Hood in Texas, where she could talk by phone and e-mail her husband every day, but she hasn't been able to communicate as much while she's spending the summer with her in-laws in Clayton. When Ken Hughes saw a notice about Freedom Calls in the Army Times, he immediately decided to apply to be hooked up to the network with a Webcam and software for what will be weekly videoconferences.

Freedom Calls, a public charity that relies on donations because it receives no government funding, plans a similar system for Chrissy's Fort Hood home.

The anticipation was almost too much as the family waited until the 11 a. m. call, which came after Capt. Hughes went off duty. Chrissy caught a glimpse of him and told Christian he was hiding behind boxes because it was too soon for him to sit at the desk and put on the headphones to talk.

"This is just nerve-racking sitting here," Chrissy said as she encouraged her son to be ready to say hi. When the smiling captain sat down and appeared onscreen, his relatives clapped and squealed.

Hughes said he was thrilled by the chance to see his family.

"This means a lot to me. It's a very valuable service out here," he said. "This is almost like being in the room. It's probably the next best thing."

Still, it was bittersweet.

"I miss him more now that I see him," Chrissy said, crying. "I'm glad I got to see him, but it does make it harder."

Freedom Calls is expanding to eight additional camps in Iraq and two in Afghanistan. Donations may be made at www.freedomcalls.org.

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