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Smiles are all around as loved ones visit with soldiers online

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Northeast Ohio residents connected with their loved ones in Iraq Thursday during video teleconference calls sponsored by Freedom Calls Foundation.

Four families conversed with their relatives -- including a 4-year-old girl and her 21-year-old brother, and one woman with the young man she has been dating for the past few months -- through calls to Camp Fallujah in Iraq coordinated by the nonprofit group.

Freedom Calls, based in Brooklyn Heights, N.Y., connects families with loved ones deployed in Afghanistan and Iraq through telephone, Internet and video teleconferencing free of charge.

Since making its first calls on Mother's Day 2004, the organization has connected thousands of service people with their friends and families, said Edward Buckstel, co-founder and director of operations.

Those contacting their loved ones Thursday spent about a half-hour watching and waving into a video screen, talking into a microphone and listening through headphones in a meeting room at the Renaissance Cleveland Hotel in downtown Cleveland.

Both sides were all smiles and giggles. The soldiers didn't seem to mind the eight-hour time difference -- it was after midnight in Iraq -- and sometimes were embarrassed as they sat in a closed room, their guns at their sides.

Marine Cpl. Mark Smykowski, 22, conversed with his parents, their spouses and his younger brother, all of them happy to see that he was doing well.

"You look good," Diana Ross told her eldest son.

Smykowski has been a Marine for 4½ years and has been followed into the Marines by his brother Darren, 20, a corporal assigned to Afghanistan. His younger brother, Kenny, 18, will enter the Marines in June.

Ross, of Mentor, said she had mixed feelings about having all three sons in the Marines, but that she was proud of them.

Burt Smykowski, of Garfield Heights, said: "I always feel good when I talk to him."

Mary McAfee, of Cleveland, talked to her daughter, Marine Cpl. Monique McAfee, about what she will cook for her when she returns from Iraq. She and another daughter and her children took turns talking to "Twin" about what they were doing.

In the end, everyone asked the same question of their loved one: When are you coming home?

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