

# The Columbus Dispatch

A VIDEO REUNION

## Seeing what they're missing Soldiers in Iraq share a few minutes with families in Columbus

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The first question asked by most folks who communicated via live video to their loved ones in Iraq last night was "Can you hear me?"

It was as if they couldn't believe they were seeing and hearing them at the same time.

"You can talk on the phone all you want, but it's the face that matters. I want to see that he's alive," said Dee Freidhof, of Mansfield, who spoke to her husband, Paul, along with their two children, Ryan, 4, and Sean, 6.

The family members of 22 soldiers who came to Nationwide Arena for the video hookup also were treated to the Team USA vs. Team Canada World Cup exhibition hockey game.

The event was organized by the Freedom Calls Foundation, a nonprofit group that connects military members with their families via phone and the Internet at no cost.

Each family had about 10 minutes on one of three computers to talk to their loved ones.

Though no exact location was disclosed, the soldiers spoke from a downlink facility built close to Baghdad, said Ed Bukstel of the foundation.

It was the first time many had seen their loved ones since the 706<sup>th</sup> Army Transportation Company from Mansfield shipped out in December.

The Burkepile family of Mansfield wore bright yellow T-shirts that declared "I Support Our Troops."

Just hours before, Kathie Burkepile, whose son Arick is a fuel hauler, had been bitten on the leg by a Belgian sheepdog she was training.

She got a tetanus shot and three stitches at a Mansfield hospital, then hopped into the car to go to Columbus.

"I told them I was coming here for this and they had me out in 20 minutes," Mrs. Burkepile said.



**Arick Burkepile, who is serving in Iraq, is seen on a laptop screen. He hasn't seen his family since December.**



**Kathie Burkepile uses sign language to send her love to her son, Arick, as the family sees him on a live video hookup.**

She teared up as she talked to Arick, and she held up a cellphone with her daughter on the other end. Daughter Elizabeth couldn't make it because she's expected to give birth soon.

The family did most of the talking. Arick, 25, seemed to want to listen.

"He doesn't talk about it much," Mrs. Burkepile said of his work in Iraq.

"He wants to know what's going on here," his father, Richard, said.

Little Kaleb Clapper showed his dad, Chris, his missing front teeth. He opened wide in front of the eye-size camera.

Chris Clapper's sister Carley blew him a kiss.

His wife, Lanisha, spoke volumes just by sitting in front of the computer: She had gotten pregnant just before Chris left for Iraq; last night was the first time he had seen what she looked like.

"It wasn't long enough," Lanisha said of the video visit.

She is to see him in person soon: Chris has been granted two weeks R &R for the birth of their child next month.

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