

Bravo Company Christmas

National Guard families celebrate the holidays

By BECKY WALDROP
Corvallis Gazette-Times
Sunday December 5, 2004

CORVALLIS — McKenzie Davis of Waldport was just 1 year old the last time she saw her father, Staff Sgt. Scott Davis, who is in Iraq with the Corvallis-based Bravo Company, part of the 2nd Battalion, 162nd Infantry in the Oregon Army National Guard.

On Saturday the little girl, now 2, had on her black and red plaid Christmas dress and her blond hair curled in ringlets for a special visit with her dad.

McKenzie's mom, Sheila Davis, and the couple's other two children, Cameron, 11, and Shelby, 8, and Scott Davis' mom, Carol Davis of Lebanon, all sang "We Wish You a Merry Christmas" to Sgt. Davis in Iraq using videoconferencing technology provided by the Freedom Calls Foundation.

The national nonprofit organization has raised money to help families like the Davises stay in touch with soldiers serving in Iraq.

Sheila Davis said what she misses the most is the daily interaction with her husband.

"I miss seeing his face and having conversations and doing things together," she said.

Bravo Company soldiers have been in Iraq since March and are expected to return stateside in late February or early March. The Davises are looking forward to when they can take day trips or just hang out and watch movies together.

Until then, families rely on each other and their extended families, including other children, spouses, parents and siblings of soldiers in Bravo Company. At the company's holiday party Saturday at the Corvallis Armory, families shared a meal of turkey and ham, potatoes and dressing, salads, vegetables and rolls, as well as a whole table of sweets.

Santa Claus was stationed in one corner, and children could sit on his lap to share their Christmas wishes. Santa also handed out presents to each child, gifts that were donated by people in the community and local businesses, said Bravo Company family coordinator Chelle Young.

More than a dozen families were able to talk with soldiers in Iraq for 30 minutes using videoconferencing.



Andy Cripe/Gazette-Times
Two-year old McKenzie Davis and her grandmother, Carol Davis, visit Santa at the Bravo Company holiday party at the Corvallis National Guard Armory on Saturday afternoon. McKenzie's father, Staff Sgt. Scott Davis, is currently serving in Iraq with the Corvallis-based Bravo Company.

Debi Key-Young of Beaverton has coordinated three other events like this one, connecting Oregon soldiers and their families through Freedom Calls. Key-Young doesn't have anyone serving in the military, but she does have a son, and she knows the importance of families staying in touch.

After watching news coverage of the war in Iraq, Key-Young researched ways that she could be involved in supporting soldiers. She learned about Freedom Calls, which provides free Internet and e-mail, phone and videoconferencing services to Army soldiers.



Courtesy Freedomcalls.org/MAJ Richard Durost
Staff SGT Davis's view of his family from Iraq during
½ hour video conference provided free of charge by
the Freedom Calls Foundation

Watching the families anticipate and then emerge from a room where they've seen a live picture of a loved one on a computer screen has had a profound effect on Key-Young.

"It was the most emotional, powerful thing I've ever seen," she said.

Some families she's helped have told her they've spent tens of thousands of dollars on long-distance and cellular phone bills to stay in touch with soldiers.

"I can see my son anytime. They don't have that choice," Key-Young said.

John Harlow, executive director of Freedom Calls, said his organization has facilitated videoconferencing for weddings, adoptions, graduations and birthday parties.

"We had a guy actually talk his wife through childbirth," Harlow said.

The foundation hopes to cause a paradigm shift in the life of a soldier in battle, where he can interact with his family on a daily basis, even if he can't be there in person. Harlow said videoconferencing has an even greater advantage over talking on the phone, because young children usually don't engage on the phone. But in front of a camera, where they can see their mom or dad, it's a different story.

Kristen Cary of Keizer brought her two young daughters, Chloe, 2, and Liah, 6 months, and her mom, Wendy Gehman, to talk to her husband, Spc. Justin Cary.

Spc. Cary was able to be home when Liah was born, but he hadn't seen his daughter since that one-week leave. On Saturday, Kristen held up a happy baby Liah and told her husband about how she ate almost a whole piece of pumpkin pie on Thanksgiving.

Upon seeing his healthy daughter, Spc. Cary jokingly called Liah "chubby" for eating all her pie.

Kristen Cary said her husband is looking a little thin and she's eager for him to be home soon. They were married just before he deployed, and she found out that she was pregnant with Liah two weeks after he left.

"When he gets back, we're going to take a honeymoon," she said. "I don't care where we go as long as it's warm and sunny."