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MAJOR MILESTONE: After her high school graduation, Sarah Andrada (l.) speaks to her mother, Spc. Michelle Soto, who's at Camp Cooke in Iraq.

MAJ. RICHARD
DUROST/COURTESY OF
FREEDOMCALLS.ORG

It's almost like being there

Mom's in Iraq. Her daughter's in California. But now, Mom doesn't have to miss the big event.

By **Crystal Allen** | *Correspondent of The Christian Science Monitor*

Spc. Michelle Soto, a member of the California National Guard's 1072 PLS Company serving in Iraq, had planned to be home for her daughter's high school graduation. When she couldn't get leave, she was devastated.

Then Soto heard about video conference calls offered by Freedom Calls Foundation. It's one of several nonprofit organizations that help military people abroad connect with their families and participate in important events in their lives - births, weddings, anniversaries - even though they can't be there in person.

At first, Soto was skeptical, but she decided to give it a try. So Freedom Calls and Army staff worked with her to install the cameras, computers, and video conference equipment in Iraq. Volunteers also worked with Soto's family in the United States to set up the necessary equipment at her daughter's school.

Thanks to this technology - which was provided at no cost to her - Soto got to watch her daughter receive her diploma and to talk with her family for almost two hours afterward.

Charities, technology companies, and the armed services are working to provide families like Soto and her daughter with new communication options, ushering in a virtual revolution in the level and quality of communication between military personnel in the field and their loved ones back home.

"The state-of-the-art technology has reached a point where we can have a paradigm shift in communication," says John Harlow II, cofounder and executive director of the Freedom Calls Foundation, which opened its first facility to 12,000 soldiers at Camp Cooke in Iraq on June 14.

In previous wars, armed forces personnel serving abroad didn't always find contacting their loved ones fast or satisfying. Letters sent by mail could take weeks to arrive at their destinations, and even e-mail, which became available during the Gulf War, does not provide the same feeling of intimacy as audio or visual contact.

Access to phones has always been a challenge for soldiers in a war zone, and the cost of calls typically has been prohibitively high. In addition, war-torn countries often didn't have the infrastructure (such as accessible telephone lines) to support technology, says Glenn Sparks, professor of communications at Purdue University in West Lafayette, Ind.

Organizations such as Freedom Calls are working to combat these challenges and connect families separated by military service.

Project Video Connect, offered by the Red Cross, does not provide face-to-face interaction, but it does let families send video messages with sound.

Even traditional video gives soldier and families a more personal feel than just pictures or regular e-mail, says Amanda Lepof, who helps manage the project.

Fifty Red Cross chapters across the country have been equipped with stations where military families can create and send video messages by e-mail to loved ones deployed overseas. Audio and video streaming allows the families to send high-quality video without creating large file attachments.

Then troops can access the messages via an e-mail notification on any computer with a broadband Internet connection. The messages are stored on the server, which allows recipients to access them again later if they want to.

In most cases, troops overseas, even in war zones, now have access to telephones and e-mail. Internet facilities in Iraq are currently available to more than 132,000 troops, and there are plans for 32 new facilities at base camps. Service personnel in Iraq made 1.2 million phone calls from these stations in May alone, says Marsha Hassell of the Naval Weapons Station in Charleston, S.C., where these mobile communication stations were developed.

The phone calls cost 4.7 cents a minute instead of the usual expensive overseas rates.

Be there and here at the same time

But video conferencing is the most exciting development. "There has been no reliable video conferencing available to soldiers in Iraq or Afghanistan until now," says Mr. Harlow. "The bandwidth available to soldiers on existing military networks has been insufficient even to support reliable low-quality instant-messenger type of video conferencing."

The new video conferencing from Freedom Calls allows service members overseas to "be present [in voice and image, at least] at birthday parties, anniversaries, and births," Harlow says.

"It's more participatory than any other kind of communication, and that's what it's all about," he adds. "I think this will have profound implications for what it means to be deployed in wartime."

Staff Sgt. Jacques Rodriguez, who is currently on duty in Iraq, agrees, saying that the value of these technologies to soldiers in war zones is immeasurable.

People gain most of the emotional impact of communication by interpreting facial and vocal expression, far more than they rely on actual words that are said, explains Dr. Sparks.

"By putting people in touch with the actual faces of our loved ones, we experience a much deeper sense of emotional connection with them, because we understand in a way that we simply cannot if we don't see them, what exactly it is they are feeling. We have a much better understanding of their emotional state."

Since he has been helping with Freedom Calls in Iraq, Maj. Richard Durost has seen firsthand the value of the new types of communications and how they improve the troops' morale.

"I've been able to watch every one of these graduations," he says. "I've been here to watch fathers seeing their new babies for the first time.

"The real reward in working on this and getting this place set up," he adds, "is being able to watch these soldiers connect with their families. It's just been really incredible."

One time, Major Durost personally experienced the joys of one-to-one communication. He had set up a video conference for another soldier and at the end, the man walked over and said that the wife of the unit's colonel wanted to talk to him about the family support group.

As he looked at the video screen, "the next thing I saw was my wife," he relates. "Talk about a morale booster. I was floating around for the next couple days."

Increased expectations

However, there is a potential downside to all this new technology, warns Sparks.

He points out that the possibility of receiving daily e-mail from soldiers overseas builds the expectation that it will come, and if it does not, families become worried about the safety of their loved ones.

This can increase anxiety for families who, in previous wars, would have patiently waited weeks for a letter, and learned not to worry until it came.

"With the advantage of closer contact there also comes the reality of the fact that family members are probably hearing many more details about what is actually going on than families did in World War I or World War II, and they're hearing it on a daily basis," Sparks says.

Families may not really want to know the gory details of battle, and this may also increase stress for them.

Despite these potential drawbacks, families and armed services personnel have an overwhelmingly positive response to technology that allows them closer and more personal contact.

Being able to see and talk with one another gave Soto and her family peace of mind. "After this graduation, after talking to my family for about two hours, [I understand that] they have changed a lot," Soto says. "I mean, when I call home [now], they're not sad, they don't sound upset. They don't sound that worried either, because they have seen me, they have seen how I am....

"I think it made a big difference - and for me, too. I saw that they were doing good and that they were happy, so it made me be able to continue my mission and not worry so much about how they are doing and how it is affecting them. It does make a big difference on both sides."