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Morristown-based group's webcams offer soldiers in Iraq 'emotional' link home

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MORRISTOWN --Army Spc. Stephen Davis is stationed at the Al Asad Air Base in Iraq and has been away from his family for 18 months.

On a recent afternoon, the Alabama native was as close as he could get to the U.S. thanks to a webcam at the base that allows servicemen and women to not only talk but also see people in the states.

During a brief chat with people in the offices of the Morristown-based charity that maintains the webcam, Davis was happy to talk to someone back home and said he'd been eating well, having had steak and lobster the day before.



KELSEY KASPAR / DAILY RECORD

Kathryn Hudacek of nonprofit Freedom Calls jokes around with Army Spc. Stephen Davis in Iraq via videoconference. The group provides soldiers serving in some areas of Iraq with technology to videoconference with their friends and families back in the United States.

The webcam is normally used to connect those serving overseas with significant others, relatives and friends. Davis happened to be passing by the cam last week as the foundation was demonstrating its uses.

"It's a tremendous emotional experience," said John Harlow, founder of Freedom Calls Foundation, the charity that provides video hookups between troops and military families that allow them to communicate.

Harlow added that the video hookups are "part of a solution to the anxiety issue."

While video conference is Freedom Calls' signature service, the organization also offers phone service, usually about 20 minutes per call, with an unlimited number of calls.

Harlow, a Wall Street attorney and venture capitalist, said he was inspired to create such a service in 2003 when he learned of a serviceman who had to pay \$7,000 for his long-distance phone bill.

"That's what inspired me," Harlow said. "They shouldn't be commercially exploited. They are making a huge sacrifice."

Many uses

That's when Harlow unpacked his webcams. With such a capability, military personnel can communicate with their loved ones stateside and witness such milestones as the birth of a child, a graduation, or handle smaller items like the renewal of automobile insurance.

According to Harlow, Freedom Calls has broadcast on average 100 births out of the 2,000 Web conferences each month since its inception more than three years ago.

"They have never been offered a gift of this magnitude," Kathy Hudacek, director of development for Freedom Calls. "It offers morale, welfare and recreation services."

Other Freedom Calls services include e-mail and Instant Messaging. More than 40,000 military personnel have access to the videoconferences, which are done from a handful of military camps based in the volatile Anbar Province, according to Harlow.

Some families have software that enables them to communicate from home, while others go to a designated station such as a hospital or corporate office. The software and webcam are provided to the families at no charge. Normally the cost would come to about \$250.

All of the video conferences must be scheduled in advance, whether done from home or a public place, Hudacek said.

The communications stations in Iraq include Camp Taji, about 15 miles northwest of Baghdad, Al Asad Air Base, among others.

Lacking funds

For the military to continue to videoconference through Freedom Calls, a nonprofit organization, Harlow said \$75,000 must be raised as soon as possible to facilitate the service for another three months. Harlow estimated that it costs about \$25,000 a month to transmit signals from satellites to make the videoconferences possible. Freedom Calls leases bandwidth to make the communications possible.

"We'd like to expand to other parts of Iraq, but we just don't have the funds."

While Freedom Calls has raised about \$1 million in private donations the past three years, the charity needs more to continue providing services, and even more to expand.

Harlow said corporation contributions are the best way to solve the charity's financial woes. While there have been equipment donations, such as \$50,000 worth of cameras from Logitech and \$200,000 worth of satellite services from Broadwave Corp. of Las Vegas, he is hoping employees of various corporations get the word out for some cold hard cash.

If not, the video conferencing services will end, Harlow said.