

Technology puts face on soldiers' calls home

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Monday, June 13, 2005

It was a tearful reunion Sunday for the Howe family of Elk Grove Village, who had not seen their son Geoffrey since he was deployed by the Army to Iraq in January. Only their son won't be home until next January at the earliest.

The Howes were able to see their son for the first time in months through a video conference call at the James R. Thompson Center in Chicago that was linked to Camp Taji, where Howe is stationed.

The video conference was made possible through the Freedom Calls Foundation, a non-profit organization that has established three call centers on military bases in Iraq.

The program is funded through donations and is free for military families.

"They're going to have the Freedom Calls set up on Father's Day, but I got my present early, I have to thank them for that," Geoffrey's father, Larry, said.

During the video conference, the Howes told Geoffrey he received a jury summons in the mail.

Geoffrey joked he may be able to fulfill his civic duty with the use of the video conference technology, but he may have to step out for a while in the event of a mortar attack.

The family communicates with Geoffrey frequently through e-mail and reads his blogs, but the video conference was something special.

"It's overwhelming, we just want him to come home," said Christine Howe, whose son is on his second tour in Iraq.

Christine said Geoffrey, 32, plans to finish college when he returns and would like to pursue a career in communications.

Lt. Gov. Pat Quinn, who was in attendance at the video conference, praised the service.

"The brave men and women who have answered our country's call to duty can now answer a call from home thanks to the Freedom Calls Foundation," he said.

Anyone interested in registering for the program or making donations can do so by visiting OperationHomefront.org.

The next video conference is scheduled for Father's Day at Clark Consulting, 102 N. Wynstone Drive in North Barrington. Times for the conferences are assigned to families registered for the video conference.