

## Soldiers watch from Iraq as their kids graduate

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As Josh Ramirez graduated from Hesperia High School, three video cameras were taping the event. With a giant American flag draped as a backdrop the cameras rolled, allowing his father in Iraq to see the ceremony.

"I read about someone who was married via satellite from Iraq using this service, so I got in touch with Freedom Calls in early May to see if they could arrange something," said Josh's mother, Laura Ramirez. "Freedom Calls and Hesperia High School went above and beyond what we thought would happen."

Parents serving abroad in Iraq can have the chance to see precious family moments thanks to nonprofit Freedom Calls. The group has arranged satellite uplinks for the graduations of Hesperia and Victor Valley high schools.

Because his father, Navy Seabee Noel Ramirez, has been in Iraq since March, it meant a lot to the family to know he could watch the graduation in detail.

A special conference room uplink was also arranged after the ceremony. Newly graduated Josh Ramirez said it was very special for his father to be able to see him in the conference room surrounded by nearly all of his family and their friends.

"It was great to be able to see him, everybody was there," said Josh Ramirez. "He calls us on the phone every now and then, so that was special to be able to actually see him when he congratulated me on finishing school. Before he would call late at night, but only every few days for about 10 or 15 minutes. There's a long line at the camps over there so there's a time limit."



**Reneh Agha / Staff Photographer**

Victor Valley High School graduate Brandon Rey talks with his mother, Petty Officer 2nd Class Lisa Rey, in the Navy stationed in Iraq, during his graduation ceremony on Thursday.

Freedom Calls arranges 2,000 video conferences every month and saves military families \$4 million in telephone bills every year said John Harlow II, who founded the nonprofit in 2003. The charity arranges uplinks at 40 graduations in May, Harlow said.

“I was in venture capital back in 2003 when I heard about a national guardsman in Iraq with a \$7,000 phone bill for calls home,” said Harlow. “I thought that given conference technology available we could do better by these guys. No matter how you feel about the war, these guys go where they’re told. Many of them don’t make a lot of money, but they have a right to maintain a family life ... We hope to expand services into Afghanistan and Bosnia.”

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