



A familiar face, live from Iraq

Soldiers get rare chance to see loved ones through Web service

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Johnston, Ia. - Paula Burnett and her two children walked anxiously into the sparsely occupied computer lab at Camp Dodge on Sunday morning and immediately began scanning computer screens for the face of their father and husband.

Within minutes, Howard Burnett's face appeared on one of the screens.

"There he is, oh, my goodness," whispered Paula.

Eleven-year-old Nathan Burnett impatiently waited for his turn to talk with his father, a member of the 185th Combat Support Battalion stationed in Taji, Iraq, about 20 miles north of Baghdad. Nathan told his father he had been practicing basketball and had grilled hamburgers Saturday night, burning them.

Howard Burnett laughed. "Maybe we can grill together when I get home, buddy. Would you like that?" Burnett asked his son.

The families of about 20 members of the 185th Combat Support Battalion talked with their loved ones through an Internet conference and Web cameras Sunday at the Iowa National Guard headquarters in Johnston. The service was provided by the Freedom Calls Foundation, a nonprofit organization in New York that has built a network for families and troops in combat to communicate with their families at home.



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Long distance: Capt. Rick Hansen, 40, of Palo waves to family members Sunday during a Web conference paid for by the Freedom Calls Foundation. About 20 soldiers in Iraq talked with loved ones at Camp Dodge.

It was the first time the Burnetts had seen each other since December.

"You look like a teenager," Howard Burnett told his 13-year-old daughter, Faith. "Where's my little girl at?"

Capt. Rod Throckmorton of Sigourney also appeared surprised at how much his daughter had grown in the eight months he had been in Iraq. When he left, his young daughter, Marin, had not yet begun walking. On Sunday, the 18-month-old was hurriedly walking around the computer station at which her mother was sitting.

"Marin . . . Daddy misses you," Throckmorton said to his daughter, who turned 1 year old while her father has been away.

"She looks so grown up, it's hard for me to believe she's getting that big," Throckmorton said to his wife, Missy.

As Missy and her parents, David and Lila Prell, huddled around the computer to talk with Throckmorton, Marin waved and blew kisses to her father on the screen. The toddler curiously looked under her mother's chair, calling out, "Daddy."

Lila Prell said her son-in-law hopes to be home by Marin's second birthday in February.

Throckmorton opted not to take the two-week recuperation time offered to deployed military personnel because he worried it would confuse Marin, Lila Prell said.

As the family's 30-minute Web conference drew to an end, Prell became emotional. "We love and miss you, and I'll have the beef and noodles ready," Prell told her son-in-law as she clung tightly to her granddaughter.

Major Jay Lohmann of the Iowa National Guard at Camp Dodge, said it would be difficult for the National Guard to offer the Web conferences because the costs reach several hundred dollars an hour. The Freedom Calls Foundation provided the Web cameras and the necessary software, and provides the network for the troops to talk to their families, Lohmann said.

Many families communicate weekly either by telephone or e-mail over the Freedom Calls network, Lohmann said.



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So long: Loved ones of Master Sgt. Steven Eggers of Polk City say goodbye Sunday. They are, from left, his daughter, Stacie; father, Orlan; friend Jay Monson; wife, Marcia; and son, Mike.

Paula Burnett repeatedly told her husband how happy she was that the Web service had been set up. Later, Paula said the family expects Burnett home this fall for two weeks of rest and recuperation.

Howard Burnett, during the Web conference, several times commented on the maturity he saw in his children.

"Are these my children or are these some adults you found outside the door?" Burnett asked Paula, whose eyes filled up with tears as she watched her children talk to their father.

Nathan, dressed in a "Who's Your Baghdaddy?" T-shirt, told his father that he was "looking balder."

Burnett told his family that they all they looked great.

"You look so close," he said, "I could reach out and touch you, even though we're 6,000 miles apart."