

Seeing is relieving

John Harlow, Co-Founder and Executive Director of the Freedom Calls Foundation, heralds the the service being provided to American Forces deployed overseas...

As America settles into Iraq for the long haul, the realities of maintaining the morale of deployed Forces are now being addressed. The Freedom Calls Foundation is bringing personal communications into the modern age, providing Service personnel with ready access to videoconferencing, satellite telephones and internet access, free of charge, maintaining family ties that have so often paid the price when military necessity has seen family members deployed overseas. To learn more about the Foundation's inception and achievements, DMJ spoke to John Harlow, CEO of the Freedom Calls Foundation.

To begin, could you give us a little bit of the background to the Foundation's beginnings?

We formed the Foundation in September 2003 when we heard that soldiers had \$7,000 cell phone bills from trying to keep in touch with their families, and that they were pooling money amongst themselves to purchase satellite dishes to try to set up their own satellite networks because they didn't have adequate facilities to communicate with their families. We felt that they shouldn't be commercially exploited in this manner and that this is something that the American people ought to pay for. Our troops should have totally free telecommunications 24 hours a day to speak with their families, given the sacrifices that they are making on the country's behalf. We went through a six month vetting process with the Army and the Secretary of the Army's Office, and we were approved to provide services in April 2004, and that's when we commenced services. Just to be clear as to what we do, we have built a satellite network that is routable from the public internet, so that we now have 10,000 sites in the United States that can access our network, which goes to four sites in Iraq, to approximately 30,000-40,000 soldiers, sailors, airmen and marines, so that their families can communicate with them 24 hours a day, either from home if they have the proper bandwidth and computer equipment – we'll send them a webcam and the necessary software so that they can get connected – or through 10,000 sites made available by corporations, school systems, law firms, universities, telemedicine sites, State Government and National Guard.

How is the Foundation funded?

We're a 501C3 public charity and a New York not-for-profit corporation, which means that we are authorised to take

donations from the public to support our activities. So we receive money through individual contributions over our website, from corporations, foundations, both in kind and in cash.

Could you talk us through the process of setting up a videoconferencing station?

Generally what happens is that I'll get a request, either directly from a soldier or from the family, to set up a conference. We first ascertain if the family has the necessary equipment to do it from home – if they do, we send them the software and a webcam, getting them set up so that they can conference three or four times a month over the kitchen table. If they don't have the equipment, then we go about selecting the best site nearby for them to conduct the conference. If we don't have a site near to their home, and we're constantly expanding our list because people live all over the place, then we'll find a new site close to them. Then we'll set up the conferencing and make it happen. Teleconferencing is just one of our activities – we also provide more than one million minutes per month of free telephone calls, internet access and the ability to print photos – the full service, state-of-the-art communications system, which allows a family to conduct important family business, as well as to keep in touch. This full service allows families, for the first time in history, to virtually be together during wartime, allowing these Servicemen and women to meet their commitments to their families whilst they're serving overseas.

Is it being used for the full range of familial customs?

It's been extraordinary – every day, someone surprises me with a new application. Everything from the small family moments, such as a four year old girl showing her father that she's learned to tie her shoelaces, right through to marines getting married over the network. We do around 30 or 40 new baby conferences a month, right from the hospital hours after birth, we've had a conference set up by a pregnant woman so that her husband could virtually attend an ultrasound scan of their unborn child at her OB-GYN's office. We've had people complete adoption proceedings at courthouses, attend parent-teacher evenings at school, say goodbye to dying relatives, attend relatives' weddings. We've even had Servicemen act as best man at weddings, on a six foot plasma screen. All of these are milestone family events that Servicepeople would otherwise miss. We try to be cre-



ative, but ultimately, it's the users who are thinking of new ideas, and they come to us and we try to make them happen.

What levels of permeation are you ultimately hoping for with this technology?

Our overall vision, and this is technologically and economically feasible today, is that a warfighter can come home from a hard day on the battlefield and spend virtual time with his family every night. It's just a question of establishing that paradigm, and I think this will have profound implications for morale and, perhaps, the whole logistics of how we fight wars.

How do you strike the balance between having accessibility whilst remaining cost-effective and operationally flexible?

We really haven't, and I don't know when we'd reach that point. Obviously, that ultimate vision begins to approach that line. So far, I think the military has been very appreciative for the morale boost that we have been able to provide – it's been technologically universally positive, which is certainly a rare thing – usually there's a downside associated with technology, but not in this case. We try to do our conferences on a regular basis – we don't want people to finish a videoconference thinking that this is the last time that they will speak for months. We try to schedule our conferences so that they look forward to the next one. We don't yet do this every day – our standard operating procedure is for a maximum of four times a month now. We're yet to run into any conflict over this, and so far, we've not seen any downsides. It's a win-win-win situation – for families, for the military and, of course, for soldiers. We're now seeing incidences of soldiers turning leave down because it's now possible to participate virtually in a milestone family event, and who felt that others should have the opportunity to take leave because they had the good fortune to videoconference. Of course, this saves the military a lot of money and indicates that that soldier has pretty high morale.

Do you think this is now a permanent fixture in the infrastructure of long-term military deployments?

You're asking someone who's kind of biased. I think we've established the paradigm and it's important to note that technology will carry us forward. More and more people will be able to do this from home as the infrastructural ability builds out – more people receive broadband services in their homes and computer equipment becomes more capable. It's extremely popular with families, soldiers, marines and airmen. Right now, it requires a great deal more infrastructure

than just setting up the technology – it takes many, many relationships in the community. Say if you want a wedding link-up to Iraq – you have to establish connections in that church, or if you want to virtually attend a graduation – a link has to be provided at the school hall – these are real logistical efforts. But we're establishing the

paradigm, proving the paradigm and refining the paradigm. I think, at present, it will continue to be a third party provision – I don't think the military has the infrastructure or support capability to provide this to the troops on a regular basis, but they have seen how important it is and responded positively to it. It's only natural – it's the most important thing to these families. Of course, there's a few guys out there for whom beer and football are at the top of their priority lists, but for 99%, keeping in touch with family is so important, especially on deployments that last anywhere between nine and 18 months. It's also worth remembering that many of these families have young children and it's a very important time in their lives – it's easy to take for granted the things that we do every day to participate in family life and it's very hard to miss these things. We do 1,000 conferences a month now, which is building geometrically and putting a strain on our resources – we're always looking to reach out and find more corporate support for this. We're a very efficient organisation, and there's nothing more important to these serving guys and their families, especially given the way media portrays wars. Anxiety builds up over time, which doesn't get resolved by a three minute Morale Welfare and Recreation (MWR) phone call. The wives and mothers know that their men will assure them that they are fine, even if bullets are whizzing over their heads while they're on the phone. A videoconference provides that assurance, that quality of experience that allows families to see their serving relative, see their body language, see that their mannerisms are the same – to see that they haven't changed. If there has been a change, then they can be there, can adjust and assist through a critical time. As such, we have a saying – 'seeing is relieving'.

If you would like to support the work of the Freedom Calls Foundation, please visit their website: www.freedomcalls.org.



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