



'Freedom Calls' Offers Free Video Conferencing

By Donna Miles
American Forces Press Service

WASHINGTON, July 16, 2004 -- Army Spc. Joshua Strickland thought he was in big trouble earlier this week when his commanding officer personally escorted him to a facility he'd never heard of at Camp Cook in Iraq under the pretense of signing some papers. The young soldier got even more nervous when his tight-lipped commander led him behind a door that read, "Authorized Personnel Only."



Dorothy Strickland holds up her daughter, Shelby, so the baby's father, Army Spc. Joshua Strickland, can wish her a happy birthday via videoconference from Camp Cook, Iraq. Courtesy photo (Click photo for screen-resolution image).

But there, on a television screen, were 16 members of Strickland's family, gathered around a large-screen TV at his brother-in-law's home in Valdosta, Ga., waiting for Strickland to help celebrate his daughter Shelby's first birthday.

Thanks to 21st-century technology and the Freedom Calls Foundation, Strickland got to sing "Happy Birthday" to the daughter he hadn't seen in seven months and to watch her toddle toward the TV screen for the first time and utter her first "da-da." He looked on excitedly as Shelby

blew out her first birthday candle, then chatted with his wife Dorothy and other family members he hadn't seen since deploying to Iraq with the 25th Infantry Division's 1st Battalion, 25th Aviation Regiment.

"It is just amazing," said John Harlow, executive director of the Freedom Calls Foundation, which made the July 14 visit and others like it at Camp Cook possible. "It gives me a lump in my throat every day."

On July 20, another deployed soldier is scheduled to see his newborn son for the first time via a videoconference at Camp Cook's Freedom Calls Foundation Facility — with the segment to be aired live on ABC's "Good Morning America," Harlow said.

The facility, the first of its kind in Iraq that offers service members free videoconferencing so they can stay in touch with their families, is made possible through private donations to the Freedom Calls Foundation. Harlow said plans call for three additional facilities in Iraq and two in Afghanistan, and possibly five more facilities after that depending on donations.

In addition, the foundation plans to install the videoconferencing capability at Army posts in the United States for families who don't have a broadband Internet connection at home, and at military hospitals so troops can interact with their newborn children and new moms hours after birth, Harlow said.

Harlow said the capability is shortening the miles between deployed troops and their families and helping ensure deployed service members don't miss out on important family events.

"Soldiers are now able to not only see, but participate in, milestone family events such as the birth of a new child, first communions, high school graduations, birthdays, weddings and anniversaries over the Freedom Calls Network."

Shortly after the facility opened to 12,000 soldiers at Camp Cook last month, Spc. Michelle Soto, from the California National Guard, used the facility to "attend" her daughter's high school graduation. Participating virtually by videoconference, Soto got to watch her daughter receive her diploma, then talked with her family for almost two hours.

Army Staff Sgt. Shadow Evans used the facility to create her own family milestone. Arriving at the facility in an up-armored Humvee rather than a limousine, she exchanged wedding vows via videoconference with Sgt. Richard Everton, in Durango, Colo.

But Ed Bukstel, director of operations for the Freedom Calls Foundation, said the facility isn't just for major family events. He said deployed troops and their families can use the capability to talk about the little things in life, such as a child's camp experience that day, that too often go unshared during a parent's deployment. "They can talk just like they would over the dinner table," Harlow added, "in spite of the fact that their soldier is 10,000 miles away in a war zone."

Harlow said the service is transforming the nature of deployments, bringing families together in a way never before possible. "Throughout history, tours of duty in wartime have served to separate families," he said.

Thanks to state-of-the-art technology provided through the Freedom Calls Foundation, he said, "though families may be separated by war, they need not be estranged by it."

More information about the service is posted on the Freedom Calls Foundation Web site.

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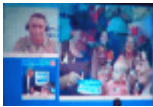
[Freedom Calls Foundation](#)



The Freedom Calls Foundation Facility at Camp Cook, Iraq, provides free videoconferencing to keep deployed troops in touch with their families. Courtesy photo



High resolution photo.



Army Spc. Joshua Strickland watches via videoconference as his daughter Shelby blows out the candles on her first birthday cake. The videoconference service is provided free by the Freedom Calls Foundation. Courtesy photo