



'Freedom Calls' Helps Deployed Troops Connect With Family

By Samantha L. Quigley
American Forces Press Service

WASHINGTON, Aug. 20, 2004 -- A non-profit organization is building a communications network dedicated to keeping deployed troops in touch with family back home, all at no cost to the troops or their families.



Army Spc. Joshua Strickland sings Happy Birthday from Iraq via videoconference to his daughter, Shelby, who celebrated her first birthday in Valdosta, Ga. The July 14 event was more like a birthday present for him, as he heard Shelby say "dada" for the first time and she kissed the image of her father on the screen. Strickland hadn't seen his daughter since she was 4 months old.

Photo by Maj. Richard Durost, courtesy of Freedom Calls Foundation

(Click photo for screen-resolution image); [high-resolution image](#) available.

Freedom Calls Foundation has helped military parents in Iraq attend graduations and meet new children. It has even allowed a couple get married, despite the fact that he was in Colorado and she was in Iraq. It also allowed troops in Iraq to cheer the Philadelphia Flyers Hockey team live during game 6 of the 2004 NHL playoffs -- all via videoconferencing.

Founded by John B. Harlow II and Edward Bukstel on Aug. 12, 2003, after military personnel requested assistance in setting up a communications network for troops overseas, FCF is supported by private and corporate donations. The foundation began operating Sept. 26, 2003.

"The foundation was formed as a public charity because we believe family is important, particularly in wartime, and that this is the least that the American people can do to show their appreciation for the sacrifices being made by our soldiers and their families," said Harlow, executive director of the Freedom Calls Foundation.

FCF has been operating in Iraq at Camp Cooke for about five months, said Bukstel, the FCF operations director. Daily, 1,500 troops file through the FCF facility and are able to chat briefly with their loved ones.

They may only get 15-20 minutes, Bukstel said, but it can make all the difference. Having attended several of the stateside Internet videoconferencing events arranged by FCF, he said the events are very emotional.

"Obviously, it's the whole range of emotions," he said. "You have to see it. The American people have to see it."

One servicemember spent 15 of his 20 minutes singing "The Itsy Bitsy Spider" to his months-old infant son, Bukstel said. When his wife asked if he was going to talk to her, he told her he'd saved the best for last.

Families have traveled great distances to attend a videoconferencing event. And, Bukstel said, there is no reason to believe that the two upcoming events will be any different.

On Aug. 21, FCF, the Family Readiness Group of Headquarters Company, 980th Engineers, and SBC Communications will provide secure Internet videoconferencing at a military installation in Austin, Texas. Troops based at a camp in Iraq's Baathist Triangle will get a chance to talk with approximately 300 family members that are expected to attend.

Bukstel said SBC donated communications technology to link the facility to the Freedom Calls Network and has provided SBC Pioneers volunteers to help with mission.

On Aug. 23, FCF, the Columbus Blue Jackets hockey team, USA Hockey, and the 706th Transportation Company of Mansfield, Ohio, will provide Internet videoconferencing for troops based in the Baathist Triangle and about 50 of their family members from Ohio. The event will take place at Nationwide Arena in Columbus, Ohio.

Bukstel said the troops would have a special message for their family members attending the Team USA vs. Team Canada hockey game taking place that night.

"This is a very meaningful way for families to connect with their loved ones deployed in Iraq. We have families -- moms and dads, sisters, brothers, wives and kids -- that are coming from all around Ohio," said Crystal Lybarger, 706th Transportation Family Readiness coordinator.

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