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America Supports You: Deployed Forces, Families Linked Via Video

By Terri Lukach
American Forces Press Service

WASHINGTON, March 31, 2005 – From precision-guided munitions to unmanned aerial vehicles to hand-held devices that can provide a squad or a company with real-time, over-the-horizon views of trouble spots in the battlespace, the technology of warfare has taken a giant leap forward in the global war in terror. Now, with the help of organizations like the Freedom Calls Foundation, so have communications between warriors and their families.

Recognizing the stress service members face when separated from their loved ones by thousands of miles and extended tours of duty, two communications experts teamed up to form the nonprofit organization.

With the help of individual contributions and corporate sponsors, the foundation provides free, state-of-the-art videoconferencing technology to link U.S. service personnel with their families back home.

Unlike the censored mail of World War II, or the few minutes of barely audible telephone conversation that characterized communication during the Vietnam conflict, videoconferencing allows today's military men and women to attend and participate in birthdays, graduations, weddings and other milestone family events. Via the magic of video, they can join their spouse at a parent-teacher conference, speak to an insurance agent or financial adviser, or participate in any number of other events important to the life of the family. One Army general, foundation officials said, called it the single greatest boost in morale for the troops in the past 25 years.

The venture began when military personnel in Iraq contacted Edward Bukstel, a corporate executive with a satellite services provider, and asked him to help establish a communications network for U.S. forces overseas. Together with John B. Harlow II, a lawyer, banker and Internet service provider, the two established the Freedom Calls Foundation and offered its services to the U.S. Army.

The first foundation facility was established in 2004 at Camp Cooke (now Camp Taji), an Army base north of Baghdad. In addition to several Polycom videoconferencing stations, the facility offers 40 phones, 10 video e-mail stations, and 50 computers with e-mail and Internet access. Thanks to their efforts, the camp's more than 14,000 soldiers are now able to communicate with their loved ones regularly and free of charge. The services are available 24 hours a day.

Harlow said the foundation is working with Marines at Camp Fallujah, Iraq, to establish two more facilities. The Army has asked the organization to install facilities at 10 more Army camps -- eight in Iraq and two in Afghanistan. Two of the eight new Iraqi facilities will be up and running in the next 90 days, Harlow said.

Each Freedom Calls Foundation facility costs about \$300,000 to establish and another \$300,000 annually to maintain. "We are always begging for resources," Harlow said. "Donations come from individuals, from corporations, and from a variety of other sources." For example, he said, a group of office workers whose employee fund was being dissolved voted to donate the entire amount to the Freedom Calls Foundation to help connect families to their service members in Iraq.

"In upstate New York," Harlow said, "a couple of high school girls started selling magnetic car ribbons and are now raising about \$1,000 a month for the troops."

Harlow said the foundation's goal over the coming year is to establish a facility at every Army camp in Afghanistan and Iraq. Eventually, the organization hopes to add facilities in other locations around the world where U.S. troops are deployed. The services make a real difference to those fighting for freedom far from home. For example, in a surprise video visit arranged by a buddy at Camp Cooke, Maj. Mark Brooks of the Army Reserve's 98th Division was able to spend an hour visiting with his wife and his 4-day-old baby daughter in rural Maine.

Twenty-five members of the 706th Transportation Company were not only able to cheer on Team USA in the first of three World Cup hockey exhibition games in Columbus, Ohio, but also addressed the capacity crowd of 18,000 over the arena's Jumbotron screen. After the game, the soldiers spent about 20 minutes each visiting with their own family members.

Army Staff Sgts. Shadow Evans and Richard Everton were wed in a long-distance video ceremony that brought together the bride in Iraq with the groom in Durango, Colo.

And two fathers, in simultaneous videoconferencing sessions over the Freedom Calls network in Iraq, were able to attend high school graduation ceremonies for their daughters in separate cities in California.

While the technology is sophisticated, implementation is surprisingly easy. Many families keep in touch by phone or e-mail to exchange greetings, conduct family business, or address the myriad problems of everyday life. For those with broadband

Internet service and an inexpensive Web camera, families can talk to their warfighter on special occasions or simply while gathered around the dinner table, so that husbands, wives, fathers and mothers can still play a role in the family.

“Our vision,” Harlow said, “is that warfighters should be able to come home from a day on the battlefield and be with their loved ones on a virtual basis every evening. That is both technically and economically feasible today,” he said.

For households without broadband capability, the Freedom Calls Foundation offers a service called Operation Hometown Link that connects families to their military member via a local videoconferencing facility.

In Massachusetts, for example, the foundation is able to offer military families more than 30 sites, thanks to the leadership of the Raytheon Company, a Massachusetts corporation. Raytheon was the first company to open its facilities to military families, and has been a charter contributor to the Freedom Calls Foundation. Also in Massachusetts, Harvard University, St. John’s Preparatory School, Springfield Technical Community College and the Hampshire Educational Collaborative have also opened their existing video facilities to military families. Across the country, other corporations, law firms, schools, hospitals and universities are doing the same.

One new dad, Harlow said, got to sing “Happy Birthday” at his daughter’s first birthday party, saw her walk for the first time, then watched as she ambled over to his video face, uttered the words, “Da Da” and planted a frosting-smear kiss on the screen. “Those are awesome personal experiences,” Harlow said.

In the coming months, the foundation hopes to have more than 1,000 published sites nationwide where families can gather to interact via video with their military members. To access the services, they’d simply find a nearby site, make a reservation and show up.

In the meantime, the foundation has become quite nimble at making events happen in faraway places. For example, they set up a video wedding for a soldier in Iraq and her deployed fiancée in Afghanistan, complete with venue, cake, balloons, a chaplain and a six-foot video screen -- all on less than eight hours’ notice. They even arranged for the bride to arrive in a white up-armored Humvee masquerading as a limousine.

“When she stepped out of that Humvee and walked in, 20 tough guys cried,” Harlow said. “She even threw a bouquet – and it was caught by a 25-year-old, 250-pound sergeant. It was the most gratifying thing we’ve ever enabled,” he said, “and the most gratifying thing I’ve ever done in my own work life.”

And military families, he added, deserve the efforts people make to help them. “Military families are some of the most selfless, giving people I’ve ever met. It’s a privilege for us to do this for them,” Harlow said.