



## Troops discuss duty, family -- and ribs -- with students

Wednesday, September 12, 2007

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The Express-Times

BETHLEHEM | Speaking via satellite from a small, bland room at an Iraq base, six U.S. troops shared moments of levity and some about the heartbreak of their deployment with students Tuesday at Lehigh University.

Two themes kept surfacing throughout the nearly hour-long exchange: the students' appreciation of the troops' service -- nearly all opened their questions with a thank you -- and the enjoyment these troops find in their work.

"I know why I'm here, why I came over here. I appreciate it. This is my job, and I really enjoy my job," one woman, 24, told the 200-strong audience of Lehigh University and Nazareth Area High School students.

The six troops ranged in age from 20 to 29, with four of them single and two married with children back home. Two of those unmarried said they were from Allentown. Their names were unclear over the connection to Al Asad Airbase in Anbar Province.

The conversation took place about 8 p.m. for the troops; it was noon in Bethlehem. Most of the troops said their days begin about dawn in the gym, and they are on call 24 hours a day, every day.

"I'm lucky to get four hours of sleep a day, but you get used to it," said an infantryman from Georgia, on his second tour in Iraq. "I can easily sleep for two hours and stay up for two days."

The most gratifying part of this soldier's service? Talking to his family, "Hearing your little rug rats running around saying, 'Daddy I miss you.'"

Asked what they miss most about the United States, what they would seek out upon their return, one answered, "Chili's Baby Back Ribs and a big ol' beer."

As for what they'd most like to see in a care package, votes were cast for Gillette razors, conditioner, Butterfingers and, according to one man, "a mountain of white socks. Underwear wouldn't hurt either."

Despite falling on the sixth anniversary of the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, the troops said it was business as usual besides the videoconference. "This is the most special thing I have personally done all day," one said. "I couldn't imagine anything better."

Among those in the audience were three Nazareth Area High School students who this week plan to ask their principal to form a Junior ROTC program. They entered the Lehigh auditorium chatting about their picks for next year's presidential election, even though they're too young to vote.

"We're just interested in what our outcome's going to be for the country," said one of the students, Daniel Elinich, a 16-year-old junior from Lower Nazareth Township.

Talking to troops in Iraq is a regular occurrence for Shanacy Marler, a 23-year-old earth and environmental science major in the audience. She is friends with a recent West Point graduate whose tour was just extended beyond October until January. They usually keep their talks light, like that on Tuesday.

"They're very tired," said Marler, of Albuquerque, N.M. "Some days he's working 26 hours without stopping, and they're constantly doing something."

Tuesday marked the third time in three years Lehigh University was linked to Iraq via satellite through Morristown, N.J.-based Freedom Calls Foundation.

A dispute about money between the nonprofit group and its satellite provider could doom the service, Executive Director John Harlow said. He said he is seeking donations for the service, which links about 2,000 troops a month to their families

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