

## Soldiers call home on 9/11 anniversary

**For fourth year in a row, troops in Iraq talk to Lehigh Valley students about their experiences.**

Friday, September 12, 2008

**By SARA K. SATULLO**

**The Express-Times**

BETHLEHEM | They were thousands of miles away from Lehigh University, sitting on a military base somewhere in Iraq, but they managed to give some comfort to the mother of a soldier about to deploy.

That mother, Debbie Henritz, wiped away tears as the three U.S. soldiers gave her son advice via a satellite hookup arranged by the university through the Freedom Call Foundation.

"He has to understand the big picture, what he is there for," Capt. Matthew Benton told her, assuring Henritz her son would be physically prepared.

Thursday afternoon's program marked the fourth time the university hosted an hourlong informal conversation with troops on the anniversary of the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

At Camp Taqaddum in Iraq, where it was 8 p.m., the day included a barbecue in addition to the talk with more than 100 people back home.

While they appreciate care packages, Benton said, these satellite calls help them know that Americans support the troops regardless of their opinion on the war, Benton said.

"To me, that means more than getting socks," he said.

Almost all of the students from the university, Nazareth Area High School and Lehigh Valley Academy offered expressions of thanks before asking questions. But there were few easy ones, causing the troops to often laugh and look to one another to see who wanted to answer.

They spoke of signs of progress like elections, curfews being lifted, roads being opened and watching Iraqi forces take over terrorist-controlled areas with only minimal U.S. supervision.

Benton said his second deployment into Western Iraq, nicknamed the Wild, Wild West, has been much quieter than expected. He believes Americans often don't hear about the progress.

For Sgt. 1st Class Orlando Menez, who spent his first deployment training Iraqis, it is significant to see Iraqis know how to hold a gun and shoot.

But the soldiers also didn't paint a totally rosy picture of the country.

"There's still a lot of people who don't like our Western culture and the way we are," Benton said.

They spoke of how very intertwined religious feuds are often hard for Americans to understand.

"If you are a Republican and a Democrat you may not agree with each other but you aren't going to go out and start killing each other," Benton said.

All three repeatedly expressed love and passion for their service but admitted the conditions in Iraq are tough and they miss their families.

"It sucks, we won't lie," Benton said.

Because it is so hot, the soldiers are constantly drinking water, which comes from an on-base bottling plant, Staff Sgt. Chanel Martin said.

"We try to make the best of our situation," Martin said. "It's pretty much like we are camping out in the desert for 15 months straight."

The father of an 11-year-old boy, Menez is a career Army man in the middle of his 17th year.

"Almost three years of my son's life I've spent over here," he said. "This is the third Thanksgiving in a row my seat at the table will be empty."

The Freedom Call Foundation, which organized the call, began when founder and Executive Director John Harlow learned of a soldier stationed in Iraq with a \$7,000 phone bill. AT& T has a monopoly on cell phone service in Iraq so Harlow set up free satellite links in Iraq, he said, saving military families \$4 million a year.

Reporter Sara K. Satullo can be reached at 610-867-5000 or by e-mail at [ssatullo@express-times.com](mailto:ssatullo@express-times.com).