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## Computer screen becomes a link to loved ones

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Shantella Ross arrived at the Airborne & Special Operations Museum on Tuesday morning ready for her date.



Staff photo by Tracy Wilcox  
Shantella Ross talks with her husband via a computer at the Airborne & Special Operations Museum. Her husband, Jerry, deployed to Iraq on Nov. 11.

Her hair was just so. Her lipstick was perfect. She wore a new black leather jacket and high-heel black pumps.

Ross wrung her hands a bit and looked anxiously at the closed door, behind which she would find her man. "I mean, I'm just ready to see him," she said.

Her "date" was with her husband of nearly 10 years. Staff Sgt. Jerry Ross has been in Iraq since Nov. 11. He is a soldier assigned to Headquarters and Headquarters Company of the 46th Corps Support Group, part of the 1st Corps Support Command at Fort Bragg.

On Tuesday, the couple met for a 20-minute "date" with the help of laptop computers, desktop cameras and a satellite.

Shantella Ross sat down before one computer in a secluded room at the downtown museum. Her husband's face appeared on the screen. She could see him and hear him. And he could see and hear her.

"Stand up," she told him, "I want to see you. Turn around. OK, OK, that's good. I miss you so much. I'm ready for you to come home."

Between 6 a.m. and 2 p.m. Tuesday, 22 such cyber dates occurred at the museum. It was part of an effort to keep families in touch with their deployed soldiers. Ross and the other troops in his company will be in Iraq until this time next year, said 1st Lt. Yetta Johnson, who is with the same company.

Johnson said the intent is to provide the videoconferencing link between Iraq and Fayetteville about once a month until the soldiers return. Johnson said the first session was last month on Fort Bragg.

The Freedom Calls Foundation provided the technology Tuesday, Johnson said, to give 22 families an early Christmas gift. The foundation's mission is to provide the network that keeps families in touch with their soldiers serving in war zones.

"They are just happy to see their families," Johnson said. "We try to make it as easy back here for them as possible, so they don't have to worry over there."

The conversation between the Rosses was upbeat to begin with. There were wedding preparations to discuss. Shantella Ross is planning a big wedding for next year in the couple's hometown of Augusta, Ga. They will renew their vows and have the big wedding they didn't have 10 years ago. She wanted to know about colors.

"How about blue and silver?" Shantella Ross asked. "Royal blue and silver."

"How about fatigue?" came her husband's reply from the computer speakers.

"How about not," she said. "How do I look?"

"You look good," he said.

The tears came later in the conversation behind a closed door.

Then it was Stevan Whitehurst's turn. She held up her 4-month-old baby, Steven Jr., so his daddy, Steven Whitehurst Sr., could get a good look at him.

"There he is," said Steven Sr. "Hey, boy. Hey, whatcha doing? You being a good little boy?"

And then his words shifted to his wife. "How are you, baby? God, it's so good to see you."

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Staff photo by Tracy Wilcox  
Stevan Whitehurst, holding her 4-month-old son, Steven Jr., talks to her deployed husband, Steven, who is in Iraq.