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Freedom calls: Teleconferences with families boost morale

By Jarel Loveless
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For Nena Foster, September could not come quickly enough. Her husband, Christopher Foster, is stationed in Taji, Iraq, and won't return for another 12 weeks.

On Friday morning, she had her first chance to talk with him in days, but there was a twist — she could actually see him.

The Airborne and Special Operations Museum provided 12 families the opportunity to have 30 minutes of teleconferencing with their loved ones overseas. The museum partnered with the Freedom Calls Foundation to provide the calls free of charge.

"Teleconferencing is great because it's so cost effective," said Kevin Blackshear.

Blackshear manages soldiers in need of medical care at Womack Army Medical Center on Fort Bragg. "It's better than a phone, because you can see who you're talking to. Things like this are good for morale."

Founded in 2004, the Freedom Calls Foundation is a nonprofit organization that aims to provide communication for troops in Iraq and Afghanistan. The foundation provides more than 1 million minutes of teleconferencing a month.

"We started up after we heard about soldiers with \$7,000 and more in cell phone bills," said John Harlow, executive director of the foundation. "It didn't seem right that they were being exploited while they were deployed, serving our country."

According to Chief Warrant Officer Rhonda Sloan, families in which both spouses are in the military have it the worst.

"Dual military couples are sometimes forgotten," Sloan said. "What about the soldiers back here that have to do things as a soldier and also as a parent? It's been a challenge to raise a kid. When one of us comes home, it seems like the other one has to leave."

In 2003, Sloan was deployed to Afghanistan, where she spent Mother's Day away from her 12-year-old daughter.



Staff photo by Mike Spencer

Nena Foster holds up her 6-month-old son, Chris Foster Jr., so her husband, Spc. Christopher Foster of the 189th Combat Support Battalion, can see him during a teleconference at the Airborne & Special Operations museum Friday. Christopher Foster is serving in Iraq.

"It was really hard for me," Sloan said. "I had never been away from her or missed her birthday, so it was a sad day."

Missing big events in personal lives is a common occurrence for deployed soldiers.

"My husband missed the birth of our son," Foster said. "So far, it's had its good and bad points. It went from seeing him every day to e-mailing him and talking on the phone a few times."

Harlow said the foundation is closer to its goal than the public imagines.

"If only 1 million people donate \$30, we would be able to provide free weekly teleconferences to every soldier in Iraq and Afghanistan," Harlow said.

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