



Not Your Daddy's Morse Code

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By Molly Bernhart

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NEW YORK — The Navy locator service once helped parents of servicemen reach their children. Now it only spouts an automated message: "Due to current Department of the Navy privacy and security regulations, we are unable to release the Navy Unit address of active Navy personnel."

Everyone knows the saying "loose lips sink ships." But some people are working hard to establish other lines of communication, so those lips can send "I love you" half a world away.

Even with today's advanced communication technology, there's a lack of contact between deployed men and women and their loved ones back in the states. But it's getting better.



"The distraction is probably the worst feeling," Tracy Della Vecchia told FOXNews.com.

Della Vecchia, founder of MarineParents.com, said she felt like many parents of Marines, soldiers and airmen. She wanted a way to share and connect with people who understood what she was going through. And watching the TV coverage of the events in Kuwait and Iraq didn't answer any of her questions.

"At the time, they didn't have a system in place to support parents and the Freedom of Information Act is such that they don't necessarily have to tell a parent what the son is doing in his job," Della Vecchia told FOX News.

Della Vecchia wanted more direct contact with her deployed son, Cpl. Derrick Jensen, so she formed a network of Marine parents who pooled their children's e-mail addresses, though scarce, into a single source of information.

Between reading the thank-you cards from troops and answering phone calls asking her, "Can you call my mom and tell her how to use this?" Della Vecchia finds time to help 150,000 visitors each week worry a little



bit less about their Marines.

MarineParents.com provides message boards for parents, a chat room that is open for three hours each evening, a database of local support military groups, and an opportunity for parents to communicate with other parents whose Marines are in the same unit and often going through the same thing. This program offers an alternative to the services offered by the military.

Due to current privacy and security regulations, each of the military branches has deactivated their locator services.

The Red Cross, however, is still providing its emergency troop telephone

locator service free of charge 24 hours a day. This program serves troops and families anywhere in the world, whether they are at sea or at a remote military camp.

Troops can also contact loved ones at home better than ever through e-mail, telephone and video conferencing — services which are becoming more and more accessible to troops in the field.

“There has been a tremendous leap forward in technology — telephone connectivity at remote locations and Internet connectivity at remote locations,” Capt. Ryan Fitzgerald, an officer at the United States Central Command, told FOXNews.com. “Fifty years ago, one letter a week was nice. Now it’s several e-mails a day.”

Another program, Operation Uplink, sponsored by the Veterans of Foreign War, helps keep the families of military personnel and hospitalized veterans a phone call away by supplying them with a free phone cards.

And much like Della Vecchia, FreedomCalls.org (search) co-founder John Harlow wanted to see troops keep in touch with their loved ones by taking advanced technological capabilities from the corporate world to the battlefield.

“We foresee a time when all war fighters can virtually come home to their families on a daily basis after a hard day on the battlefield utilizing the foundation’s state of the art video conferencing technology,” Harlow told FOXNews.com.

FreedomCalls.org provides free, state-of-the-art communication services to over 30,000 servicemen and women. The program allows 1,500 deployed troops a day to spend virtual time with their families, enabling them to participate in milestone family events like births and family reunions, adoption services, spending time with dying relatives and even getting married.

The system uses custom satellites provided by private organizations and individuals to link into the military camps worldwide. Family members stateside can go to local companies, universities, schools, law firms or they can even stream communication directly from home to contact their loved one if the have broadband. “Soldiers may now keep their commitments to their families while keeping their commitments to their country,” Harlow said.