

## “Happy Birthday” from half a world away

Jordan Fischer



Shown here, Army Sergeant Ron Lohrum's nephew practically crawls up the wall as his uncle is projected via video conference from Iraq. The sergeant was able to celebrate his 26th birthday with friends and family with the assistance of the Freedom Calls Foundation.

Even Superman can't see something from 10,000 miles away. On Thursday, however, one local family outdid the Man of Steel with a little help from the Freedom Calls Foundation.

For Army Sergeant Ron Lohrum, of Greensburg but stationed in Iraq, this service allowed him to attend his own 26th birthday party with friends and family. Lohrum is currently serving with Echo Company 3-4AVN, deployed out of Fort Hood, Texas.

Freedom Calls is a public charity which uses video conferencing technology to allow soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan to not only talk to, but see their loved ones back home. More than 30,000 soldiers and Marines are able to use the service free of charge, 24-hours a day.

“The foundation is transforming a long standing family communication paradigm in time of war by enabling soldiers in the war zone to attend

and participate in milestone family events like weddings, First Communion and new births, etc.,” explained Freedom Calls executive director John Harlow. “Soldiers are now in a position to keep their commitments to their families at the same time they keep their commitment to their country thousands of miles away. The long term vision of the Freedom Calls Foundation is that our war fighters will be able to come home from a day on the battlefield and spend virtual time with their families every night using state of the art technology.”

Lohrum appreciates the gesture.

"I'm pretty shocked... you surprised me," Lohrum said once he realized what was going on. Though it was 3:30 p.m. here, in Iraq it was nearly midnight, and Lohrum had been pulled out of bed and told a "soldier was in trouble." He was greeted with "Happy Birthday" and warm smiles from his family immediately when he sat down to the screen.

One of the first questions asked of him was: How is the weather?

"It was 117 degrees today," he said. "It actually felt good, today it was pretty cool."

Lohrum had been given the day off for his birthday, and said he had wanted to sleep in, though this was a welcome surprise.

Ron's wife Amanda was not the least vocal of the bunch, being both awed by the first sight of her husband in many months, and excited at the ability to see and hear him in, nearly, real time - there was a slight delay, as Lohrum noted to his wife.

"You're 10,000 miles away, what do you expect?" he joked.

Lohrum's father was moved to be able to see his son after so long.

"Being able to see him face to face, know that he's OK, that's wonderful," he said. "It'd be worth standing out in the heat for this."

During the video conference, young nieces and nephews climbed up on the couch to try and touch Lohrum's image on the wall, having trouble understanding why they couldn't pull him through it. Nearly 20 friends and relatives joined the conference call and were augmented by media representatives from television and print embedded with the group.

Lohrum's best friend Jeremy Ridgewater was the man in charge when it came to getting the technical aspects, and there were many, of the process hooked up and working correctly. The night before the call he worked six hours just to make sure everything would be ready.

"It was pretty amazing," he said. "It's the first time I've seen his face in seven months."

Still, Ron's wife was probably the happiest of all to see him.

"I'm feeling very excited," she said. "It works out really well, I just wish I could be there."

When asked whether it was hard being separated for so long, Mrs. Lohrum just smiled and gave a simple response, "Love can make it through anything."

More information on Freedom Calls can be found at [www.freedomcalls.org](http://www.freedomcalls.org).

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