

A Very Special Birthday Call

■ Plainville Soldier In Iraq Visits Via Teleconference

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By WILLIAM WEIR, Courant Staff Writer

He's stationed in Iraq, but thanks to technology, Lance Cpl. James Lenois got a visit Monday from his parents, sisters and about 30 of his fellow Plainville firefighters. He even learned of a firefighting promotion from Gov. M. Jodi Rell.

Three days after his 20th birthday, Lenois was the guest of honor at a video teleconference at the Hartford SBC Connecticut building. It was the first time since January that he had seen his parents, James and Pam Lenois, as well as his sisters Meghan, Rebecca and Amber, who cried for much of the two-hour visit.



Lenois faced his well-wishers from a television set that sat on a table at the front of the room. For friends and family, it was great to see him.

"It was a great feeling," said his father. The senior Lenois said his son seems to have adjusted well to an extreme situation. "The cool thing is that he hasn't lost his sense of humor."

Lenois signed up for the Marine Reserves shortly after graduating from high school in 2003 and was called to service in January. He's now stationed in Al Asad and is scheduled to come home in October. But family members said he hinted that he might be home a little sooner.

The teleconference was opened to everyone after his family spoke to him in private. In groups of three, his fellow firefighters gathered in front of the TV to talk with their friend.

Lenois mostly listened as his friends urged him to come back and bring some excitement to the department, teased him about owing a lot of back taxes when he returned and, in general, wished him well and told him to stay safe.

Lenois seemed in good spirits, despite the grueling conditions he described. Since January, he said, he had lost 42 pounds. The average day over there, he said, gets up to about 110 degrees.

"Yeah, it's hot over here," he said. "It's hot."



The videoconference was set up by SBC Pioneers, a group of current and retired SBC employees who take on various community service projects. One of the group's members, Darlene Tacinelli, is married to a Plainville firefighter and decided to contact the Freedom Calls Foundation about arranging the teleconference. Based in New York, the Freedom Calls Foundation is a nonprofit organization that has set up communications facilities in three camps in Iraq. SBC provided the technology on this end.

Rell also showed up to wish Lenois a happy birthday, which she pointed out fell on the first anniversary of her inauguration as governor. "So I guess we both have something in common," she said.

And it was Rell who informed Lenois, to a round of applause, that he had graduated from being a probationary member of the fire department to a full-fledged one.

Then his friends set a cake in front of the television set and sang "Happy Birthday."

Plainville Fire Chief Raymond Swanson said he was glad for the chance to see Lenois.

"He's committed to the department," said Swanson. "He's only been with us for a short while, but he's made his mark."

When department members learned that Lenois would be deployed to Iraq, said firefighter Bruce Bull, the department raised money for extra safety supplies.

"We're a close-knit group, as most people know, and he's made a lot of good friends," he said.