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SHARING MORE THAN THE GAME

Hookup lets families see loved ones in Iraq

By Jim Jordan

HERALD-LEADER STAFF WRITER

LOUISVILLE - "As long as we get through the holidays, we'll be all set," Vicki Paul said as she fed Jodi, her 1-year-old daughter, bits of turkey from a sandwich.

Two other daughters -- Elizabeth, 8, and Julianna, 5 -- were eating nearby as the Nicholasville family waited patiently at the Kentucky Fair and Exposition Center for a video conference call with husband and father, Chief Petty Officer Willis Paul, in Iraq.

His family has been able to talk to Willis Paul by telephone two or three times a week since he left in July, but this call was different: He could see them and they could see him.

It was an early Christmas present that could last until Willis Paul returns in February, Vicki Paul said, although "it's always hard to say goodbye."

The Pauls and about 30 other Kentucky families with loved ones in Iraq participated yesterday in the "Freedom Calls" program held in conjunction with the University of Kentucky-University of Louisville basketball game at Freedom Hall.

In cooperation with the Freedom Calls Foundation, the game was shown live at Camp Fallujah and Camp Cooke in Iraq, and live pictures of the troops watching the game were shown on a huge screen viewed by their families in Louisville.

Family members also walked next door to Freedom Hall to be honored just before the game started and, later, they were joined by Gov. Ernie Fletcher.

"None of us knows the sacrifices you have made," Fletcher told the families.

To "your loved ones in Iraq, this means everything to them," he said, referring to the video calls.

It meant a lot to the families, too.

"Christmas is going to be hard this year, but this is going to make it a whole lot better," said Jennifer Sanders of Taylorsville, who was waiting to talk to her husband of nine months, Marine Lance Cpl. Derek Sanders.

He'll return in "96 days," she said. "I keep a hard-core countdown."

Rachel Ratliff of Pikeville is keeping two countdowns: One for her husband, Lance Cpl. Paul Ratliff, who returns in April, and one for their first child, a son due to be born Jan. 13.

Paul Ratliff is finishing his second deployment to Iraq, she said. "The 24 months we have been married, he has been gone 13 of them.

"It's hard, but I pray a lot," Rachel Ratliff added. "God's got me through to where I am now."

In other cases, it's people like Brigid Taylor of Louisville who get Marine families through their loneliness and other problems.

Taylor's husband is a staff sergeant in charge of a Marine military police platoon and Brigid Taylor is the platoon's "key volunteer," a counselor who can help other wives with their problems.

"It's good. It keeps you busy," she said. "It keeps you focused on other people.

"They are all my sisters. We are very close," Taylor added.

One "sister" is Shauna Johnson, wife of Kentucky State Police trooper Matt Johnson, who is now on duty in Iraq.

The Johnsons are celebrating their first wedding anniversary today a half a world apart.

"This is the best anniversary gift I could get, is to be able to see him," Shauna Johnson said.

Matt Johnson has been to Iraq twice. The Elizabethtown couple had to reschedule their wedding because of Iraq.

Shauna Johnson says the separation is only a temporary inconvenience. "It's nothing compared with our whole lifetime together," she said.

Parents were on hand for the Freedom Calls, too, including Ron and Judy Logan of Lexington. Their twin sons, Steve and Matt, are Marine sergeants in the military police in Iraq. Matt's wife, Amanda, was also at Freedom Calls.

"This is great; this is super," Ron Logan said. "Christmas came a week early."

Judy Logan said the chance to see her sons, who are scheduled to complete their second tour in Iraq in April, was another kind of present for her.

Yesterday she said, "Tomorrow is my birthday," she said, "so this is a happy birthday gift for me."