

# The Huntsville Times

## Family cherishes 90-minute reunion

Soldier catches up in video hookup; 'so good to see him'

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They were family - seated around a table, talking about smoked turkey and deer hunting and college football with a big-screen TV the honored guest.

Even with all of those typical Thanksgiving elements, it wasn't a typical holiday gathering. It was in a college library conference room, and the main attraction was a soldier on the television screen, via satellite from Camp Taji, 12 miles north of Baghdad.

It was Wednesday afternoon in the University of Alabama in Huntsville library, but it was already officially Thanksgiving for Sgt. Matthew Burbank as he watched his wife, two stepchildren, parents and both sets of grandparents on TV. This is his second tour in Iraq, and he's not scheduled to return home to Grant until May.

The conversation topics were similar to those a family would discuss sitting around a dining room table on Thanksgiving: Tony Stewart's NASCAR championship win; Alabama's loss to Auburn and Vanderbilt's surprise victory over Tennessee in Knoxville; Katelyn wanting a horse for Christmas and Cole wanting a puppy; a cousin who is retaking the bar exam and a nephew with an ear infection.

Distance was the difference.

"It was so good to see him," said his wife of three years, Robin Burbank. "I wish he could be home with us for the holiday, but this is the next best thing."

The Freedom Calls Foundation made it happen. Families aren't charged for the service. It's paid for by corporate and private donations.

Burbank had heard of it and asked his wife to look into it. He repeatedly thanked her for pulling it together.

Not only did the family get to see Burbank, they got to meet his bomb-sniffing dog, Kitchee, and his boss.

Robin cried as the video conference was ending, and she fussed at herself for that. Her husband reassured her that this would be his last Thanksgiving away from her.

"It'd better be," she joked back, the playfulness that characterized most of the 90-minute conference call returning.

They all said their "I love you" and "I miss you" and "Happy Thanksgiving."

His father, Randy Burbank, told him, "Keep your head down, son."

Stepdaughter Katelyn Best threw in a "Merry Christmas."

"I'd better talk to you again before Christmas," Robin said. "I'd better."