



## Dad serving in Iraq watches son graduate from Southwest

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High school graduation is often a family celebration, with graduates waving to their parents in the stands as they head toward the stage to receive their diplomas.

However, Southwest High School graduate Josh Rodriguez's father, Jacques, couldn't attend his son's graduation Thursday. Jacques Rodriguez, an officer with the California Highway Patrol, is serving in Iraq.

But thanks to a charitable organization called the Freedom Calls Foundation, Jacques Rodriguez was able to see his son receive his diploma.

John Harlow, executive director of the foundation, said the organization has set up networks in Iraq and Afghanistan to enable soldiers serving there to communicate with their families and to virtually attend milestone family events for free.

Harlow said Jacques Rodriguez approached the network operator stationed north of Baghdad, in the Sunni triangle, about setting up a video conference to see Josh's graduation.

"That was just a couple of days ago," Harlow said.

Harlow said the organization contacted Southwest and the Highway Patrol to connect the school with the Freedom Calls Network and help coordinate the logistics of setting up the video conference.

In addition to allowing Jacques Rodriguez to witness his son's graduation, the video conference gave the Rodriguez family a chance to speak with Jacques in Iraq after the ceremony.

Speaking Thursday afternoon, Josh Rodriguez said he was excited to get to speak with his father.

"I think it's great," he said of the video conference.

Communication is limited with Jacques stationed overseas, Josh said.

"Every once in a while he'll call," said Josh.

Thursday's conversation was especially meaningful because of Josh's post-graduation plans. Following in his father's footsteps, Josh will be joining the Army and heading to basic training sometime this summer.

With Jacques not slated to return until after Josh leaves, Thursday was a rare chance for father and son to speak face to face.

"I won't be able to see him," Josh said.

For Harlow and his partners in the Freedom Calls foundation, making events such as Thursday's happen is exactly why he started the work. He said he hopes to expand the network to allow all overseas soldiers to communicate with their loved ones.

"We can bring this capability to every soldier in Iraq and Afghanistan," he said. Freedom Calls provides the service free of charge thanks to public donations over the foundation's website, he added.

On Thursday, the Rodriguez family was thankful for the opportunity the foundation provided them, allowing the family to share a special moment across thousands of miles.

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

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