

The Journal News

Tuckahoe students talk to troops about life in Iraq

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TUCKAHOE - For an hour yesterday, schoolchildren here were just a two-second delay from troops stationed in Iraq.

During the satellite video conference at Tuckahoe Middle School, 38 sixth-graders in James Moore's social studies class got the chance to pepper four Marines and a soldier with questions about their everyday lives, ranging from the weather to their favorite video games.



Victoria Baez, 11, asks questions during a video conference with Marines serving in Iraq June 20, 2007. (Tom Nycz / The Journal News)

The session was offered by the Freedom Calls Foundation, a nonprofit group that sets up free video calls between troops in Afghanistan and Iraq and their families, enabling them to "attend" weddings, births and graduations back home.

The foundation, which runs on donations, also has begun organizing conferences for student groups; Tuckahoe's event was the first time Freedom Calls had organized an event in New York.

"It's good to see people back home. It makes you want to hang up and get there," said U.S. Army Spc. Brad Stanley, who helped set up the call from the Al Asad Air Base in Anbar Province, Iraq.

During the call, Robert Tudisco, 12, of Eastchester, found out that the base gets ESPN on TV and has a Burger King and a Pizza Hut.

"I was surprised about the food. I thought they were going to get Army rations," he said.

"But, it's probably not the same," said Mary Ehring, 11, of Tuckahoe.

Ehring asked why the five had joined the military, learning they had done so for the financial, educational and travel opportunities. She said she wanted to ask about their families and when they can come home, she said, but Moore had told students not to ask any sensitive questions.

"I thought they would be kind of upset because they're in a war zone," Ehring said later. "But they seemed happy and they were joking with us."

The troops brought the subjects up anyway in response to student questions about how they spend holidays.

"Thinking about your family having fun back home," said Marine Cpl. Barclay Bell, 21, who added that he looks forward to getting home to Texas so he can drink "real milk" again.

Halfway into the conference, the connection was lost for about 10 minutes for technical reasons. Before and after the gap, the troops talked about the challenges of dealing with the dust and the heat, which has exceeded 110 degrees lately and recently broke a thermometer on the base.

"You blow your nose and dirt comes out," said U.S. Army Sgt. Schenita Bruno, 23, from Alabama, the only woman in the group. "I don't like playing sports over here because it's too hot - you sweat and my hair will get all messed up."

Bruno made several jokes about fixing her hair during noncombat hours, then had a serious answer for a question from Maria Machado, 12, of Tuckahoe, about the experience of being a female soldier

"It's different because we are pretty much (the) minority. There's 200 to 300 males to every one female," Bruno explained. "But it's not bad."

The Iraq group applauded and whooped for 12-year-old Alex Fitzpatrick, who enthusiastically waved and started off his question with, "Hi, guys!"

"I just asked them about their gear, but I think they liked that I was being cheerful," he said, shrugging and grinning afterward.

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