

# Journal Star

## Virtual visit

### Marines spend time with families via video conference call

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By ANDY KRAVETZ

Joel Rowell ripped open the gift-wrapped box to reveal a PlayStation 2. His sister, Bethany, got a Scooby Doo video. The children reveled in their presents as their parents looked on.

Sounds like any Christmas, but for the Rowell family, this was different. For starters, they were sitting in a conference room at the AT&T facility on North Knoxville Avenue in Peoria, not their Morton home. And their father, Lance Cpl. Jared Rowell was watching his children over a video-conferencing monitor from his base in Al Asad, Iraq.

"They haven't been counting down to Christmas. They have been counting down to the 21st. It shows you that presents aren't everything. Even young kids can understand that," said his wife, Kim Rowell, who on Wednesday saw her husband for the first time since the Marine reservist shipped out in August to begin what will likely be an eight-month deployment.

Seven others with the Peoria County-based Company C, 6th Engineering Battalion, also "met" with their families. The 30-minute calls were sponsored by the Freedom Calls Foundation, a not-for-profit organization that enables such reunions. Peoria was one of five places nationwide Wednesday where military personnel in Iraq got a chance to see and hear their loved ones.

Joni Thornton of Mattoon and her family made the drive to see her son, Lance Cpl. Clayton Barnes. He looked good, "really good," she said.

"He seemed very relaxed and calm, more so than I thought he would be," Thornton said.

Conversations ranged from the recent Iraqi elections to tales of children sledding down hills. When one of his children told him about the cold weather here, Jared Rowell said he had taken to using his sleeping bag for warmth when he was on convoy missions.

That slice of life, that personal touch is what the families saw as a chance to reconnect, something 1st Sgt. Casey Samborski said is a real morale booster.

"If I had gotten to talk to my wife for just five minutes in 1991 or in Libya, it would have meant so much and motivated me," said Samborski, who is part of Company C.

Lauren Harris, 20, is Barnes' girlfriend. She's talked to him numerous times over the telephone but seeing him added to that experience.

Terry Rowell, Jared Rowell's father, agreed. The elder Rowell served with the Marines in Vietnam. He understands what it is like being gone and only hearing a person's voice.

"A picture is worth a thousand words, and well, a live picture, that's tremendous," he said.

Rick Fox, an AT&T spokesman and a former Marine himself, said the calls were a way for the company "to give back to the community."

"Simply seeing the faces of the families is why we do this," he added.

After her call was finished, Kim Rowell said she was amazed by the technology and the lack of delay.

"It was like he was sitting right here," she said.

The Marines are expected home in either February or March.

Just after he opened his present, Joel asked his father what he wanted for Christmas.

Without missing a beat and with a slight quiver in his voice, Jared answered, "Daddy is getting it right now."

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