

Journal Star

Guard members ring in the New Year

BY HILARY KINDSCHUH / Lincoln Journal Star
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A group of Nebraska National Guard soldiers stationed in Iraq rang in the new year Saturday with their families in Lincoln. At 3 p.m. Lincoln time, which corresponded to midnight in Iraq, about 35 families gathered in a large drill room at the Penterman Armory on the Nebraska Air National Guard base to welcome the new year via teleconference with their soldiers, who are stationed at Camp Al Asad, Iraq.

Thanks to a oversize projection screen hung on the armory wall, family members could see members of the 67th Area Support Group gathered at the Iraqi base. Family members raised glasses of sparkling cider to toast their husbands, sons and fathers, while a bottle of water was raised in toast in Iraq. Family members in Lincoln were provided food and noisemakers.

The Iraqi midnight event capped a day at the Lincoln armory during which families got to have individual 15-minute teleconferences with their loved ones in Iraq.

"Fifteen minutes goes by really fast when you haven't seen someone in six months," said Sue DuBois, who came to the armory to talk with her husband, David.

The teleconference was supported by the Freedom Calls Foundation, a non-profit organization that help members of the military to participate in milestone family events.

Saturday's teleconference also included family members at the armory in Scottsbluff.

So what do families talk about when they have only 15 minutes to see their soldiers?

Nebraska football, for starters.

Val Petersen of Lincoln said she and her husband, Brian, talked about the Huskers' win in the Alamo Bowl game Wednesday, which the soldiers were able to watch in Iraq.

Joining Petersen to speak to her husband were the couple's two children, Brian's parents, and his brother and sister-in-law.

"It kind of gives you a fix, helps you get through until the next time you talk to him or see him," Petersen said.

Bob Eddy of Beatrice, who came to the armory with his wife, Rhonda, said they communicate with their son, Russell, about once a week, usually via e-mail.

"Face-to-face is a lot more special than just looking at a screen," Eddy said.

Virginia Rutt of Lincoln said she speaks to her son-in-law, William Frederic, two or three times a week. She is caring for Frederic's two young children until he returns from Iraq.

"It's one thing to talk to him on the phone," said Rutt, who could barely contain her excitement as she waited for her family's teleconference session.

Rutt said she is comforted by the frequent meetings among soldiers' family members.

"You can be really sad about them being gone, but the meetings just cheer you up," she said. "This is just like one big, happy family."

DuBois, who came to the event with her four children, said Saturday during the video teleconference session that her husband saw their two-month-old baby awake for the first time.

DuBois' husband won't meet his youngest daughter until May, when he will return for their 17-year-old child's high school graduation, she said.

Still, she and the kids are able to communicate with their soldier frequently — they talk at least every other day on the computer, DuBois said.

And technology has allowed her husband to share special moments with the family, DuBois said.

For example, two months ago, before she gave birth to their daughter, DuBois found a computer at the hospital and communicated with her husband via instant messaging, she said.

Right after she gave birth, DuBois spoke to her husband on the phone from the delivery room.

"Communications these days is so nice — it's so easy to keep in touch," DuBois said. "I can't imagine what they went through back during World War II, when you'd go months waiting for a letter."

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