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## Video link connects families in Rupp, troops in Iraq

Experience brightens holidays for many

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It wasn't the first piece of home Spc. Billy Jones was interested in — he did give a quick hello to family members first — but the question came pretty quickly.

"Who's winning the game?" Jones asked his family.

He was speaking from Iraq through a special video hookup yesterday during the University of Kentucky-University of Louisville basketball game.

Jones was pleased to hear that Kentucky was up by 15 at halftime. His family was just happy to see that he looked healthy and safe, for the moment — he was going to go on night patrol in about two hours.

"You get the phone calls, but you don't get to see him," Jones' wife, Rachel, said shortly before talking to her husband in a conference room at Rupp Arena. "So this is exciting."

Rachel Jones' family was one of about 50 families from Kentucky and Southern Indiana that talked to loved ones in Iraq, thanks to a national project called the Freedom Calls Foundation.

For many of them, the basketball game became an afterthought, well behind speaking to their sons and daughters.

"This is the best Christmas present ever," Denise Lewis told her son, Marine Cpl. Adam Lewis. He was at Camp Fallujah, one of three bases the troops assembled at for the calls.



UK fan Melissa Seligman, left, holding Amelia Seligman, and her mother-in-law, Christy Seligman, holding grandson Elijah Seligman, were at the game. They video conferenced with family members in Iraq and were honored during the game. (By Bill Luster, The Courier-Journal)

As Adam Lewis' family wrapped up a 20-minute conference call, his girlfriend, 19-year-old Danielle Mora, leaned close to the camera to show Lewis her new bag.

It read: "Forget Prince Charming, I've got a U.S. Marine."

In Iraq, Lewis leaned closer to his screen, revealing the M-15 assault weapon he was holding, a stark reminder of the couple's differing circumstances.

"Isn't it cute?" Mora said of her bag.

"I love you, Danielle," Lewis said.

Lewis' time in Iraq has not always been so pleasant.

Earlier this month, 10 Marines from his unit were killed when a powerful makeshift bomb exploded near Fallujah. Lewis was across the street from the explosion, his family said.

"I knew this would be important for him to have some touch with home," Denise Lewis said in an interview after the call. "It's been rough on him and on those of us at home."

This was the second straight year that the Kentucky Telehealth Network set up the video links during the UK-UofL game.

Rob Sprang, a project manager with the network, said the conferences cost the Freedom Calls Foundation between \$300,000 and \$400,000 in donated money and equipment.

"It's a great thing to do right before Christmas," he said.

Some soldiers received holiday wishes from Gov. Ernie Fletcher or Donna Smith, wife of UK basketball coach Tubby Smith.

The loudest ovation of the day came when soldiers were shown on video screens in the arena just before the game.

The soldiers — at Camp Fallujah, Camp Taji and Al Asad Air Base — mostly asked about family members, shared memories and, of course, asked about the Cardinals or Wildcats.

Joan Richardson's son, Sgt. James Richardson, even chided his mother for wearing a red Christmas vest while the rest of the family was decked out in Kentucky blue.

"It just made my Christmas to get to see him and see that he looked OK," she said.

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