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Video to link soldiers, families

Teleconferences set at UK-U of L game

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FRANKFORT, Ky. -- Army Sgt. Joshua Fields' spray-painted sports message — "Go Big Blue" — on a broken Iraqi tank got his face and voice inside the state Capitol yesterday.

Beaming from a huge screen, Fields warmly greeted his parents via teleconference as Gov. Ernie Fletcher announced an opportunity next month for other Kentucky families to see and talk to their loved ones in Iraq.



David and April Fields, center, talked by teleconference with their son, Sgt. Joshua Fields, second from left, yesterday in Frankfort. At far right was Gov. Ernie Fletcher, next to Rob Sprang of Kentucky TeleHealth. With Fields in Iraq was 1st Sgt. Roger Nickel. (By Michael Clevenger, The Courier-Journal)

"I wish everyone in our family could be here," April Fields, of Richmond, Ky., told reporters after the call. "It's almost like a rush of adrenaline. I feel like he's here almost. He looks wonderful."

The families of 40 to 50 Kentucky servicemen and women in Iraq will have the same opportunity on Dec. 17 at the state's second "Freedom Calls" event, scheduled during the University of Kentucky-University of Louisville basketball game.

The calls, starting at noon and lasting until 5:30 p.m., will be conducted in private videoconference rooms in Heritage Hall, adjacent to Lexington's Rupp Arena, where the game will be played.

Event organizers said yesterday that 13 families have signed up so far, and that families wishing to participate should send an e-mail expressing their interest to freedomcalls@kthnschedule.com.

The CBS broadcast of the game will be carried on the Armed Forces Network. During the game, video of servicemen and women watching it from three camps in Iraq will periodically be shown on screens in Rupp Arena.



Sgt. Joshua Fields stood on a tank that he had painted with the phrase "Go Big Blue." (Courtesy of the Governor's Office)

Joshua Fields, 21, enlisted in the Army three years ago during his senior year at Lexington's Lafayette High School. He serves in the 3rd Infantry Division, based at Fort Bragg, N.C.

Fields has been in Iraq since January. His mother said he is scheduled to return to Kentucky a week or two after Christmas.

"It's great to talk to you," April Fields told her son yesterday. "We love you."

"Great talking to you too mom, dad," replied Joshua Fields, speaking from Camp Taji, just north of Baghdad. "I love you, too."

Sign 'caught people's eye'

Fields said a fellow soldier, knowing that he is a UK fan, mentioned the game and the teleconferences to him.

Fields' father said he knows why.

"The big thing that caught people's eye was that he climbed out on an Iraqi tank and wrote 'Go Big Blue' on it," David Fields said.

April Fields said after her son painted the message, someone took his photo as he stood on the barrel.

"That photo has made its way everywhere. We e-mailed it to all of our family members," she said.

Works with Cardinal fan

Fletcher asked the soldier if he knew any Louisville Cardinal fans in Iraq.

"I work with one, but I try not to talk to him too much," Joshua Fields joked.

David Fields said his son plans to enroll at UK when he gets out of the Army.

The Fieldses, who are respiratory technicians, said families taking part in the calls are in for a thrilling experience.

"You can't even imagine what it's like. We talk on the phone and we e-mail. But to see him and interact with him is just unbelievable," April Fields said.

At the first "Freedom Calls" last year at Freedom Hall in Louisville, about 250 family members spoke with 40 servicemen and women in Iraq.

"Last year was tremendously successful," Fletcher said.

"Soldiers talking to their moms, their dads, their fiancées, wives and children. It was a neat experience. It was very touching."

The "Freedom Calls" event was the idea of Rob Sprang, director of the Kentucky TeleHealth Network -- a state hospital teleconference network. Sprang said the company that supplies equipment to the network agreed to donate what is needed for the teleconferences.

HOW TO APPLY

Families with loved ones serving in the military in Iraq can send an e-mail to freedomcalls@kthnschedule.com to apply for a teleconference visit. The e-mail should include the name, e-mail address, telephone number and hometown of the family, as well as the soldier's name, rank and unit.

Links can be made at three locations in Iraq: Camp Fallujah, Al Asad Air Base and Camp Taji. The teleconferences will be about 20 minutes each. Organizers said the number of relatives taking part in Kentucky is limited to four per soldier, not including infants.