

# LANCASTER EAGLE-GAZETTE

## Family visits soldier via video

### Technology enables link with Iraq

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December 14, 2007



Jason Bolyard, 30, a gunnery sergeant in the Marines, speaks to his parents, grandparents, uncle, sister, and nephew through a video conference set up through the Freedom Calls organization.

PIKETON - Christmas came early for a Chillicothe family when they got to talk to a loved one stationed in Iraq.

Debbie Bolyard was hoping to surprise her parents when she took them to the South Central Ohio Computer Association to talk to her son Jason Bolyard via video conferencing Thursday. However, as 4 p.m. neared, word from Fallujah was the connection may not happen because they didn't know where Jason was.

"It's kind of like I've been on a high all day and now it's maybe, maybe," Debbie said.

With Jason's connection unsure, Debbie revealed the "surprise" to her parents, Glenn and Mary Sue Woods. Luckily, after about 40 minutes and a three-way phone call between Jason, his sister, Jessica Bolyard, who was at SCOCA and Jason's wife, Desiree, in North Carolina, Jason found his way to the right location and appeared on screen with a smile on his face.

"I'm glad to see you, honey," Mary Sue said.

Debbie joked waiting for him is typical since he has always had his own sense of time. The good-natured ribbing continued along with comparisons of weather - while Ohio is expecting snow, Fallujah is expecting a dust storm - and discussion on OSU football.

"I heard Ohio State is in first place, now," Jason said, adding he hoped the team doesn't have a repeat performance of last year. After Debbie mentioned getting him an OSU/LSU shirt, he lamented about last year's performance again. "That'd only be an omen of bad luck because I got the same one last year and they lost," he joked.

At times, the joking became a little more sober, as the emotion of the visit surfaced.



Jason Bolyard's mother, Debbie, speaks to her son through a video conference set up through the Freedom Calls organization. Jason is a gunnery sergeant in the Marines and is stationed in Iraq near Al Taqaddum, one of five sites available in Iraq through the program. The call between Jason and his family is the first to take place at the South Central Ohio Computer Association in Piketon, the only Ohio site offering the service

"You look good sweetie, but I miss you. I miss talking to you," Mary Sue said.

"I'm glad I did actually get here to make it happen," Jason said.

"You're my early Christmas present," Mary Sue said.

"I'm just glad I got to see you. The day was dragging waiting for this ... The only thing better would be if I could put my arms around ya," Debbie said.

Jason, a gunnery sergeant in the Marines, is on his second tour in Iraq as is his brother, Justin, a master sergeant in the Army. Both times, the men have been deployed at the same time - Jason, 30, left in September and expects to return in April and Justin, 27, left in November and is slated for a February 2009 return.

Only five bases in Iraq (Taji, Fallujah, Taqaddum, Al Asad, and Camp Victory in Baghdad) have the equipment to do video conferencing, so the Bolyards were unable to connect with Justin because he isn't stationed near any of those bases.

Although it has been stressful having two sons in Iraq at once, Debbie and her husband, Larry, said they take it one day at a time. They also take solace this time in the fact both Jason and Justin report the situation is going better. Jason told his family things are pretty quiet.

"It's definitely OK with me," Debbie responded. "What would be better is if you told me you were on your way home."

Debbie got a surprise like that a few years ago when Justin showed up at home for Christmas without telling her - the rest of the family knew.

"(Today) was almost as good as a few years ago with or other son surprised us," Larry said.

Other family members got to connect with Jason Thursday too, including his 13-month-old nephew, Dalton Meddock, and his uncle, Hobie Woods. His wife, Desiree, and three children - including his youngest Waylon born Nov. 17 - were in North Carolina but unable to make the video conference call.

"I'm supposed to blow you kisses from you wife but ...," Jessica said with a chuckle.

Jason just shook his head.

This was the first year SCOCA, located at the Vern Riffe Career and Technology Center campus, was able to offer "Freedom Calls." Today, two more area families - one from Washington Court House and another from Hillsboro - will connect with a loved one.