

Press-Telegram

Center aids military families

By Samantha Gonzaga, Staff writer

LONG BEACH — Under many other circumstances, Army Sgt. Laumatalelei Pelesasa's Sunday morning phone call to his wife and children wouldn't have differed much from those made by countless others reaching out to loved ones separated by several time zones.

But how many can say they can see and hear their loved one smile while stationed in Taji, Iraq?



"This is really good," said Pelesasa, 28, via a video conference call at the Long Beach Video Conferencing Center. "I get to see (the family) for an hour. It helps a lot."

The Pelesasas are the first family connected by LBVCC to a soldier serving overseas through a relationship with the nonprofit Freedom Calls Foundation, a New York-based charity seeking to open lines of communication between frontline troops and their families.

It's been nearly six months since Pelesasa's second deployment to Iraq, said his wife, 28-year-old Tery. She and her children Merilai, 7, Matty, 5, and Malachi, 2 moved to Long Beach from Fort Riley, Kan., to live with relatives until her husband completes his tour of duty early next year. They plan to move to Hawaii when he returns, she said.

Using a T-1 Internet connection, LBVCC was able to connect to a secure location in Taji. Television screens enabled the Pelesasas to see each other as they spoke.

"It's a very exciting feeling," Tery said. "The kids were so excited to see him again."

In the privacy of Kusar's ocean-view conference room,

Pelesasa and his wife grinned at each other as they held their conversations in English and Samoan. Merilai and her siblings also got their time and one of their requests answered blown kisses and seeing their father pose with his weapon.

"Bless you," Merilai and her sister, Matty, said in unison after Pelesasa sneezed in mid-sentence.

"Thank you, baby," he answered, smiling.

"We're hoping this is the first of many we can do, putting them together with their families, especially here in the Long Beach area," said Jeri Lu Kusar-Estorga, president of Kusar Court Reporters and Legal Services, LBVCC's parent parent company.

Families interested in a video conference call can contact Long Beach Video Conference Center by sending their request via e-mail to Conferencing Coordinator Bob Freeman. Please include the following information: your loved one's name, military branch, and a number to contact the family.

For information about Freedom Calls Foundation, log on to <http://freedomcalls.org>.

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