

THE SUN

A War-Zone Visit, on Screen

Teleconferencing project puts soldiers, families in one room

Saturday, November 27, 2004
By PETER WARD, Sun Staff
Tewksbury, MA

In two years of fighting in Vietnam, George Callahan was able to phone home to his parents in Westford exactly twice.

It's a new war, baby.

Yesterday, the retired lieutenant colonel, huddling with his extended family in a gleaming Raytheon Co. conference room, spoke to his wife, a soldier in Iraq, via the miracle of real-time satellite video-conferencing.

It's reach-out-and-touch-someone, half the world away, in wartime.

When Mary Callahan, a 50-year-old medic with the National Guard's 118th Medical Battalion, suddenly appeared on the navy-blue plasma screen, she surprised everyone by donning a hideous Halloween mask.

"There's our tax money hard at work," joked her husband, who married his longtime sweetheart the second marriage for both while she was on leave in September.

For the next 25 minutes, the Callahans, of Rockland, caught up, mixing questions about her health with one-liners.

Mary's oldest sister, Cathy Ewell, a teacher's assistant, hoisted a flag that her preschoolers made using red hand-prints for stripes.

"It's upside down," corrected her sister from 5,800 miles away.

Mary was pleased to see that her 20-year-old son had cut his hair.



A WORLD AWAY, BUT TOGETHER: Cathy Ewell holds photos up to a camera so her younger sister, National Guard medic Mary Callahan, can see them as she talks on screen to her family from Camp Cooke, north of Baghdad. Family members spoke to her from a conference room at Raytheon Co. in Tewksbury. SUN / HOWARD MARTIN

It's what she instructed. The Callahans were among 10 families who took part in the trial teleconferencing last week at Raytheon's Waltham facility. At that time, Mary asked her son to cut his curly locks.

The high-tech project was launched in April by Freedom Calls Foundation, a nonprofit devoted to improving the lines of communication between American troops in Iraq and Afghanistan and their families at home. As the thinking goes, better communication reduces separation anxiety, especially as missions are extended.

With corporate and individual donations, the foundation set up several transmission centers in Iraq, each at a cost of \$300,000. It hopes to establish a total of eight stations in Iraq and two in Afghanistan.

At Camp Cooke, a site just north of Baghdad, it also installed phone banks and computers with Internet and e-mail.

"We've really changed the paradigm here for wartime communications," said Freedom Calls co-founder John Harlow via video-teleconference from his headquarters in New York City.

He said the idea came in part from reports he heard that female soldiers in Iraq had tried to set up computer equipment so they could talk and see their families back home with mixed results.

He told reporters that one day, speaking to loved ones in Iraq will be as easy as walking into Starbucks.

On the screen, behind the soldiers, the room was sparsely stocked with quick-build metal shelves, white cinderblock walls and a big air conditioner, though it's not been needed lately.

"It's been like 46 here," Mary told her family.

Unlike e-mail, video-conferencing can make for heavier heartstrings.

After Jeff Greenberg, a medic in the 118th and a landscaper in Marblehead, spoke privately to his family parents, wife, three kids, a brother and a sister his mother, Rita, left the room red-eyed.

"We could use some Kleenex. There are tears," said a Raytheon employee, one of a dozen who gave up a day off to make sure families were comfortable.

Why Massachusetts families were first in line to enjoy the technology was dictated in part by the unit. The first volunteers signed up by the foundation belonged to Company A of the Concord-based 118th Medical Battalion, which consists mostly of Bay State residents. Freedom Calls then contacted the families and arranged with them to make appointments at Raytheon for the transmissions. Raytheon then picked the facility located most conveniently to most families.

There were no glitches, but the technology isn't flawless.

At times the images froze and the sound seemed to skip like a mistreated CD. But the families didn't mind.

In fact, Diane Lynch, Jeff Greenberg's wife, held their 22-month-old boy, Cormac, so close to the video camera lens that father and baby appeared to kiss.

"This has been great for all of us, especially the kids," Lynch said. "It's something to hold on to."

Peter Ward's e-mail address is pward@lowellsun.com .