

Soldiers talk to families over video hookups

By Hilary Simmons/Associate Editor
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MACOMB - Having a loved one devoted to military service never is easy to cope with.

A program called "See Your Soldier" was able to connect soldiers in Iraq with their loved ones for 30-minute Internet video conferencing sessions this week. The live audio and video links were offered at the University of Illinois Extension Service office in Macomb in



HILARY SIMMONS/Journal Photo-Grandparents Mary and Myron Raymer, grandmother Dorothy Vail and mother Geri Hillyer visit with their son, 1st Lt. Christopher Vail Raymond during a special program called "See Your Soldier" Tuesday afternoon. Raymer is serving in Iraq at Al Asad Airfield. Not pictured, but also present, was stepfather Jeff Hillyer.

collaboration with the National Center for Supercomputing Applications in Urbana and a non-profit group called the Freedom Calls Foundation.

The Raymer and Dexter families were ecstatic to be able to visit with their sons, both Marines, during this special event on Tuesday.

First Lt. Christopher Vail Raymer, 29, a 1995 graduate of Macomb High School, has been in Iraq since in August working as a communications officer. Since that time, his family has received one phone call from him, but are able to stay connected through e-mails.

"He sends me regular mail, too; he calls it 'snail mail,'" grandmother Dorothy Vail laughed.

For Raymer's mother, Geri Hillyer, having part of her heart overseas is nothing new.

She traveled to Germany with Raymer's father, Dirk, during his service in the Army. Her other two sons also are Marines. Josh Raymer, 31, who spent time in Hawaii, is out of the service now; however, youngest son Paul McCullough, 26, a combat engineer who spent his last tour at Camp Fuji in Japan, still could be called back into service.

"He's always wanted to be a Marine and he's the only one that made a career out of it," Hillyer said of Raymer. "He enlisted at 17 and turned 18 three days after boot camp started. I had to sign special papers for them to let him in. Of course, there was no war then."

Hillyer said all three of her sons joined the Marines to help pay for their education. Raymer, an Illinois State University graduate with a degree in parks and recreation, went to Officer Candidate School while he was enrolled at the university.

Raymer sent messages through his family to deliver to his wife Sara and 2-year-old son, Tyler, in South Carolina, who were unable to be present for the video conference. In addition to his mother, stepfather Jeff Hillyer, maternal grandmother Dorothy Vail and paternal grandparents Mary and Myron Raymer were able to visit with their soldier. Myron Raymer also is a former Marine.

During the video hookup, Raymer assured them he was doing well and the base, Al Asad Airfield, even had a Christmas tree.

"It's an artificial one though, because you're not going to find any Christmas trees growing out here," he joked.

His family was quick to tease him back, suggesting he use a palm tree instead.

Mary Raymer told her grandson how good it was to be able to visit with him, how good he looked and reminding him, "we love you, be careful and be safe."

Dorothy Vail blew a kiss into the camera, asking, "I threw you a kiss, did you get it?" as Raymer reached out to pluck it from the air.

The family is eagerly looking forward to seeing him upon his return in March, though he will most likely stay in South Carolina with his family and work as a recruiter for the Marines for three years.

First Lt. Ryan Dexter, 25, was able to visit with stepfather Mike Mareth, mother Kim Mareth, maternal grandparents Lee and Ruth Hare and paternal grandparents Dr. Don and Ruth Dexter. His father, Scott Dexter, was unable to be present.

Dexter joined the Marines in the summer between his junior and senior year at Aurora University, where he graduated with a degree in law enforcement. He is currently serving in his second tour and, like Raymer, is expected to return in March.

Military service also runs in his family as both grandfathers served in the Korean War. Hare was in the Army and Dexter was in the Navy.

"The way the situation is set up over there is very dangerous; we're always worried about what he does," Hare said.

The family depends on e-mail to stay in touch, though they have received one phone call since he was stationed at Al Asad Airfield in August. Dexter's wife Meghan, a Texas native, was stuck in her home state during the conference. His family is thrilled to see him upon his return, but think he and his wife will stay in Texas. The family just wanted their soldier to know they want him to be safe and he will be missed, especially throughout the holidays. It was just after midnight in Iraq when the soldiers were able to speak with their families; at that time, Dexter had been up for 23 hours.

"We miss him a lot, but he's doing what he always wanted to do," mother Kim Mareth said. "We're very proud of him."

Both soldiers are stationed on the same base and had the conferencing opportunity when Ruth Hare saw the ad in the newspaper and submitted her name and got in touch with Myron Raymer. They have known about the visit for a week and a half. Both families were lucky enough to be chosen as their soldier's schedule was able to accommodate the visit.