

Families get to see and talk to soldiers in Iraq

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For the Kraiss family, the holidays just won't be the same this year as Sgt. Roland G. Kraiss serves with the U.S. Army Reserve on the other side of the world.

But the thousands of miles that separate Roland from his wife, Laurie Kraiss, and their two sons were made a little less daunting Saturday as family members were able to come face to face again - even if it was only on a TV screen.

The Kraisses were among eight families of soldiers serving in Iraq with the Madison-based 826th Ordnance Company who had the chance Saturday to talk with their soldiers during 30-minute Internet videoconference calls at Madison Area Technical College's Truax campus.

"I tried not to cry," Laurie Kraiss said. "It was so good to see him. It's really nice to be able to put a face with the voice again."

The calls, which were part of the unit's annual Christmas gathering in Madison, were made possible by the Freedom Calls Foundation, a nonprofit group that provides free communication services for members of the U.S. Army and their families. MATC provided their videoconferencing facilities for free.

"It was kind of a little weight lifted off today," she said. "That's the only Christmas present I want. Nothing can top that."

Adding to the joy of seeing her husband's face again was the news that Roland will likely be returning to the family's town of Burke home in March, nearly a year after his arrival in Iraq, Laurie Kraiss said.

The videoconferencing was a big boost to the families and troops said Nicole Peltier, who helped organize the event and runs the unit's Family Readiness program. The program is designed to prepare soldiers and their families for deployment and help them manage while those troops are away.

"The holidays are the hardest time for deployed families," said Peltier, whose husband is also serving in Iraq. "To be able to physically see someone you know is over in a war zone is priceless for the families."

"We had large groups of family. One family brought almost 20 people with them," Peltier said. Soldiers from the unit who were deployed in the past were also on hand to talk to the troops overseas, some who have been away from home for more than a year.

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