



Just to see your smile

Jessica Grant Staff Writer
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It had been almost a year since Melissa Gonzalez had spoken to her husband face-to-face.

But Melissa, whose husband John Gonzalez has been deployed with the 82nd Medical Company (Air Ambulance) in Iraq since last November, was able to see her husband's face live for the first time on Aug. 6, thanks to a program called Freedom Calls.

"I was laughing and crying at the same time," Melissa said of her Aug. 6 reunion. "It was great."

Even without Freedom Calls, Melissa has been able to talk to John on the phone and hear his voice, but "it's not the same as seeing him."



Sergeant Melissa Gonzalez, of Fort Riley, was able to see her husband John 'face-to-face' thanks to a program called Freedom Calls. Specialist John Gonzalez has been deployed with the 82nd Medical Company (Air Ambulance) in Iraq since last November. The Freedom Calls program uses videoconferencing technology to connect troops serving overseas with family at home. The session was held in K-State's Bob Dole Hall. Staff photo by Carly Pearson

Sixteen Fort Riley families were able to speak to loved ones on Aug. 6 through the Freedom Calls program, which uses videoconferencing technology to connect troops serving overseas with family at home.

The session was held in the Kansas Regents Educational Communications Center's electronic classroom in K-State's Bob Dole Hall. The conferencing was set-up via satellite by Chief Warrant Officer Gary Doak, the rear detachment commander; and John Harlow II, executive director of the Freedom Call Foundation, and the communications staff at the Educational Communications Center in Bob Dole Hall.

The calls began at 8 a.m. and went to the U.S. Marine Corps unit in Al Asaad, Iraq which the Fort Riley helicopter company is supporting during the deployment. Each family was given about 30 minutes to speak privately with their loved one.

Gonzalez said the 30 minutes of time with her husband was more than she expected.

Until the inception of the Freedom Calls Foundation in 2004, military families had to rely on phone calls, e-mails, or letters to stay in touch with family members.

The Freedom Calls Foundation works with corporate contributors, individuals, and the military. It has built a satellite network connecting three military installations in Iraq with the United States. In 2004, the foundation installed its first facility offering VOIP telephone, Internet and video conferencing services in an Army camp located north of Baghdad in the Sunni Triangle.

In 2005, the foundation installed satellite links and communications facilities at Marine headquarters at Camp Fallujah and Al Asad Airbase in Anbar Province on the Syrian border. The foundation's three facilities in Iraq now serve nearly 30,000 to 40,000 soldiers, marines and airmen — nearly 2,000 per day, according to the Freedom Calls Foundation.

The Aug. 6 conference calls were the second that K-State has hosted for Fort Riley families.



Susan Jagerson, project coordinator for ECC, said some of the families had a surprise planned for their children.

"A couple of the families came in with kids and the kids didn't know what they were here for," said Jagerson. "So it was a complete surprise for them to talk and see their dad on the screen."

Jagerson said the program has allowed fathers to see their newborn babies for the first time, or watch their young children take their first steps.

While there are no new dates scheduled for Freedom Calls, Jagerson said the ECC has been talking to the Freedom Calls Foundation about doing the calls about once a month.

"We are just glad that we can participate in this program and support our soldiers and their families," said Jagerson. "This is a great way for the university and for us to help them out."

Gonzalez said she really appreciates the army and K-State allowing military families to participate in the calls. Even though she loved talking to John face-to-face, Melissa said after their conversation, she wants to see her husband more.

"I worry about him all the time," said Gonzalez.

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