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Troops, families connect: Service enables families to visit via video

By Kate York, kyork@mariettatimes.com

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BEVERLY—Wearing his Marine Corps uniform and a wide smile Thursday, Joshua Richter, in a crystal clear image on a television screen, held his hands apart further and further until they were finally out of the picture.

“I love you too much,” he finally told his mother, Karen, watching the image in a classroom at Fort Frye High School. “I can’t spread my arms that far.”

The mother and son had their first contact in six weeks and first visual of each other in more than three months Thursday, through a live video conferencing call using the Freedom Calls Foundation satellite network.

All across Ohio, families and loved ones of soldiers stationed at five camps in Iraq were having the same experiences with more scheduled to make the emotional calls today. Fort Frye High School was the local site for the free calls, with three families signed up.

Karen Richter, of Waterford, along with her parents, Robert and Sarah Love, and her brother, Kevin, got to see and talk to Josh Richter, 22, for about 30 minutes Thursday.

“The conversation was mostly ‘I miss you, I love you, you look great’ over and over,” said Karen Richter. “I don’t think you can say ‘I love you’ or ‘I miss you’ enough.”

Her son was able to squeeze in a mention of Waterford High School’s winning football season and tell the family a little about his life in Iraq.

“One thing about this country is that there’s just nothing there—it just sucks,” he said. “But it has the most beautiful skies as far as sunsets and sunrises. There’s not a star in the sky you can’t see at night.”

Sarah Love sat with her hands clasped against her chin, leaning forward in her chair to catch every word, as she listened to her grandson.

“It was wonderful to see him,” she said afterward. “It just touched my heart. He’s my first grandson and he’s a wonderful boy.”

Richter, who attended Waterford High School until the 11th grade and a move to New Orleans, is expected back in the U.S. in March after seven months overseas. Thursday marked the exact half-way point of his first tour in Iraq.

When he arrived in Iraq, she was able to speak to him regularly on the telephone, said Karen Richter, but for the last month and a half she has sent him written communication. But due to missions he hasn't been able to be in touch.

"It's such a relief to see him and know that he's safe," she said. "It's a comfort to hear his voice and see him smile. Even though I can't give him a big hug, to hear his laughter and to be able to joke around with him was such a thrill. I couldn't have asked for anything more."

Babs and John Douglass, of Marietta, are hoping for the same experience today when they go to Fort Frye High School for a chance to video conference with their son, Anthony, 24, a 2002 [Marietta High School](#) graduate serving in the Army as a military police officer.

"I'm anxious to see him," said Babs Douglass. "I've seen pictures but to see his face and be able to interact... I think it will be a very happy moment for me."

The couple will bring Anthony's grandparents, neighbors he's close to and even the family Shih Tzu, Sadie.

"He doesn't know we're bringing Sadie," said Babs Douglass. "He likes animals so I thought it would be fun."

His son, who left for Iraq in October, is expected to be back stateside in February, said his father.

"We're really thankful to have this opportunity," he said. "I just hope it doesn't make him homesick."

The video conferences already have the seal of approval from one soldier—Josh Richter.

"This is pretty cool," he said, of getting to virtually sit in the same room as his family.

When it was time to end the conversation, mother and son went back and forth on who should walk away, unable to say good-bye, before the connection was lost so another soldier could have his turn.

Karen Richter's smile became a long, deep breath and then she walked away from the camera and monitor, smiling again.

"I was a Marine, too, so the Marine in me understands the mission," she said. "But the mom in me really just thinks 'I don't want him to be there.' But he was excited to go. He has a great sense of duty."

Love said she was relieved to see how happy her grandson looked.

"I thought he looked wonderful," she said. "I hope this can happen again. I think it helps a lot of parents and loved ones—just to see them. There's nothing else like that."