

# The Mercury News

Posted on Wed, Oct. 27, 2004

## Mavericks team up to link loved ones with troops in Iraq

By NATHANIEL JONES

Fort Worth Star-Telegram

**DALLAS** - Army Reserve Spec. Rickey Burrell Jr., who is currently deployed in Iraq, hasn't seen his family for the past month, but for 30 minutes Tuesday night he was right across the table from his loved ones.

With the help of the Dallas Mavericks and the non-profit group Freedom Calls Foundation, Rickey Burrell's mother, father, uncle and aunt were able to talk to him through a 36-inch television screen at the American Airlines Arena. He was able to see them from a monitor in Iraq.

Burrell buried his face in his arms when he saw his family for the first time in weeks. On the other end in Dallas, tears fell.

Rickey Burrell Sr. said his son appeared fine physically, but it was still emotional seeing him.

"We know he's in a situation he has no control over," Burrell Sr. said.

Burrell Jr. was one of about seven soldiers from an engineer battalion in Seagoville, Texas, chosen to talk to family members at the Mavericks' game against the San Antonio Spurs.

The Freedom Calls Foundation has raised millions of dollars to build a communication center at an undisclosed location in Iraq so soldiers can communicate with their families through free Internet, telephone and video teleconference services.



SPECIAL TO THE STAR-TELEGRAM/BRIAN LAWDERMILK

Rickey Burrell Sr. and his wife, Bettie Burrell, talk with their son, Spc. Rickey Burrell Jr., on screen, via video conferencing Tuesday at the American Airlines Center. The service is provided by the nonprofit Freedom Calls Foundation.

The Mavericks allowed the group to use space at the American Airlines Arena.

Patti Van Horne, a family coordinator with the Seagoville group, said the video connections mean a lot to the soldiers.

"It takes a lot to have a loved one away from the family for a long period of time," Van Horne said.

Behind another curtain across the room, Army Reserve Spec. Trevor Howard's grin took up the whole computer screen. He spent more than 30 minutes talking to his mother Sharon Howard and his 80-year-old grandmother Alberta Wilson.

"This is amazing," said Wilson. "It's like he's home or we are where he is."