



## Families connect with troops via video

By **ARCENIA HARMON** of the Tribune's staff

*Published Sunday, January 23, 2005*

Roy Hiatte's 22-year-old grandson is serving with the Marines in Iraq, and until recently, Hiatte and his wife could only write letters to stay in touch with him.

But last month, the couple and other members of their family used videoconferencing technology to speak with Cpl. Christopher Branon in Fallujah for the first time since his deployment in September.

"Chris says we live in the Stone Age because we don't have a computer," said Hiatte, of St. Charles. "It felt good to see him on the television screen."

Branon's family was the first in Missouri to participate in Operation Hometown Link, a program that arranges high-tech meetings between armed forces members in Fallujah Taji and their families back home.

Branon's family drove two hours to Columbia to take advantage of the program put together by the Missouri Telehealth Network, the University of Missouri-Columbia and the Freedom Calls Foundation of New York, which set up the videoconferencing network in Iraq.

University of Missouri Health Care has been using "telehealth" technology to let patients in rural areas communicate with physicians by using live video links.

Joe Tracy, executive director of the Missouri Telehealth Network, had the idea of using the same technology to let troops overseas talk with their families.

"It's the right thing to do," Tracy told a news conference yesterday.

The program is available in 23 counties across the state, and the service will reach six more counties before summer. In each county, health facilities with videoconferencing capabilities have agreed to link up service members with their families.

"Soon, families will be able to see as well as hear their husband, wife, son or daughter," said Pat Wilson, co-founder of the Columbia Family Military Support Group.

Wilson, whose son is on his third tour of duty with the Marines in Fallujah, called the videoconference network "an amazing thing."

She said her support group has about 80 members with family members in every service branch throughout Iraq, though it's unclear how many are in Fallujah or Taji.

Branon's mother, Danette Branon of Wentzville, wept while describing what it was like to see her son for the first time in months.

"It was like he was right there in the room with you," she said. "It was that clear."

To access the service, each service member must ask permission from his or her commanding officer, then set up a time and date for the video link.

After the service member notifies the folks back home of the scheduled conversation, the family calls the Missouri Telehealth Network at 884-7958. The Freedom Calls Foundation then confirms a date and time for the video conference, and the family goes to the nearest telehealth provider - such as MU Health Care in Columbia or Capital Regional Medical Center in Jefferson City - to make the communications link.

Christopher Branon's conversation with his parents and grandparents lasted about an hour. It was taped so it could be replayed for other family members. They chatted about the weather in Iraq and family matters. Branon had a caught a cold, but his family was relieved to see he was otherwise all right.

"That video was worth a million words," said Stacy Apple, Branon's aunt.

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