



Iraq to Montana via video brings family together

December 19, 2006 -- By Tracy Ellig, MSU News Service

Kathy Harkin cried when she saw her daughter Tuesday on a live video feed from Iraq.

It had been six months since Sheila Stenzel left Belgrade as a lieutenant in the Navy Reserves to work as a civil engineer in Fallujah for the Seabees.

And though Gary and Kathy Harkin had kept in touch with their daughter via e-mail and phone, those were nothing compared to seeing her on Tuesday, an event made possible through the Freedom Calls Foundation, a non-profit that provides free, hour-long videoconferencing for families of any active-duty soldier.



The family of Navy reservist Sheila Stenzel visit with her through a live videoconference at the Burns Technology Center at Montana State University. Stenzel is currently stationed in Fallujah, Iraq. (MSU photo by Jay Thane.)

"I couldn't sleep last night, I was so excited to see her," Kathy Harkin said. "This turned out to be everything and more than I expected."

Montana State University's Burns Technology Center donated its staff and equipment to make the call possible. The center has seen surprisingly little demand for the service and wants to spread word of its availability, said Nadeen Comfort, videoconference coordinator.

"There are roughly 50 sites in Montana that we could coordinate with for videoconferencing," Comfort said. "People don't have to come specifically to Bozeman."

To date, the center has only hosted nine videoconferences, though two of those have been proxy weddings. Montana is the only state in the union that allows both the groom and the bride to be absent before a justice of the peace for marriage.

Families interested in a free videoconference with an active duty family member can contact Comfort at (406) 994-6553 or ncomfort@montana.edu. Nationwide, Freedom Calls, based in New York, www.freedomcalls.org, sponsors 2,000 to 5,000 calls a month. Except during the holidays, families can sign up for three conferences per month.

The Harkins watched their daughter on a wall-sized video screen in a center conference room. She

sat in a simple chair with an American flag hanging in the background. In Iraq, Stenzel got to see her family on a computer monitor. It was 10 hours later in Fallujah, 6 p.m. for Stenzel.

"Hi Sweetie," Stenzel said to one of her three nieces.

The girls - Anna, 6, and 4-year-old twins Emme and Arra, -- told their aunt what they wanted from Santa for Christmas. The family wanted to know what her holidays would be like in Fallujah.

"Christmas will be pretty low key," she said.

A 1997 mechanical engineering graduate of MSU and also a grad of Bozeman High School, Stenzel, 37, has been in the Navy Reserve for six years. Iraq is her first deployment. She's due home in March.

She and her husband, John, have been married 15 years.

"It was so wonderful to see her," he said. "When you talk to someone on the phone they can mask what they're feeling. To see her today made me feel a whole lot better. She looks good. She sounds good, and I can see in her eyes that she's okay."

John and the rest of the family were incredibly grateful for the opportunity to see their loved one.

"It was like a Christmas gift for me," John said. "I couldn't have asked for anything better."

Contact: Nadeen Comfort, videoconference coordinator, Burns Technology Center, (406) 994-6553 or ncomfort@montana.edu