



Distance can't keep soldier from family

Mittal Steel links troops in Iraq with loved ones in region via high-tech video setup

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BURNS HARBOR | It started with a gasp. It ended with a kiss.

Gracie Shumpert couldn't verbalize her emotions when she first caught a glimpse of her son, Senior Master Sgt. Thomas Shumpert Jr., via video technology.

Words weren't nearly enough.

Her son, an Air Force officer who's been in the military for 19 years, peered into a video Web cam from Camp Victory, Iraq.

His mother, a wad of Kleenex in hand, lost herself in a fancy TV screen inside Mittal Steel's Career Development Center, surrounded by similarly mesmerized relatives.

"Juno, this is mom," the Gary grandmother said, waving to the screen.

"I know who you are, Mom," he replied, triggering the first of many laughs for the family.

Shumpert got his nickname because his father's name also is Thomas and his parents called him Junior, then June -- but after his always getting into things as a child, it became "June, no!" or, Juno.

Thomas Sr., an employee at Mittal's Indiana Harbor plant in East Chicago, somehow laughed and cried when his son appeared on screen. The three-second time lag couldn't delay the drama.

"It sure is good to see you, Juno," he said, wiping his eyes. "This is big to us."

"Your daddy's crying like a baby," Juno's mother said, wiping her eyes.

"What are ya'll cryin' for?" Juno asked. "You look like you're sitting up in church or something."

This 21st century family reunion, lasting only a half-hour Wednesday morning, was

organized by Mittal Steel for a handful of its employees with loved ones serving at several Sunni Triangle camps in Iraq.

Mittal partnered with the Freedom Calls Foundation, a public charity building a communications network enabling troops overseas to keep in touch with families and loved ones, free of charge.

Thomas Sr. made a point to thank the foundation and Mittal, especially Mittal's James Shebesh, an Army veteran who helped coordinate the complex video conferencing.

Shebesh said the equipment is new for Mittal and to be used with similar video-conferencing for educational training and remote networking with other plants.

Still, Wednesday's family conferencing won't be a one-time deal, said Shebesh, who has a son serving in Iraq.

Through satellite network technology, the Shumpert family reveled in its few minutes together despite a nine-hour time difference and a few thousand miles.

"Dad, what you got under your chin?" Juno asked, smiling like a kid.

Thomas Sr. stroked his gray beard and laughed. Then he pulled off his cap to show his bald head.

"I'm taking after you, Juno," he said.

In between moments of awkward yet apparently blissful silence, Juno's mother warned him that she wanted to kiss his face on the screen.

"You're not the only one," Juno replied.

Before they parted, she did.

At one point, the family was left alone for a few minutes of privacy.

Behind a closed door, the hallways echoed with laughter.

Then, near the end of their time together, nothing but silence.

Shebesh quietly opened the door, peeked in and quickly closed it.

"They're praying," he said.