

# The News-Gazette®

## Virtual visits with U.S. military

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Michelle Slaminko gets to talk to her husband, Marine Sgt. Eli Slaminko, by phone most weeks, as long as the connection to his base in Iraq isn't down, and they exchange e-mail as well.

But Wednesday's conversation was special for the local woman. She didn't just get to talk to him, she did it face to face.

Sgt. Slaminko, who works in aircraft ordnance at Al Asad air base, which received a visit from Vice President Dick Cheney earlier this week, is still in Iraq. He deployed five months ago.

But a high-tech video conferencing system at the National Center for Supercomputing Applications brought him home for a little while, if only virtually.

"It's a really nice deal," said Slaminko's dad Steve of White Heath. "He looked good. Looked like I remembered him."

Michelle Slaminko said the family jumped at the opportunity to participate when the University of Illinois-based NCSA began advertising the video conferences earlier this month.

"We would do anything to talk to him any more than we already do," she said.

Sgt. Slaminko's wife, dad, his mom Kathi, stepdaughter Erika, sister Evelyn and grandmother Bernadine of Pittsburgh, Pa., got to gather in one of the video-enabled conference rooms at the new NCSA building in Urbana. They were joined by Tara Lynch, a UI employee who's soon to be the Marine's sister-in-law and first made the family aware of the program.

More than 50 area residents with loved ones serving in Iraq were scheduled for the live 30-minute sessions, said Nancy Komlanc, director of education and training for the UI's NCSA-administered Technology Research, Education and Commercialization Center.

Komlanc does a lot of work linking people for educational purposes. At professional conferences recently, she kept running into folks from the Freedom Calls Foundation, a nonprofit organization that enables deployed soldiers to video conference with their families free of charge.

Given the new building it moved into this year, which is well-appointed with facilities for the

purpose, the supercomputing center and Freedom Calls seemed like a perfect match, said Komlanc and NCSA's Trish Barker.

Soldiers at, or able to get to Al Asad, Camp Taji/Cooke and Camp Fallujah in Iraq, which have the proper video-conferencing equipment, could participate.

A lineup of NCSA volunteers met the families in the lobby of the new building, complete with cookies and hot chocolate, and guided them to the video-conferencing rooms.

Michele and Ed Bein Sr. of Gibson City and Marion Christman of Champaign came for a virtual visit with their grandson Cpl. Kevin Bein, a third generation Marine working for an air unit at Al Asad and serving his second tour in Iraq.

Also along: Kevin Bein's uncle Illinois National Guard Lt. Col. Steven Bein, who returned in July after serving with the Army for a year in Iraq. He also brought his wife Elaine and son Joseph, Kevin's cousin.

Ironically, Lt. Col. Bein just missed seeing Kevin in the Iraq months before catching up with him here.

"I got to the base he was at three days after he left," Steven Bein said.

Kevin's mom Bonnie, formerly of Urbana, and sister Debbie, who are in Virginia, attended as well, kind of. The family had them live on a cellphone in the middle of the conference table during the session.

Kevin Bein appeared on a big-screen TV set at the front of the room and said he had a pretty good view of his family on his end.

"They look, well, the same," he joked.

"I didn't have any idea they had this technology here," he said. "This was a very nice distraction, for a little while anyway. I wish it had lasted longer."

So did the folks at home.

"We all miss you," his grandmother told him as the call came to a close. "We love you and we pray for you all the time."