

The News-Gazette

ROTC grad gives brother first salute

By [Greg Kline](#)

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University of Illinois senior and Army ROTC Cadet Battalion Commander Matthew Ewing hoped his brother Michael would be at the UI over the weekend and on Monday for his graduation and commissioning.

But Michael's business kept him on the road – in Iraq, where he's a Marine corporal, based at Camp Al Asad air base.

Matthew Ewing really wanted to salute his older brother after his commissioning, in a tradition that calls for a new second lieutenant to give his first salute to a person, usually a noncommissioned officer, who's had a big impact on him or her.

So the UI-based National Center for Supercomputing Applications brought Michael Ewing to Champaign-Urbana – virtually.

NCSA's Nancy Komlanc said Ewing's father, also named Michael Ewing, found the Web site, www.seeyoursoldier.uiuc.edu, about video conferences the NCSA and partners have arranged with soldiers in Iraq previously. He sent an e-mail to Komlanc and to Freedom Calls, the group that maintains the satellite network and handles the system on the Iraq end.

The elder Ewing, from the Chicago area, said he was looking for information on the UI's Dad's Day football game when he saw a link to the See Your Soldier program and wondered about the possibility of the family conferencing with his son Michael during graduation weekend. The NCSA and Freedom Calls agreed to arrange it.

That's how a large group of Michael Ewing's family members ended up in a conference room at the NCSA Building on campus Monday afternoon, a room equipped with a wall-sized video monitor where a larger-than-life Michael held court on screen.

Matthew's first salute was an early order of business. Then Michael opened a package his brother had sent him, with instructions not to open it until Matthew's commissioning day.

Inside was a new silver dollar, like the first salute a traditional offering by a new officer to the valued comrade who receives the salute – a tradition dating back to America's early military forces and perhaps the British before them.

"It's pretty special," Michael Ewing said via the video link-up.

He didn't even mind that his younger brother, who also received a UI economics degree over the weekend, now outranks him.

"He gets paid more," Michael said. "I'm still the older brother."

The brothers' sister Rebecca, niece Moira and brother-in-law Army Capt. Jeff Barta, a 1999 UI graduate and former ROTC battalion commander, traveled from Germany to attend Matthew's graduation and commissioning, and the video conference. Barta has served in Iraq himself.

"This is a special day," said Marty Ewing, the brothers' mom, fighting back tears. "He (Michael) looked phenomenal."

As family gatherings will, the event had some lighter moments, too. Michael is a helicopter air frame mechanic for the Marines, something his uncle Paul Vinkler said he foresaw.

"We knew he'd work on helicopters because he once installed a ceiling fan in our bedroom," Vinkler joked.

"I remember getting a pretty good shock out of that," Michael Ewing responded.

Matthew Ewing will now spend a year in infantry and Army Ranger training. His mother, who said she has stopped watching the news, tries not to think about having two sons in Iraq.

"I just pretend that they're going away to college or they're on a nice trip," she said. "It's easier that way."

The NCSA with the UI Extension program sponsored video-conferencing sessions for families around the state during the last two Decembers and last July and plans another for this July. Two camps in Iraq, Camp Al Asad and Camp Taji/Cooke, are equipped to participate in the videoconferences.

The videoconferencing equipment and satellite connection in Iraq are provided by the Freedom Calls Foundation.