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Freedom Calls

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Teleconference reunites soldier dad with family

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Parents, teachers and little soldiers at Patronis Elementary School began their day Tuesday with tears and the Pledge of Allegiance.

U.S. Army Capt. Shawn English caused several visitors to cry when he had a distinct emotional response to the sight of his oldest son, Nathan, 7, holding Old Glory.

English, his face wracked with emotion, cleared his throat and led a group of Patronis kids in the Pledge of Allegiance. Shawn was speaking from Iraq through a videoconference set up

by a New York-based charity, Freedom Calls, and the Bay District school system. English left his wife and three young boys in February to help Iraqis form their own government. The first-graders in Anna Hull's and Alison Parker's classes have been writing letters and sending care packages to English since he left. They also have been comforting their classmate, Nathan, his mother, Tricia, and his brothers, Noah, 5, and Austin, 2.

English will be deployed for at least a year as he trains Iraqi soldiers to fight insurgents, said his father-in-law, Curt Daily.

English explained to the first-graders what life is like in Iraq — it's hot; what they eat — American food mostly, although a group of Iraqi counterparts recently prepared them an "amazing meal"; and what the people in Iraq are like — hospitable and gracious.

When asked, English said he has not driven a tank "because some of them don't work."

After spending some time with the students, English got to talk with his wife and kids. Austin is a blond blur of energy. He shouted to dad, played and investigated the classroom.

"I cannot believe how big he is," Shawn told his wife.



News Herald Photo: Robert Cooper

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Noah and Nathan were quiet — they miss their dad, Daily said.

“They know too much,” he added.

Tricia told her husband that he looked good, then considered him again.

“You look a little skinny,” she said.

Weight loss probably came from the heat. It was 108 degrees in Iraq, English lamented.

“It’s a dry heat,” English said. “So you don’t know you are getting dehydrated.”

The family is fine, Tricia told her husband, except for a growing pest problem. The other day, a snake slithered into the yard and had to be scared away. Then the boys brought frogs into the house, she said.

“We were chasing sticky frogs throughout the house,” she added.

“Boys will be boys,” English replied.

He also gave her some advice.

“Don’t make the mistake of looking at the calendar,” Shawn said. “I looked at one the other day.”

English told the class about what he was fighting for and against.

The captain mentioned an Iraqi soldier who was just like him. The man was about the same age and had small children at home but, unlike English, the man was afraid to go home at night. Children over there “don’t have a beautiful place to sit and learn,” English said.

“It bothers me sometimes when I see the news that people are taking freedom for granted,” he added.

While her husband fights in Iraq, Tricia fights fear in her home. She does not watch the news and she does not let her kids watch the news because they do not want to catch a story about a wounded or dead American soldier.

Tricia said her faith in God and her faith that the mission in Iraq is righteous helps her get through the long days.

The American soldiers are bringing “God-given freedoms” to the Iraqis and, by fighting insurgents over there, her husband is helping to prevent more terrorist attacks over here, Tricia said.

But it is tough on the boys, she added.

“I tell them that their daddy is the very best at what he does,” she said. “He’s our hero.”