

SOLDIERS LOG ON FOR GRADUATIONS Milestones shared across the miles

DEBBY ABE; The News Tribune
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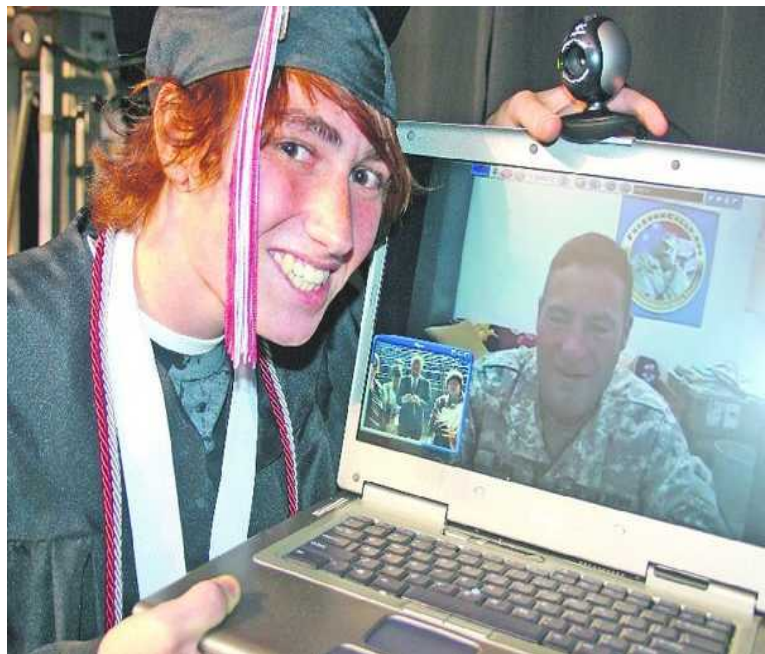
Since Staff Sgt. David Bliss left for Iraq last June, he's missed Christmas and New Year's with his family in Roy.

He missed his stepson Brandon Lopez's senior year and 18th birthday. He's missed helping the kids with homework and those occasional requests of, "Dad, could I get some spending money?"

But the 36-year-old father was part of a family milestone on Saturday: Brandon's graduation from Bethel High School.

Thanks to a real-time video connection, the Army sergeant watched the entire, 90-minute commencement exercises in the Tacoma Dome while he sat in front of a computer monitor at the Al Asad Air Base in northern Iraq.

"Incredible, just incredible," he told a News Tribune reporter via the video connection. "I was able to see him walk through and get his diploma. It was awesome to get this opportunity to see him graduate. I know I can't be there but this is the next best thing."



PHOTOS BY MARK WENZEL/BETHEL SCHOOL DISTRICT
Bethel High School graduate Brandon Lopez holds the laptop with the live video feed to his stepfather, Staff Sgt. David Bliss, who is at an air base in Iraq. A program from the Freedom Calls Foundation allowed Bliss to watch the Bethel graduation, and then speak with his family for about 40 minutes.



PHOTOS BY MARK WENZEL/BETHEL SCHOOL DISTRICT
Amber Bliss, Cathy Bouno and Terrie Urbas, from left, and Brandon Lopez talk online to David Bliss.

The video connection was made possible through the Freedom Calls Foundation, a nonprofit group that has installed satellite links and communications facilities at Al Asad and several other bases in Iraq to provide live video connections between U.S. military personnel and their families.

Coincidentally, Bliss, a computer specialist in the Army, volunteered to help set up the Freedom Calls Centers in his first deployment to Iraq in 2005.

News reports are scattered with examples of soldiers deployed to Iraq watching graduations, a pregnant wife's ultrasound, weddings and other family events through such hookups. In another commencement Saturday at the Tacoma Dome, Army Chief Warrant Officer James Baker in Baghdad used the video link to watch his son, Joshua Baker, graduate from Spanaway Lake High School.

Baker is with the 3rd Brigade, 2nd Infantry Division on his third deployment to Iraq. The father took notes on the graduation as part of a book of reflections he plans to give Joshua when he goes to Harding University in Arkansas.

"It was really great," Joshua said of having his dad watch the ceremony. "I wish he could have been there. I've missed him a lot."

Next week, a similar set-up will allow Carolyn Moore, in Al Asad, Iraq, to see her daughter Blake Taneisha-Marie Moore's eighth-grade promotion ceremony from Pioneer Middle School.

Brandon had worried for months that his dad wouldn't be able to see his graduation.



PHOTOS BY MARK WENZEL/BETHEL SCHOOL DISTRICT
Spanaway Lake High School graduate Joshua Baker, left, his sister Bethany, mom Melody and grandparents Bobby and Betty Prosser, listen to Joshua's dad, Chief Warrant Officer James Baker, live from Iraq.

Without their dad, it's been a tough year for Brandon; his 8-year-old sister, Amber Bliss; brother, Justin Lopez, 19; and mother, Lynnette Bliss.

The family didn't know the dad had arranged to watch the graduation until the morning of the ceremony. That morning, a digital camera focused on the stage to capture the events, including Principal Wanda Riley's announcement that Bliss was watching via a live feed. She asked Brandon to stand, eliciting Dome-shaking applause. Once Brandon received his diploma and shook Riley's hand, the two walked to the camera and the teen saluted his dad.

After the graduation, Brandon and the family walked backstage to talk with Bliss via a laptop that allowed them to see the soldier. The two can exchange bear hugs when Bliss returns to Fort Lewis this week with the 593rd Corps Support Group.

"This is one of the best graduation presents I've ever gotten," Brandon said. "It's something every father should be able to watch his son do."

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To learn more about Freedom Calls Foundation or to donate, go to freedomcalls.org.

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