

Observer-Reporter

Greetings from Iraq

Christie Campbell, Staff writer

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CHARLEROI - A day in the life of a soldier at an air base in Iraq can be long and tedious. But there's never a day, an hour, or a moment when soldiers don't think about their families back home.

That's what students at Charleroi Middle School learned Friday when they had the opportunity to speak directly with five U.S. Marines stationed at the Al Asad Air Base.

The students took part in a first-ever video conference with Iraq via the Internet. This is the first year the school has had video conferencing capability and has used it to link up with other schools, but never with servicemen.



Chaniece Tarpley, an eighth-grade student at Charleroi Middle School, walks away after asking a question to Marines stationed in Iraq via a videoconference March 2, 2007

Twenty-eight students in the school's sixth-, seventh- and eighth-grade classes asked the Marines about their daily routines, what they do for fun, and what they miss about the U.S.

Linked through Internet 2 to the satellite network maintained by the New Jersey based Freedom Calls Foundation, there was no fee for the video conference. The five men crowded together on a couch in order to appear in the same frame.

Sixth-grade student Ian Whiten asked what they missed besides their families.

The soldiers replied it is those minute, daily tasks they took for granted while living in America, such as hot showers, driving to the grocery store, working on their bikes or a home computer.

"Do you ever get bored?" asked seventh-grader Martin Maytas.

The question brought wide grins and laughter from the men who admitted that is a constant concern, though their workdays are often 12 to 14 hours long.

They have a theater room and access to pool, ping-pong, and air hockey, they said. Food is available from two chow halls, a Pizza Hut and a Subway.

The video conference was made possible through the Freedom Calls Foundation, a nonprofit organization that provides free telephone calls, e-mail service or video conferences to link soldiers with families. Bill Flenniken, the school's director of technology, said it was founded by John Harlow after he learned of a soldier returning from Iraq with a cell phone bill in the thousands of dollars.

The importance of the video communication was evident Friday when one of the soldiers was called away for another conference with his wife to view for the first time their new baby. Students and faculty at Charleroi gave him a round of applause.

Charleroi joined with Intermediate Unit 1 in a consortium grant through Act 183. Flenniken said the district received funding to install high-speed Internet in the classrooms as well as the video conferencing unit.

In addition to the Al Asad Air Base, the school can video link with Camp Taji, Camp Fallujah and Camp Victory. Michele Piatt, Classroom of the Future coach for the school, hopes families with servicemen and women in those areas will contact her so she can arrange free video conferences for them through the Freedom Calls Foundation.

Information about Freedom Calls is available at www.freedomcalls.org.