

## Internet tools are connecting military families, boosting morale

Orange County nonprofits and companies have made social networking and videoconferencing more accessible for people playing the waiting game.

By **CAMERON BIRD**

THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

Monday, July 7, 2008

Marine wife Tlynda Cavaletto clasped her mouth and let out a quiet shriek when she walked into a room with her baby son and locked eyes with her husband, Lance Cpl. Steven J. Cavaletto, on a massive HDTV.

Steven, rounding out his first tour in Iraq, glanced down at Tlynda's hands.

"I see you got your nails done," he said, sparking a two-and-a-half-hour conversation last week.

The Cavalettos are able to catch up every month or so on a tiny, glitchy webcam at home, said Tlynda, who lives at Camp Pendleton. But the device pales in comparison to the high-definition screen she sampled at the Irvine headquarters of Tandberg, a maker of "telepresence" products.

Technology, it seems, can't shrink the time it takes for soldiers to return home, but it can bridge the space. Conjured by 20th-century sci-fi, interactive innovations such as Tandberg's have shortcut the distance between military families and their loved ones serving overseas.

While the Pentagon last year blocked several popular "Web 2.0" portals – including MySpace and YouTube – for fear that troop movements could be leaked and bandwidth used up, other options emerged.

Freedom Calls Foundation, a public charity founded by a former Wall Street investor, taps into a system of satellites to facilitate phone and video conversations for 50,000 deployed troops.

The foundation sponsors 200 to 300 videoconferences every month, using top-of-the-line, four-figure technologies from companies such as Tandberg.



Tlynda Calavetto, with her son, Logan, reacts to seeing her husband, Lance Cpl. Steven J. Calavetto at video conferencing company Tandberg's Irvine offices. Lance Cpl. Calavetto is stationed in Iraq's Camp Taqaddum and they were able to speak with him through an arrangement with Freedom Calls, a foundation that sponsors the video conferencing.

MIGUEL VASCONCELLOS, ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

An even more powerful and pricey videoconferencing engine is in the works, said Sean Lessman, Tandberg's senior director of advanced technologies.

"It'll be kind of like sitting in the front row of a movie theater," he said. "Hopefully you don't see monitors... you just see the other person on the line."

On the more practical side, Websites for Heroes.com, a non-profit venture between two Orange County Web entrepreneurs, provides free networking pages for families. Subscribed members gain access to a password-protected domain, where they can share photos, upload videos, post to a message board and pencil in events on a calendar.

Just last month, 659 families applied and 76 remain on a waiting list.

"When you're in harm's way and you're doing your job, you feel disconnected," said cofounder Terry Gniffke, a Vietnam veteran who recalled anxiously waiting for letters from home.

A Harvard Kennedy School of Government study endorses Websites for Heroes as the most user-friendly and accessible point of connection on the Web for military families. Rudolph Brewington, a retired commander who directs the Department of the Navy's official "quality of life" homepage, Lifelines, called the site "an absolute godsend" for troop morale.

And by compressing file sizes, Website for Heroes also unburdens the military's Internet pipelines.

John Harlow, founder and executive director of Freedom Calls, said he imagines a day when the kinds of connections provided by modern tech are a daily occurrence.

"Our vision is of a war fighter coming home from battle and talking to his kids every night," he said.

**Contact the writer:** [cbird@ocregister.com](mailto:cbird@ocregister.com) or 949-553-2915