

## **Toby Depot video link unites soldiers, families**

**By SUSAN KOOMAR**

*News and Business Editor*

[skoomar@poconorecord.com](mailto:skoomar@poconorecord.com)

**August 28, 2004**

TOBYHANNA — Red-eyed but smiling, Debbie Gardner grabbed a wad of tissues from her purse after saying goodbye to her son in Iraq on Friday.

An Internet video link gave Gardner half an hour of the spontaneous smiles and comforting small talk she's missed in e-mails and phone calls.

"At least you had eye contact," said Gardner as she dabbed at tears. "He really looked good. I don't know if he's lying to me, but he said he's doing good and he hasn't fired his rifle."

Gardner and her husband, Bill, traveled from Sunbury to Tobyhanna Army Depot to join in a remote reunion organized by the Freedom Calls Foundation, a charity that uses technology to link families with military loved ones.

Ten families — one with 18 members and another toting their pet dog — came from as far away as Harrisburg and Altoona for the first Freedom Calls video conference in the state.

"Don't get too close and don't kiss (the screen)," Sgt. Kevin Walsh jokingly instructed as he led the way to a computer monitor displaying a live picture broadcast from a U.S. Army camp in the Sunni Triangle.

Walsh, a family readiness liaison from Scranton, called the Freedom Calls program "just amazing."

"They're even (broadcasting) births and weddings," he said.

The Gardner family's chat with son Eric, an Army reservist, rambled from golf to weather to his anticipated two-week leave in October.

"We're gonna have a big party when you come," said Debbie Gardner.

"Lots of beer?" her son replied with a laugh.

Eric gave his family a glimpse into the harshness of life in the desert.

"It's really hot here. I'm sweating body parts off," he said.

"You'd better have that same sense of humor when get home," said his mom.

Turning more serious, Eric added, "I didn't think I would be real excited (about the video conference), but you guys look good."

A family from Scranton peppered Edward "E.J." Kabilus with questions as he wiped sweat from his brow.

Do you need anything?

Have you seen any camels?

Have you met any new friends?

"You don't know what to say when you haven't seen them in so long," said Sue Timlin, the soldier's aunt.

E.J., who is 20, has been overseas since March. His family doesn't know when he will be home.

"Basic training was hard, but this is harder," said mother Ann Kabilus. "This is the longest we were ever apart. I could cry."

Tobyhanna Army Depot has started a support group for families with loved ones overseas. The group, called Waiting Families, meets monthly to get information on services and share stories.

"Half an hour is information, and then we let them talk and have it open," said Sonya Walls, an Army Community Service specialist.

Walls enjoyed hosting the excited military spouses, parents and siblings at Friday's event.

"My job is to help the families, so it's great to see them talk to their soldiers," she said.

*For information on Freedom Calls, visit <http://www.freedomcalls.org> on the Internet or call (610) 279-0362.*