

Journal Star

Families get face time with loved ones

Video conferences let area military families see, speak with deployed service members

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BY ED McMENAMIN



Families of Marines from Engineer Company C, based in Peoria, had an early Christmas present by having a video conference visit with their Marines stationed in Iraq.

EAST PEORIA - May 20, 2007, was an important date for Bradley Niemerg. It was the day of his one-year wedding anniversary with wife, Kathleen, and the day he was activated for his second tour in Iraq.

The Rantoul man, a sergeant with the Peoria-based Marine Engineer Company C, 6th Engineer Support Battalion, isn't scheduled to return home until April 2008.

But he and his wife, both 22, received an early Christmas present Saturday - a half-hour, face-to-face conversation via video thanks to the Freedom Calls Foundation.

"It was good, it was just too short," Kathleen Niemerg said. "I didn't want to leave. It was really nice seeing him responding to the things I was saying."

She and several other area military families participated in the program, held at the University of Illinois Extension office in East Peoria.

"I brought his Christmas presents and opened them and showed him what I got," she said. "We talked about how things are going at home and how things are going over there and the different responsibilities he has."

Bradley Niemerg leads an engineering team that works directly with the Iraqi army, showing members how to build buildings and other infrastructure, his wife said.

The video conferences were a unique moment for the couple, who have limited opportunities to communicate.

"Not being able to call, that's the worst thing," she said. "I always have to wait for him to call me. If I miss the call because I'm working or just stepped out into the garage, then I might have missed him for the whole day that I've been waiting."

According to the Freedom Calls Foundation Web site, the organization provides 2,000 family video conferences and more than 1.5 million minutes of free telephone calls every month to military service members overseas free of charge.

Tony Cooper of Long Point also is deployed with the 6th Engineer Support Battalion. His mother, Linda Cooper; his 12-year-old son, Bryan; and his sister Angela Danko also were able to spend 30 minutes talking and sharing updates from home and abroad.

"It was marvelous," Linda Cooper said. "Seeing his cockeyed smile and his silly ways - there is no way to describe the way that makes you feel."

Cooper, a staff sergeant, is a demolitions expert and combat engineer. Linda Cooper said this was the first time the family has been able to visit with him by video connection.

"It gives you a lot of peace of mind," she said. "He's OK, he's laughing and joking, and that's worth a million dollars."

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