

A soldier calls home to deaf parents

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When the clock struck noon Sunday at the Marinaro household in East Stroudsburg it was a wish come true.

Cpl. Derek A. Marinaro of the Pennsylvania Army National Guard, serving with the A-1/109th IN, 2 BCT, 28th ID, communicated with his deaf parents for the first time since his deployment to western Iraq on Father's Day in June.

"We miss you and love you," they said to the young corporal using American Sign Language.

"How are you, Derek?" asked his family. "You look great Derek."

"I feel better now that I can see my family," the soldier replied.

"Oh, he's crying," said Sabrina Marinaro, his older sister.

The family installed a video conference program on their home computer provided by the Freedom Calls Foundation to help Robert and Maida Marinaro communicate with their son over the Freedom Calls network. Videoconferencing enables Robert and Maida, who are deaf, a face to face opportunity to use American Sign Language to communicate with their son.

The foundation has built satellite based networks for soldiers stationed in Iraq and Afghanistan to communicate with families in the United States at no cost to either party.

Aug. 23 was the first time Marinaro had spent a birthday away from his family and he hopes it's the last.

As a belated birthday celebration his family blew out candles on a cake in front of the computer screen and signed/sang "Happy Birthday."

His virtual birthday party was a memorable one, the 23-year-old soldier said.

During his down time, Marinaro keeps in contact with his two sisters by phone and e-mails, and sometimes listened to noises his parents made over the phone, but it was not the same for either him or his parents.

"Derek and I are kind of tired of using other people to communicate on the phone, but thanks to this video conference, we have the golden opportunity to communicate directly," said Maida Marinaro.

The video conference was long anticipated and his parents and family made up a list of questions.

As soon as the computer received a signal and they saw Cpl. Marinaro's image on the screen, the room filled with family members. Space around the computer was tight and family members had to switch seats so each had a chance to speak with him.

"How's the food?" they asked. "How do you sleep?"

"I try to sleep as much as I can," he said. "I figure if I sleep eight to 10 hours I'm only here half the time," Derek said.

"How's the weather?"

"It's very hot," he answered.

"Do you hear bombs?"

"Yes, I hear bombs," he responded. "It's not like we hear bombs every day."

"Derek, you look good in your uniform," said sister Tamara Marinaro, who is also with the Pennsylvania Army National Guard stationed in Fort Dix, N.J. "Look at those ranks."

"I'm trying to catch up to you," he said smiling. "I'm ready to turn in my uniform for civilian clothes."

"If you have faith," said Ruben Matos, his grandfather, "pray every night."

"I do," Derek said.

"Do you still have the ring?" asked his father.

"Yes, I put it on my left pocket next to my heart," his son said.

The ring was Robert Marinaro's baby ring, which he gave to Derek before he shipped out.

"Do you get to watch TV?"

"At chow time," he said. "We watch CNN all the time."

The New York Yankees are Marinaro's favorite baseball team but he declined an update on the status of their pennant race.

"I'm not worried," he said. "The Yankees are a good team. I'm worried about getting all my troops home."

"What has surprised you the most?" Tamara wanted to know.

"I expected it to be like Vietnam, like you see in the movies or hear about," he said. "But bullets are not flying around."

"That's a good thing," his family responded. "You're safe."

Forty minutes pass and slowly the family moves to the dining table, leaving Robert and Maida Marinaro alone with their son for a private conference.

Maida closes the door.

"Derek is an amazing guy, who we are very proud to call son," she says.