

Post-Tribune

Freedom calls

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By Jim Stinson / Post-Tribune staff writer

BURNS HARBOR

Thomas Shumpert Sr. was working in his Mittal furnace area one day when he saw a bulletin board with an interesting request.

A few weeks later, on Wednesday, he and his family were videoconferencing live with Senior Master Sgt. Thomas Shumpert Jr. in Iraq, where the U.S. Air Force soldier is serving.

Shumpert, a soldier for 19 years, is a Gary native, West Side High School graduate and Hawaii resident.

His family hasn't seen him for about two years, certainly not since he arrived in Iraq for duty three months ago.

When the extended family gathered in a United Steelworkers union meeting room with high-tech equipment, Internet and a large flat-screen television, they focused. The family said when Shumpert appeared on the large television screen, it was as if he had really walked into the room.

And that had a very real effect, even though the live meeting was held through cables and satellites.

"We started crying," said Gracie Shumpert, his mother. "And he did, too."

The meeting was one of five held Wednesday at the Mittal United Steelworkers Learning Center in Burns Harbor. USW Local 6787 teamed up with New York-based Freedom Calls Foundation, a not-for-profit organization that helps arrange the videoconferences.

The soldiers reached are all serving in central Iraq.

Freedom Calls Foundation started up after New York businessman John Harlow heard of a \$10,000 phone bill that one overseas soldier was disputing. Harlow

and several others helped form the charity, which came up with high-tech solutions and facilities for overseas soldiers seeking family contact.

“We do more than 1 million minutes of phone calls per month,” said Harlow. “For every family that we help, I have to turn down three because we don’t have the resources to reach the other camps in Iraq and Afghanistan.”

The foundation spends about \$1 million a year, and is seeking to expand its donor base, budget and station locations, Harlow said. The foundation does about 1,000 videoconferences a month.

The foundation is the only private entity to have the Pentagon authority to provide such teleconferences, Harlow said.

Harlow said the foundation has helped soldiers see family meetings, graduations and many “new baby conferences,” including a birth in which one soldier helped comfort his wife through the process.

The Shumperts and the extended family talked weather and baseball.

Shumpert and his father are Cubs fans. His brother, Kenneth Alford, is a White Sox fan. Alford is also a veteran of the U.S. Marine Corps.

“So we have some issues,” said Alford, smiling.

Shumpert, 38, is serving in the Air Force’s 15th Civil Engineer Squadron, and may be home in Hawaii soon, relatives said.

After the Shumperts, the Steelworkers brought in the Rios family of Highland.

They came to see Gisele Rios, 23, a Highland High School graduate and a dental hygienist for the Army National Guard’s 738th Medical Company, based in Monticello.

Gisele got to wish her grandfather, Roberto Rodriguez, birthday greetings. He turns 84 today.

As she said happy birthday live from Iraq, her grandparents wiped tears from their eyes.

“We are very grateful to Mittal,” said Rios’ father, Jesus Rios of Highland. “This is something we are never going to forget.”

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