

## Latest in Hi Tech

### Video hookups allow loved ones to greet troops serving overseas

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By **JOE VARGO** and **DOUGLAS QUAN** / The Press-Enterprise

Marine wife Michele Beamer's message to her husband Tuesday reflected the same passions and concerns of military wives since troops first went off to war.

I love you. The kids miss you. Be careful. Hurry home.

But the Murrieta woman's method of transmission came straight from the Internet age. Flanked by her three youngest children, Beamer sat in front of a television camera linked to a satellite in a Riverside office. A television screen projected an image of Marine Gunnery Sgt. Wade Beamer Jr., stationed at chilly, dust-swept Camp Fallujah.



"I didn't sleep last night," Michele Beamer, 39, told her husband. "I just want to see you, that's all."

Sgt. Beamer, 35, who won't return home for another 341 days, told his family he's working long hours and taking his mission day by day. He asked his daughter, Chelsea, 12, if she could send him a batch of her chocolate-chip cookies.

Soldiers, sailors, Marines and airmen are sending and receiving digital pictures, videograms, e-mails and Internet blogs to keep in touch with loved ones stateside.

The ability to see and hear from loved ones serving overseas helps relieve separation anxiety, said John Harlow, founder and executive director of the Freedom Calls Foundation, a nonprofit group that sets up video conferencing services for military families.



**Enjoying seeing and hearing Gunnery Sgt. Wade Beamer Jr. are his wife, Michele Beamer, of Murrieta, and family members, from left, Matthew Botelho, 13; Wade Carl Beamer, 11; and Chelsea Beamer, 12. They were at a videoconferencing center in Riverside.**

"Seeing is relieving," Harlow said by phone. "You see the body language. He's telling jokes. He's tanned and he's fit. Not everyone is hunkered down in a foxhole. Most of these guys are living in secured environments. ... But that doesn't come across in the news."

Eighteen families from Los Angeles to San Diego exchanged Valentine's Day greetings Tuesday courtesy of Raincross Conference Suites, a law office that turned its video-deposition equipment into an international message center.

"I can't keep my emotions in check," said Maria Marin, 34, of Murrieta, who sent greetings to her husband,

Marine Master Sgt. Mario Marin. "There are no words to describe the feeling of being able to see him while I talk to him. Thank God for technology."

But some experts say instant communication also can be a source of tension because neither spouse nor combatant wants to burden the other with problems that may be occurring at home or the battlefield.

And when family members share domestic problems -- a child isn't doing well in school, for instance --that can leave military personnel feeling helpless.

### **High-Tech Hookups**

Until the early-1990s, Americans fighting overseas relied on the same communication method used by troops since the American Revolution.

They wrote letters home, making sure to number each correspondence so loved ones would know to read them in order. Some went for letters going to faraway postings. Often weeks passed before delivery.

About 1991, sailors began using a network of military ham radio operators, but it often took days to transmit and deliver messages.

Later satellite telephones became available, but those calls cost \$6 to \$9 per minute. Early versions of e-mail allowed only a single account for an entire ship. By the late 1990s, most military personnel had individual e-mail accounts, even those on ships.

But some Marines who spearheaded the drive into Baghdad at the start of the Iraq war moved so fast they were out of touch for weeks.

### **Christmas Greetings**

Navy Cmdr. Matt Berta, of Murrieta, said he took advantage of high-tech communication to watch his son, Christopher, unwrap his Christmas bicycle in 2003.



Berta watched from the Pacific Ocean island of Diego Garcia, where he was stationed during Operation Iraqi Freedom.

Berta, 38, told Christopher that Santa Claus swung by Diego Garcia while making his rounds and picked up the bike to deliver to him.

"It's a comforting feeling," said Berta, who commands the Naval and Marine Corps Reserve Center in Moreno Valley and did not take part in Tuesday's videoconferences. "It makes you feel connected."

Berta said he saw his daughter, Amy, takes some of her first steps through the magic of videophoning.

He took advantage of better and cheaper telephone communications to call his wife, Jen, and kids every day.

"I could say, 'Honey I'm home' even though my home was half a world away," he said.



Brenda Moreno, 35, said her husband took advantage of e-mail and the Internet to become a sort-of war correspondent to the student body at Temecula Valley Charter School.

During his 16 months in Iraq, Marine Staff Sgt. Kevin Moreno e-mailed photographs and updates to the students, who included his three sons, Gregory, 14, Alex, 13, and Spencer, 10.

Many photos came from Fallujah. Marines on patrol. Kevin Moreno and his buddies tossing Skittles to Iraqi kids in the street. Close-ups of Iraqi sand spiders, big as a boot. Photos from Saddam's palace.

E-mails became critical when Brenda Moreno needed her gall bladder removed.

She couldn't talk to her husband for several days but stayed in touch with a local friend who was able to e-mail Kevin Moreno and let him know his wife's surgery was successful.

"It was certainly beneficial for me and the children," Brenda Moreno said. "There were times when the news was bad and we'd hear about the casualties. Then it was very comforting to get an e-mail from him letting everyone know he was all right."

## Challenges

While most families probably embrace having more access than less, there is the dilemma of figuring out "whether or not to share the challenges and worries of daily life with one another," said Shelley MacDermid, professor of family studies and co-director of the Military Family Research Institute at Purdue University.

"I guess I would advise both members and spouses to talk about whether it would work to share information with each other after the fact, as an update, not a request for help," MacDermid said.

Constance Ahrons, a USC emeritus professor of sociology, said she fears that video technology that allows young children to see their parents can be too traumatic, especially children younger than 8 or 9.

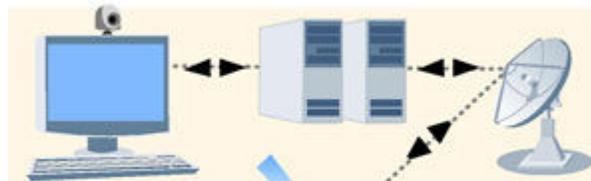
They already miss their parents. To see them on the screen might cause them to miss them even more, she said. "(The parent is) there, but they're not really there," Ahrons said.

**HIGH-TECH HOOKUPS:** Freedom Calls Foundation uses video conferencing to help families stay in touch with loved ones serving overseas.

### FAMILIES AT HOME:

Home computer with a camera is used to connect family members online with troops in Iraq.

U.S. Data Center in Atlanta facilitates communications between the U.S. and Iraq.

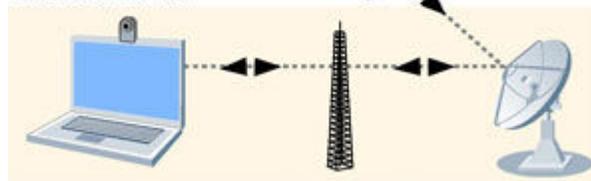


Live communications are sent by satellite.

### TROOPS OVERSEAS:

Laptops with cameras are used at three military camps in Iraq for video conferencing.

Microwave radio towers receive and transmit the signals in Iraq.



SOURCE: FREEDOM CALLS FOUNDATION

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