

Event to link troops, Maine families

Trevor Maxwell staff writer *Portland Press Herald / Maine Sunday Telegram*
November 16, 2006

A giant video screen will connect troops in Iraq with their families in Maine on Thanksgiving night while an expected crowd of several thousand watches at the Maine Mall in South Portland.

The event is one of the activities planned for Nov. 23, leading up to the mall's opening at 1 a.m. on that Friday after Thanksgiving. Absent technical problems, it will be the largest video conference held in Maine since the Iraq war started in 2003.

Families will gather in a reserved section of the mall parking lot, near a 16-foot screen, said Tim Frechette of Biddeford, who is coordinating the conference with assistance from the **Freedom Calls** Foundation. About 50 troops from Maine are expected to join the video conference from Camp Victory in Baghdad.

"They will be able to talk back and forth," Frechette said. "This is an opportunity to do something for the hometown folks who are going through a tough time at the holidays."

New equipment is being installed this week at the mall, Frechette said, and live video and audio tests to Iraq could happen in the next few days. All of this has come together in a tight time frame. Last year, Frechette, who owns a multimedia company, videotaped the Thanksgiving night celebration at the mall. An estimated 20,000 people showed up for the outdoor party and 1 a.m. opening. Frechette, who served in the Coast Guard, proposed a new element this year to honor the troops. He contacted representatives at the Pentagon Channel, who steered him toward the **Freedom Calls** Foundation.

The nonprofit foundation, based in New York City, has installed communications facilities at four military bases in Iraq. They provide video conferencing, Internet telephone, traditional e-mail and telephone service for about 2,000 troops daily. Plans are in the works for several more facilities in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as permanent public facilities in the United States.

Through conferencing, troops have interacted at graduations, weddings and the births of children. Some have even been married via teleconference. One Marine on Wednesday sat in on the in-vitro fertilization of his wife, said John Harlow, co-founder and executive director of **Freedom Calls**.

"Being able to see and spend time virtually with your family, that has profound implications for morale in wartime," Harlow said. "Every day I get e-mails saying, 'Thank you so much for what you have done.'"

The Thanksgiving night event in South Portland will be a promotional platform for the **Freedom Calls** network. Harlow hopes to work with businesses and colleges in Maine and other states to give families greater access to video conferencing. There is also a push to set up more families on their home computers.

On the military side, Frechette got help from Sgt. Rick Campbell of the Maine Army National Guard. Campbell lined up about 50 National Guard troops to participate, and he hopes to bring in troops from other military branches. The video conference could start around 10:30 p.m. - 6:30 a.m. in Baghdad - and organizers hope it will last an hour.

The Maine Mall parking lot is expected to be packed early on Thanksgiving night. Festivities will begin at 8 p.m., with entertainment ranging from three musical acts to a rock climbing wall. There also will be prize giveaways to military families, including trips, home heating oil and limo rides, said Maine Mall spokeswoman Ellyne Fleshner.

Mall owner General Growth Properties, the **Freedom Calls** Foundation, various corporate sponsors and Frechette's company will help pay the costs of the overall event, which were not disclosed.

Frechette is not concerned that some people might be offended by the combination of a shopping promotion with a celebration of U.S. troops.

"We thought, we're going to have a big crowd there, and it would be good for the troops," Frechette said. "It's a matter of supporting the troops." Staff Writer Trevor Maxwell can be contacted at 791-6451 or at: tmaxwell@pressherald.com