

Rocky Mountain News

Foundation links soldiers with families

By Jim Sheeler, Rocky Mountain News
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Beamed from a satellite dish near the heart of the Sunni Triangle, the image of Maj. Rich Durost appeared on a laptop computer Tuesday in a Denver hotel room, and he recalled the scenes that he says can temporarily transform a war zone into a family room.

"I've seen a wide range of emotions here. Lots of laughter, smiles, tears - many of them tears of joy," said Durost, the administrator for the Freedom Calls Foundation, which hooks up soldiers in Iraq with family members back home through telephones, e-mails and videoconferencing.

"When they get to see their kids graduate from high school, wedding, and when dads get to see their new babies after they've been born, it's just an incredible experience," he said during a demonstration of the service. "I remember this one kid came into the room, stared at the big screen TV for a moment, then went to the front of the room saying, 'That's my baby! That's my baby! There she is!'"

Since starting a communications center at Camp Cooke in Iraq, the group (www.freedomcalls.org) has facilitated hundreds of reunions via video screen - including at least one wedding, for a female soldier and her fiance back home.

"She showed up in her armored limo, a Humvee, and we had it all set up on a big screen," Durost said. "When she first walked in, the first thing she saw was her fiance on the screen. She started crying, and then so did we.

"We did a graduation ceremony that same night."