

Sharing smiles across the miles

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LA JOLLA – For military families with loved ones stationed in Iraq, the ache of wartime separation is acute during the holidays. Yesterday, a dozen local families got a welcome dose of pain reliever.

One by one, they were ushered into a room at the Supercomputer Center at the University of California San Diego for 30 minutes of videoconferencing face time. Linked across the miles by cameras and satellites, they could see and hear each other, reconnecting in a way not possible with phone calls or e-mail.

“It was wonderful,” Melissa Mediate said, her eyes still brimming, as she emerged from her session with husband Al, a Marine gunnery sergeant. “He did all his silly stuff. We laughed. There's nothing like seeing your husband smile.”

Or your dad. Lisa Butterfield came to talk to her husband, Jason, and brought along their three girls: Libby, 4; Emma, 2; and Andee, 10 months. All three wore matching red Christmas dresses. It was Jason's first chance to see Andee crawl and hear Emma talk.

“It's incredible to be able to see him, especially during the holidays,” Butterfield said. “It's good for morale – his and ours.”

The Supercomputer Center, in partnership with the Freedom Calls Foundation, has been hosting videoconferencing sessions since early last year. They're held on Saturdays, about twice a month, and rotated among various local military units.

Yesterday's linkup involved service members who work in an air traffic control squadron based at Miramar Marine Corps Air Station. They were deployed to the Al Asad air base in northern Iraq in August.

Family members were assigned a time to show up at UCSD, and many arrived early, milling about a lobby decorated with an artificial Christmas tree. There were wives, teens, babies – even, in one case, the family dog.

A problem with a satellite delayed things, but nobody complained. You can't be affiliated with the military and not be accustomed to waiting.



JOHN GIBBINS / Union-Tribune
Marine Master Sgt. Ken Reynolds, serving in Iraq, spoke to his family (from left) – daughter Kelsea, wife Teresa and son Tyler – via satellite videoconference yesterday at the Supercomputer Center at the University of California San Diego.

Annie Halverson was one of the first into the room, at about 9:30 a.m. She sat at a table, in front of a microphone, facing a camera and a 50-inch plasma screen, both mounted on the wall.

Her husband, Matt, came on the screen from the air base and put on a headset. It was about 7:30 p.m. there, salsa night at the rec hall. Pretty soon both were grinning. Champagne has fewer bubbles.

"I loved it," Halverson said later. "Just to be able to sit and talk to him was so nice." They grew up in Oregon, met there and have been married about two years. Both are 25. This is his first deployment to Iraq.

She said they talk often on the phone, "everyday stuff," and use the videoconferences more for play. Matt leaned forward and kissed the camera at one point yesterday. "He likes to make me laugh," she said.

Thanksgiving last month was hard, Halverson said. She spent it with friends in Orange County, but driving home alone and seeing various families in their cars, together, made her sad. She plans to spend Christmas with her family in Oregon.

Mediate will be with her family, too, on the East Coast, "but that doesn't make it any easier," she said. This is her husband's third tour in Iraq.

She sent him a 4-foot, pre-lit, artificial tree, along with some ornaments, in an effort to stay connected during the holidays. She has another tree up in their Linda Vista home, and she said she'll keep it there until March, when Al's due back stateside.

"We'll have our Christmas together then," she said.



JOHN GIBBINS / Union-Tribune
Tyler Reynolds, Teresa Reynolds and Kelsea Reynolds were one of a dozen local families who took part in yesterday's videoconferencing session. Each family got 30 minutes.