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Dad in Iraq gets to enjoy son's Shoreline graduation

By Janet I. Tu
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The graduation ceremony at Snohomish County Christian School (SCCS) yesterday started much like any other high-school graduation. Seniors in caps and gowns marched solemnly to the stage; proud parents and friends cheered.

But it didn't take long for school administrator Debbie Schindler to announce: "We are making history tonight."

The ceremony was broadcast to a proud father in Iraq: Lt. Col. George Abbott, a battalion commander in the Washington National Guard's 81st Brigade Combat Team, which was deployed to Iraq earlier this spring.

His son, 17-year-old Mark Abbott, was graduating. And this ceremony was something "I didn't expect him to be able to see from Iraq," he said.

But thanks to the Freedom Calls Foundation, his father did. The charity aims to enable American troops in Iraq and Afghanistan to communicate for free with their loved ones at home, using such methods as Internet telephone and video conferencing.

The foundation received an e-mail from Lt. Col. Abbott's wife, asking if the foundation could arrange for her husband to view Mark's graduation ceremony via video conference. Some computer-network tinkering later, the Aurora Church of the Nazarene in Shoreline, where the graduation ceremony was held, was connected to the foundation's network. During the ceremony, Lt. Col. Abbott's face appeared live on a big screen in the church. He could see, hear and speak with those at the ceremony in Shoreline.

"This is pretty special," Abbott said from Iraq at the beginning of the ceremony.

John Harlow, the Brooklyn-based executive director of Freedom Calls Foundation, said he and co-founder Edward Bukstel were inspired to form the foundation after hearing about soldiers willing to spend thousands of dollars on monthly cellphone calls or satellite hook-ups in order to keep in touch with their families.

"The least the American people should do for these guys is to enable them to communicate with their families for free," he said.

So they started a foundation to solicit donations to make such communications possible.

Monday, the organization is scheduled to open a Freedom Calls facility at Camp Cooke, an Army post north of Baghdad that serves about 11,000 soldiers. The facility will include 50 computers, about 30 of which will have Internet telephone capability and six video-conferencing stations.

Working with the Army, the group hopes to expand to other U.S. camps around the country, Harlow said.

The foundation already has helped others stationed in Iraq communicate with their families. Last week, a military contractor in Iraq coached his wife in Columbus, Ohio, through a 12-hour delivery of their baby.

And last night, in addition to Mark Abbott's graduation, a soldier in Durango, Colo., was scheduled to marry his fiancée in Iraq in a Freedom Calls video conference, with intermediary help from a 4-foot plasma screen.

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