

Families reach out to deployed loved ones

Satellite link goes a step beyond laptops and eyeball cameras

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Gabriella Martinez, 8, of Tyler, Texas, sits in Shreveport and smiles while talking to her father, Lino Martinez, who is serving in Iraq, via video conference Friday afternoon. (Douglas Collier/The Times)

The young boy sang in a voice only a child can pull off, with words that came from his heart, in a way only a mama and a papa can love.

His father's grin flew through space from Iraq to Shreveport on Friday, thanks to the kindness of strangers, and love connected the two.

"Sounds like we need to put Will on the next 'American Idol,'" Navy Reserve Petty Officer Calvert "Billy" Cannon joked from Fallujah, his happy image just tantalizing feet away on a wide-screen TV.

"Dad, I lost my tooth," another young voice chimed in, and then there was a flood of family talk.

"Y'all fill up a room," Cannon had joked to his wife, Debbie Cannon, at the start of their half-hour international conference call from the AT&T offices on Dee Street near Shreve City.

He wasn't kidding. His wife, the six children they share and her parents had driven from Avery, Texas, for the day trip to talk to the husband, father and son-in-law they hope will come home safe this fall.

Cannon deployed in January with about 40 other members of the Navy Reserve Seabee unit NMCB-28, which has facilities on Barksdale Air Force Base's East Reservation. After training, they arrived in the war zone in March.

This week's calls were the result of coordination between the local Naval Reserve units, the New York-based Freedom Calls Foundation and the local AT&T Pioneers Caddo Council.

"Our intention is to schedule another of these in August," said Larry Ramsey, coordinator for AT&T Pioneers.

The first family to talk to a deployed loved one Friday was smaller, but barely so.

Peggy Martinez, about two weeks from delivering a baby she and her husband already have named Isabella, drove from Tyler, Texas. With her were her 8-year-old daughter, Gabriella, and her mother, Delma Avellaneda, to talk to her deployed husband, Lino Martinez, a Navy Reserve storekeeper also in Fallujah.

"I had another ultrasound yesterday," Peggy Martinez told her husband half a world away. He beamed back a smile a mile wide. "She's 5 pounds and 9 ounces right now."

"Oh, she's big!" he said. Then, not to leave their other child out, a big "Hi, Gabby!"

For all the satellite hookups and computers and fiber optics linking Shreveport to New York to space and then to Iraq, the talk was down to earth.

"Did you have a big day today?" she asked.

"I had a big day today, but it's OK."

Silence. Unspoken were the words that a big day in Fallujah can mean a lot more than a big day in Shreveport or Avery or Tyler.

Then, words to reassure:

"I'll be home in a little while," Lino Martinez told his wife and mother-in-law. "Barbecuing and sitting back."

Michelle Head, whose husband, Michael, is deployed, and Alaina Smith, whose husband, John, also is deployed, were on hand Friday to lend moral support.

Smith got to talk with her husband Wednesday, with her son, Mitchell Houghton, and her parents.

In a war full of laptops and eyeball-type video cameras and cell phones that take pictures and videos, there's still a place for video links of Friday's sort, Smith said.

"My husband doesn't have access to computer hookups, so we only get to talk on the telephone," she said. So her 30-minute talk Wednesday, she said, "was awesome."

Making it even more than that was a professional VHS recording of the call, splitting from her talk and images to his talk and images, thousands of miles apart. All the families got such videos.

The families will have some good souvenirs of the event. In addition to permanent newspaper coverage, several local TV stations were present, as well as a national crew from Fox News.

"Throughout history, tours of duty in wartime have served to separate families," said John Harlow, executive director of Freedom Calls Foundation, who was interviewed from New York by the Fox News crew here. Now, thanks to modern communications capabilities, he said, "we foresee a time when all warfighters can virtually come home to their families on a daily basis after a hard day on the battlefield."

Senior Chief Petty Officer Harry Beatty, the Navy Reserve unit's top enlisted member, helped coordinate the three days of chats.

In all, 11 families took part, with more than 50 family members and friends involved on this end.

"I think we got a good majority of the families," Beatty said. "I'm just glad we got the opportunity to do this."

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Freedom Calls Foundation: www.freedomcalls.org

AT&T Pioneers: www.bellsouthlapioneers.org/Caddo.htm