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ARMY PHOTO

Schofield Barracks Army Spc. Joshua Strickland, who has been deployed to Iraq since January, waved to his daughter Shelby via an Internet videoconferencing call earlier this month.

Phoning home

**A charity videoconferencing effort
reunites families with troops sent abroad**

By Gregg K. Kakesako
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Dorothy Strickland wanted her husband, Schofield Barracks Army Spc. Joshua Strickland, to celebrate their daughter Shelby's first birthday even though he was in a war zone continents away in Iraq.

She turned to the Freedom Calls Foundation, a charity building a communications network dedicated to providing free Internet telephone service, videoconferencing, e-mail and Internet access for troops in Iraq and Afghanistan.

"I saw a news article on a couple exchanging wedding vows from Camp Cooke during a videoconference call," Dorothy Strickland recently told the Star-Bulletin.

Camp Cooke, north of Baghdad in the Sunni Triangle, is where her husband, Joshua, 25, has been deployed as a member of Delta Company, 1st Battalion, 25th Aviation, since January.

Just before Shelby's birthday on July 14, she sent an e-mail to John Harlow, executive director of Freedom Calls Foundation, to see if she was eligible.

Harlow called her back and her brother, Richard Oelkers, made the necessary computer connections at her father's home in Valdosta, Ga., where she had moved.

"We even went out and bought a new Web camera to make sure everything was new," she said.

Harlow said his New York-based company will provide the necessary software. The user has to have a computer, Web camera, microphone and a broadband Internet connection.

Harlow said Strickland didn't know what was going to happen when he was escorted to the Freedom Calls Foundation facility at Camp Cooke by his commanding officer about 11 p.m. on July 14.

In Georgia, 16 members of the Strickland family had gathered to celebrate daughter Shelby's first birthday.

"We sang 'Happy Birthday,' Dorothy Strickland said, "and then Joshua got to sing 'Happy Birthday' by himself to Shelby."

It was the first time Joshua saw his daughter since he left for the Middle East in January with other members of the 25th Infantry Division's 2nd Brigade.

"It was great. It was better than a phone call," Dorothy Strickland said. "It was just like he was sitting across the table at dinner ... It was an amazing experience. I never dreamed in a million years this could have happened."

In Iraq, Joshua Strickland got see his daughter blow out the candles, with a lot of help from her mother, on a 40-inch monitor. He saw Shelby walk for the first time and call him "dada."

The videoconference lasted nearly 90 minutes and was monitored by "Inside Edition," which planned to air part of the long-distance visit. Dorothy Strickland said she was married four days before her husband left for basic training, and Shelby was born at Tripler Army Medical Center on July 14, 2003.

Harlow said 25 other soldiers from Hawaii at Camp Cooke were able to videoconference with nearly 100 of their family members for about an hour over a six-hour period that same day.

"The Hawaii Freedom Calls came about as a result of an e-mail message from a base north of Baghdad indicating that soldiers from the 40th Quartermaster Company from Hawaii wanted to videoconference with their families via the Freedom Calls Network," Harlow said.

Brian Dougherty at Schofield Barracks determined that the equipment was in place and made sure the satellite communications to Iraq was completed quickly, added Edward Bukstel, co-founder of the Freedom Calls Foundation.

Harlow said Camp Cooke facility is the first of its kind in Iraq that offers service members free videoconferencing so they can stay in touch with their families. The free videoconferencing is made possible through private donations to the Freedom Calls Foundation. Plans call for three additional facilities in Iraq and two in Afghanistan, and possibly five more facilities after that depending on donations, Harlow added.

Dorothy Strickland added: "I am going to make a donation as soon as possible. This is much better than talking on the phone, which we don't do because it is too expensive."

Harlow said the foundation plans to install videoconferencing facilities at Army posts on the mainland for families who don't have a broadband Internet connection at home, and at military hospitals so troops can interact with their newborn children and new moms hours after birth.

Ed Bukstel, director of operations for the Freedom Calls Foundation, said the facility isn't just for major family events. He said deployed troops and their families can use the technology to talk about the little things in life, such as a child's camp experience that day, that often go unshared during a parent's deployment.

Last month, Maj. Gen. Antonio Taguba, deputy commanding general of Coalition Forces Land Component Command in Camp Doha in Kuwait, sent the foundation a letter of appreciation for providing free communication service.

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Freedom Calls Foundation
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