



Connecting to loved ones from the middle of war

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A U.S. Marine in Iraq meets his newborn daughter just after her birth at Saint Barnabas Hospital in Livingston. A National Guardsman in Iraq says goodbye to his dying sister in Kansas.

Through videoconferencing sites set up by the Morristown-based Freedom Calls Foundation, thousands of military personnel have been able to see their loved ones and participate in important family moments.

Yesterday, Morris County Sheriff Ed Rochford sought to bring some attention to the national organization. With more than 3,000 New Jersey National Guardsman being deployed this month to Iraq -- including nine county sheriff's officers -- Rochford put out a plea for sponsors during a press conference at the Frelinghuysen Arboretum in Morris Township.

Despite being based in Morristown, "we don't have one corporate sponsor supporting Freedom Calls Foundation from Morris County," Rochford said. The group already has satellite links to five camps in Iraq, but needs funding to expand to more camps.

The group's executive director and founder, John Harlow, approached the U.S. Army in April 2003 about starting the service. Operations started the following year. The idea, he said, was to provide an free alternative to the contractors that charge families for keeping in touch with their loved ones. "They're young families, and they don't make a lot of money for defending this country," he said yesterday.

Freedom Calls gets no military or government funding and is supported through individual and corporate donations. Harlow said the organization saves military families about \$4 million a year in phone bills.

Harlow, a former Wall Street attorney and venture capitalist, said he started the group after hearing about a National Guard soldier who was fighting with the phone company over a \$7,000 phone bill. Originally, the organization was just going to provide phone lines, but then he learned about the videoconferencing software as well.

Now, Freedom Calls Foundation hosts about 2,000 videoconferences every month from all kinds of places. They've beamed over live ice hockey games and regularly do NASCAR events, where soldiers' favorite drivers talk to them over just minutes before the race, Harlow said. Just this month, they have set up more than 40 videoconferences of graduation ceremonies -- in one instance, the soldier even led the Pledge of Allegiance.

The organization has 10,000 public sites all around the world, where family members can go to speak with their loved ones overseas. But they also bring equipment to individual family houses for private talks.

"We've got people three times a month talking to families over their kitchen tables," said Harlow. It's an experience that sheriff's Sgt. Moire Reilly is holding out hope for. Her husband -- sheriff's officer Tom Reilly -- is being deployed to Iraq with the New Jersey National Guard later this month. Yesterday, as Harlow spoke, she held her 13-month-old daughter Danika and her eyes filled with tears.

"It was emotional," she said later. "Reality is settling in."

She's not sure where exactly her husband will be, but she is hopeful a Freedom Calls site would be nearby. "That would be wonderful," she said. "Not only for me to be able to see him, but for Danika to be able to see him."

Tom Reilly stood with two fellow sheriff's officers, Paul Segro and Gregory Lukaszyk, who are also on their way to Iraq later this month. His daughter, he said, is "13 months old, and I'm going to be gone for 12 to 13 months. Just to know I'll have the chance to see her even sometimes ... it's huge."

For more information on Freedom Calls Foundation, go to www.freedomcalls.org.

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