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Families stay connected with GIs in Iraq via free Web-based Services

By [Jessica Inigo](#), Stars and Stripes
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Courtesy of U.S. Army

Staff Sgt. Jacques Rodriguez, with Company A, 185th Corps Support Command, upper left, wipes a tear while talking to his family in California using new high-speed video teleconference equipment available at Camp Cooke, Iraq.



Courtesy of U.S. Army

Staff Sgt. Jacques Rodriguez, who is attached to the 1452nd Transportation Company out of North Carolina, watches students of the Class of 2004 from Southwest High School in El Centro, Calif., prepare for graduation. His son Joshua Christopher Rodriguez, 18, will follow a family tradition after commencement and join the Army to become a helicopter pilot.

TAJI, Iraq — When Rich Durost was a young officer deployed for the first time with Operation Desert Storm in 1991, contact with friends and family was limited to mail.

In four subsequent deployments, technology at the front lines slowly improved, giving him phone lines and rudimentary e-mail systems.

Now, the Army major deployed on his sixth mission, this time to a camp north of Baghdad in one of the toughest areas of the Sunni Triangle, is floored by the latest technology available to troops.

Free video teleconferencing (VTC), high-speed Internet systems with e-mail and Web-based phone lines are available to Camp Cooke troops to take them virtually anywhere.

The first facility using donated technology from a not-for-profit organization called the Freedom Calls Foundation will officially open Monday, but many troops have already used the technology to see events they would have otherwise missed.

So far people on camp have seen a live birth on a big screen TV, been married by proxy over VTC, and have seen numerous graduations, all thanks to the foundation and Durost, who has worked double time to get the center prepared for Monday.



Courtesy of U.S. Army

Staff Sgt. Jacques Rodriguez, with Company A, 185th Corps Support Command, upper left, talks to his family in California using new high-speed video teleconference equipment available at Camp Cooke, Iraq. Rodriguez's son, Joshua, graduated from Southwest High School on Friday night.



Courtesy of U.S. Army

Staff Sgt. Jacques Rodriguez, with Company A, 185th Corps Support Command, upper left, watches as his son, Joshua, receives his diploma during his graduation ceremony in California. Rodriguez was using new high-speed video teleconference equipment available at Camp Cooke, Iraq.



Courtesy of U.S. Army

Staff Sgt. Jacques Rodriguez, with Company A, 185th Corps Support Command, upper left, smiles as his family poses for a photograph at his son's graduation ceremony in California. Rodriguez was able to watch the graduation using new high-speed video teleconference equipment available at Camp Cooke, Iraq.

Durost, as the system administrator, set up the first facility on his own time after his regular workday as a signal officer for the 593rd Corps Support Group out of Fort Lewis, Wash. He would work into the wee hours of the morning getting a building prepared, installing equipment, and scrounging for furniture and air conditioning units.

The only real snag he ran into was a break-in at the facility in July, when 15 laptops were stolen. All the laptops and equipment are donated to the foundation and given to camps for free.

After welding a door closed that linked the facility to another shop on the camp, Durost finally has things ready to go for Monday's grand opening. The payoff, he said, is seeing troop morale spike to an all-time high.

Camp residents will be allowed 30 minutes of facility use on a sign-up basis. There will be another roster for special events that require VTC set-up, such as graduation ceremonies.

Typically, for these special events, Durost calls the foundation, which gets cameras and other technology out to the event. Then, there is a dry run to ensure everything is working. Afterward, troops sit in front of a monitor and feel as close to home as possible.

Staff Sgt. Jacques Rodriguez, with Company A, 185th Corps Support Command, got to watch his son graduate from high school in El Centro, Calif., on special request Friday.

The National Guard troop who usually works as a highway patrolman in California laughed at the monitor as he saw old friends pass and the Class of 2004 walk across the field of Southwest High School. His son, Joshua, 18, is following a family tradition and is joining the Army to become a helicopter pilot. He leaves for basic training in July.

“This is phenomenal. You know I’m proud of him. This is going to be the only time I can see him, because he’s not going to be home, he’ll be in the Army, by the time I get back,” Rodriguez said.

The facility at Camp Cooke will serve up to 12,000 troops from 8 a.m. to midnight, but it will eventually become a 24-hour facility when there is more manning capabilities, Durost said.

The facility, once the stolen laptops are replenished, will operate with 50 computers; six of them dedicated video conferencing stations and 30 with voice over Internet protocol telephone capability. VOIP allows phone calls to travel over the Internet to telephones in the United States with extreme clarity and hardly any delay.

Another eight facilities are expected to be up and running in Iraq within the next 60 to 90 days, along with two more in Afghanistan.

For more information on Freedom Calls or to request installation at a specific camp go to www.freedomcalls.org.