

Reaching across the sea

By CHRIS VAUGHN
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FORT WORTH -- Sgt. Clifford Harris had just spent an hour with his wife and children Friday morning when he told them he needed to go.

"Group hug," he said, holding out his arms.

His wife, Michele; son, Dreon, 7; and stepdaughter, Ranesia, 14, all held out their arms.

None of them touched, though. It was a hug transmitted via satellite, watched over a television in an AT&T building in far north Fort Worth and heard with a three-second delay.

Harris, deployed in Iraq with the 1st Cavalry Division for eight months, then picked up his helmet, grabbed his rifle just visible in the corner and waved goodbye.

The Harrises have learned that phone calls are good. E-mails are too. Packages are better still. But sometimes, they want more.

These video-teleconferences, arranged by the nonprofit Freedom Calls Foundation, try to fill that soldier-to-family communications gap, to create as close to a face-to-face as 7,200 miles and nine time zones will allow.

"Guess what tomorrow is?" Michele Harris asked the television.

"The best day of my life," her husband answered.

"Thank you, baby."



The Harries in Fort Worth give dad in Iraq a group hug via video conference over the Freedom Calls satellite network.



The Harris family discusses family business with dad 7,200 miles away on the frontlines in Iraq.

"Happy early anniversary."

That day is today-- anniversary No. 7, the one in which they are supposed to give the gift of wool.

Instead, Clifford Harris, 30, will be loading ordnance on Apache helicopters in Taji, north of Baghdad; Michele Harris, 39, will be drilling with the 136th Airlift Wing of the Texas Air National Guard.

They might have gone to dinner, maybe a movie. But there's no time for thinking much of mights and maybes.

Sgt. Harris has a long way to go to finish his deployment. Originally scheduled to come home in September, he'll likely have to stay until December.

"Whatever we have to do," he said.

His wife isn't as diplomatic.

"It's been very chaotic, and they're working long hours," she said. "My husband is a pretty upbeat person, so he keeps a positive attitude. He's handling it better than me. It's a touchy subject. This is tough on families."

Sgt. Harris has been a soldier for less than two years. He wore a sailor's uniform for eight years, including a tour at Naval Air Station Fort Worth. That's where he and Michele met.

But he wants to become an officer or warrant officer, and the opportunities are in the Army. So he switched to green.

When he got assigned to 1st Battalion, 227th Aviation Regiment, a unit that everyone knew was about to deploy, his family stayed in Fort Worth.

Michele Harris has shouldered everything in the house for some time -- Ranesia's dance lessons, Dreon's tae kwon do, shuttling children to school (Ranesia attends Meadowbrook Middle School; Dreon goes to Luella Merrett Elementary), driving almost to Denton County for work at AT&T, reserve duty monthly.

She heard about Freedom Calls through fellow AT&T employees.

Much of their conversation revolved around the ordinariness of life, specifically the family's. He had little to say about Iraq, except that it had been a "rough day."

They talked of schoolwork and Ranesia's military ball next week, of rental car reimbursement and whether he's talked to his brother in the Air Force who was sent to the Middle East.

"I baked Mama a cake and bought her king crab legs" on Mother's Day, Dreon said.

"You got money like that?" his father answered, laughing.

A few minutes later, he asked the children to stand up so he could see how much they've grown.

These are the things that are the hardest about any deployment. "Watching your kids grow up without you," he said.

At one point during their conversation, Harris leaned toward the camera.

"Dreon?" he said.

"Yes?" his son said quietly.

"Help your mama out. Have fun, and don't worry about nothing."

Connecting families

The Freedom Calls Foundation, a New Jersey nonprofit started in 2003 by venture capitalist and lawyer John B. Harlow II, offers free video-teleconferences for troops and their families. The foundation has sites only in Fallujah, Taji and Al Asad, Iraq, but it plans to install more at other Iraqi locations, provided it can obtain the money.

Businesses and government agencies with VTC capabilities in the U.S. offer their facilities free to families. On Friday, it took place at an AT&T building. Freedom Calls pays for the satellite bill, which is tens of thousands of dollars per month.

Freedom Calls has shown births, graduations, even a high school football game in West Texas, to troops in Iraq.

Families in North Texas interested in setting up a VTC with a loved one in Iraq can ask Flo Kierig at 817-212-1178 or fk3964@att.com.

To donate to the Freedom Calls Foundation, look up www.freedomcalls.org or mail to 45 Park Place South, Suite 167, Morristown, NJ 07960.

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