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Video links unite troops, families

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Tanner Anderson will become a teenager Sunday and gets to hear his dad sing him "Happy Birthday" — from more than 6,400 miles away on a video monitor from Iraq.

It'll be the first time in seven months that 12-year-old Tanner will see his father, Sgt. 1st Class Darnell Anderson, who is stationed at Camp Taji about 20 miles north of Baghdad.

"He was kind of apprehensive at first because he didn't know what a videoconference was," said Tanner's mom, Crystal Anderson, 39, of Faribault. "My kids are terribly excited. They can't wait to see Dad."

The Andersons and thousands of others are a part of a growing trend of Americans using technology to connect with their loved ones in Iraq. The Andersons and 25 other families will be reunited with troops in Iraq through a special videoconference hookup Sunday at the Minnesota Twins game.

Before the advent of video links and other technologies, families would send letters and occasionally hear from troops on the phone.

Now, the "communication age" has greatly changed the way troops stay in touch with their families back home during wartime. Booths at festivals and other public events routinely let people contact family members serving overseas.

The troops can receive and send pictures, video clips and messages through e-mails. Those stationed at larger camps can call home via the Internet using voice over Internet protocol, or VoIP, and arrange videoconferencing with their families, sometimes once a week.

Staff Sgt. Don Dees, a military spokesman in Baghdad, said troops who stay in touch with loved ones tend to worry less about problems back home.

Many of the new technologies available for troops and their families came from the Freedom Calls Foundation, a nonprofit group in New York. The group aided the military in establishing e-mail, VoIP and videoconferencing for at least 40,000 troops in Camps Taji, Fallujah and Al Asad in Iraq, said co-founder John Harlow.

"It's changing in a very profound way the experience of being deployed overseas for a very long time," he said. "This is the most important thing to those people over there."

Each of the three camps has a communications center troops use to keep in touch with their families. The centers cost about \$300,000 to build and \$300,000 to \$400,000 annually to run, Harlow said. Donations pay for the centers.

Harlow created the charity after hearing about soldiers paying \$10,000 a year for cell phone bills and buying \$4,000 to \$5,000 satellite dishes in hopes of creating their own videoconferencing systems.

"It just didn't seem right," Harlow said. "We recognized the need."

The services are free for troops and families with broadband Internet. There are 1,000 sites nationwide where families can participate in videoconferencing, including universities, colleges, churches and city offices. In Minnesota, families can make appointments at the St. Paul Area Chamber of Commerce, 401 N. Robert St.

Freedom Calls also helps with special occasion videoconferencing. This weekend, the group is helping set up videoconferences Sunday at the Minnesota Twins game at the Metrodome in Minneapolis and Monday at the St. Paul Saints game at Midway Stadium in St. Paul where the Andersons and more than 25 other families will be talking to their loved ones in Iraq.

Minnesota families can also make free phone calls to troops at A Taste of Minnesota from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. today and Sunday, and 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. Monday at the T-Mobile booth. Families need to bring proof of state residence and a phone number where the service member can be reached.

Crystal Anderson believes her children's first try at videoconferencing with their father at the Army Rear Area Operations Center of the 151st Field Artillery will lift their spirits.

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