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Today, not so far away from home

By ABHI RAGHUNATHAN
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SEMINOLE - When Marine Lance Cpl. Brad Myers appeared live from Iraq on the large screen Saturday morning, his friends and family were eager to welcome him back. Even for just an hour.

A flock of relatives and buddies came to the Seminole campus of St. Petersburg College for a chance to see and talk to Myers through an Internet connection to his base at Camp Al Asad. Myers, 21, had been stationed in Iraq for three months - three very long months away from his mom Maria, 40, his dad Brad Sr., 43, and his little brother Richard, 12.

"How are you doing over there?" asked longtime friend Jeremy Miracle, 20.

"I'm doing great," Myers said. "I'm on vacation."

He paused and chuckled.

"Know what? You don't want to come here."

The college's University Partnership Center in Seminole has video teleconferencing technology that lets families see and speak with loved ones serving in Iraq. The technology to videoconference with soldiers is available in just two other Florida cities: Panama City and Jacksonville.

The college learned about the idea when an administrator heard a National Public Radio report about other calls made through the Freedom Calls Foundation, a not-for-profit based in New York. On Saturday morning, the Myers family became the first locally to talk to a soldier through the program. The college hopes to offer the service to many more families who have relatives abroad.

Myers watched his little brother Richard play a couple of clarinet solos, including *Twinkle Twinkle Little Star*. He watched his mom cry when she opened her Mother's Day present, a small ceramic angel.

His family listened to him talk about how much he missed all of them. They told him they'd have beers waiting for him when he got back. And his mom got to gently pester him to e-mail home more photographs from Iraq.

"Send them!" Maria ordered.

Myers laughed.

"I'm sitting here in Iraq and getting yelled at by my mom," he said.

The videoconference lasted just over an hour. Myers got a glimpse of home, while his family and friends learned about his life in Iraq.

Start with the weather: all heat, sandstorms and hailstorms, Myers said.

"How do you get hail in 105-degree weather?" he asked.

They laughed.

"You guys don't know how much I miss you," he said. "It's you guys who are getting me through this."

His family told him they couldn't be prouder. They called him a hero and said they couldn't wait for him to come home from Iraq this summer.

"It's crazy out here," Myers said.

"I know, honey, and that's why we give you all the love and support we do," his mom Maria said.

The tears and laughter and good-natured ribbing finally wound down after 11 a.m. It was night in Iraq, and the videoconference was ending.

"Don't worry about me," he told the gang in Seminole. "Stay strong. I love you guys."

His friends and family yelled back: "We love you!"

Myers smiled, picked up his rifle and walked off the screen.

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