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Uniting families when duty calls

Military families connect with loved ones overseas through a program by the Freedom Calls Foundation.

By TERRI BRYCE REEVES
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LARGO - They brought their tissues just in case.

But instead of a tearful reunion, the Gerlach family exchanged smiles, laughter and even a few barbs.

On Monday at 8 a.m. - that's 4 p.m. in Al Asad, Iraq - Pam and Barry Gerlach, and daughter Valerie, were reunited via videoconference with their son and brother, Marine Lance Cpl. Nathan Gerlach. The hourlong video phone call took place between St. Petersburg College's EpiCenter and Gerlach's base in Al Asad.



[Times photo: Carrie Pratt]

Carl Kallassy, the supervisor of television operation for St. Petersburg College, walks past two screens in a videoconference room at the school's EpiCenter in largo on monday. On the left, Nathan Gerlach, 25, talks with his family, shown in the screen to the right. Pictured are, from left, Gerlach's mother, Pam, sister, Valerie, and father, Barry. Nathan is in Al Asad, Iraq.

"Are there any wild animals over there?" asked Valerie, 22.

"No, 'cause you're not here," teased Nathan, 25.

They chatted about his soldier's haircut - it was shorter.

His teeth - they were whiter.

His camouflage uniform - it looked a bit loose.

It was small talk, but it went a long way toward reassuring the family that their loved one was healthy and safe - at least for now.

"Do they have good food in the mess hall?" asked his mother.

"Depends on who's cooking," he said.

"So what does a camel taste like?" joked his father.

The last time the family had seen Gerlach was in February. This is his second tour of Iraq; the first time, he was there for seven months.

The 1999 Countryside High graduate and former St. Petersburg College student enlisted for four years and should be home for good in January. He plans to pursue a career in law enforcement.

Gerlach was interested to know how some of his favorite sports teams were doing, and whether his family had seen the new Camaro.

He said the temperature was 123 degrees in Al Asad on Sunday. But now that he is stationed at a base instead of a makeshift camp on the Syrian border, he has air conditioning and cold Cokes.

"It's paradise," he said.

The free calls were made possible by the Freedom Calls Foundation, a nonprofit organization that built the satellite network to connect military families.

St. Petersburg College is one of three partners in Florida. This is the fourth military videoconference arranged by the college, said Lars Hafner, an associate vice president at the college.

As Gerlach was seated in front of the camera with his gun in the background, his family heard the sounds of airplanes, possibly helicopters. It was a grim reminder of the dangers faced every minute by their son.

"I'm just glad it's almost over," said his dad, referring to his tour of duty.

"You and me both," Gerlach said.

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WANT TO TRY?

Videoconferencing application forms and information are available online at www.spcollege.edu or by calling 727 394-6200.