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Net, satellite camera link families with GIs in Iraq

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Four-year-old Christian Hage reached out and touched his father's face. Later, he tried to give his dad a hug and said, "I love you, daddy."

His father stared back and replied, "I love you, too."

While the conversation brought tears to family members' eyes Saturday, it actually took place not in person, but on a laptop computer.

Army Reserve Capt. David Hage is on duty in Baghdad, Iraq. His sons, Christian and 23-month-old Noah, and wife, Becky, linked with him via a satellite camera and high-speed Internet connection set up in Barrington.

Their nearly one-hour conversation, which also included Hage's parents and two sisters, took place thanks to the Freedom Calls Foundation, which is traveling the country and connecting thousands of families with loved ones serving in Iraq. The calls are free, paid for by donations to the New York-based foundation.

On Saturday, the foundation set up four computers in a park district building in Barrington as part of a local Freedom Festival. A dozen soldiers linked with more than 100 family members, most from Illinois but some from as far away as Wisconsin and Ohio.

Hage, an Illinois state trooper who lives in far south suburban Dixmoor, had last seen his relatives in early September.

"My oldest cries every day," Becky Hage said of Christian. "It's great to see him."

William Rodriguez of Lombard had last seen his wife, Army reservist Maricella, in January. The two married in September last year, and she was sent to Texas two months later.

"It's been a roller coaster," Rodriguez said. "Seeing her on the screen is a blessing. It's giving me a lot of hope."

While the conversation was full of emotional moments, there was also a lot of kidding and talking about everyday goings-on. Maricella, 22, a communications specialist who does computer-aided drafting at home, had gotten a short haircut and wondered what her 10 relatives thought. One of the relatives also showed Maricella her pregnant belly.

Maricella joked, "You're eating for you and a little baby, not you and three adults."

But she couldn't answer the one thing they wanted to hear -- when she was coming home. She hasn't been told when she'll be returning.

"It's so great I get to see you guys," she said. "Hopefully, I'll get to see you again soon."