

THE TENNESSEAN

Son's love is beamed from Iraq

Soldier, Gallatin family reconnect via videoconference

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HENDERSONVILLE

—There they were, the Boehms family of Gallatin, sitting around a table, laughing at the goofy faces and screwball jokes of the family's comic, Brandon, the oldest son.

"How do you get a Kleenex to dance?" he asked with a Cheshire cat grin.

"Put a little boogie in it." The room filled with raucous laughter that settled into chuckling, then somber faces. Tammy Boehms, Brandon's mother, wiped away tears.

The mother, along with several other relatives and a few of Brandon's closest friends, was not in the living room of the Boehms' (pronounced "beams") home.

Instead they were in a church office in Hendersonville, and Spc. Brandon Boehms was not really in the room. He was nine time zones away in an American forces compound at Taji, Iraq, where he has been stationed for more than a year.

On Monday afternoon they were able to reconnect in a digital face-to-face mode via a videoconference arranged by a Nashville company, Tri Star Digital Connections, and the nonprofit Freedom Calls in Iraq. The Tennessee end of the connection was at Northeast Church, which volunteered a room for the occasion.

"Oh, this is wonderful, absolutely wonderful," said the soldier's grandmother, Patricia Siddons, otherwise known as Nana.



Spc. Brandon Boehms' parents, Kevin and Tammy Boehms, his brother, Kurt Boehms, and aunt Tricia Siddons, right, laugh during a videoconference call. Brandon Boehms is serving in Taji, Iraq. (BILLY KINGSLEY / THE TENNESSEAN)

That's their boy

Any concerns Tammy Boehms and her husband, Kevin, had about the war's effect on their soldier son were alleviated from the outset.

"You look good," she told him.

"I always look good, what ya talking about?" came the reply from the war zone.

Yep, that's their boy.

Spc. Boehms, a 2002 graduate of Gallatin High School, where he was a defensive tackle for the Green Wave football team, has been in the Army since summer 2004. In Iraq, he has been in a sniper unit and has had his share of close calls, according to Kevin Boehms.

"Yes, he has," the father said, putting his hands over his wife's ears. "I can tell more later when she leaves."

Monday afternoon's conversation did not focus on what he has witnessed.

Instead, the 1st Calvary Division soldier and his family talked about domestic issues, including the merits of *Talladega Nights*, which young Boehms calls a "very classy, funny movie" and which his Nana believes is the "stupidest movie on earth."

News from home

That got everyone laughing and talking at the same time. The room was awash with a chorus of voices, several in Tennessee and one in Iraq. For a moment, the distance between two distinct worlds collapsed.

"I feel like I could just reach through and grab you," the soldier said, reaching for the screen where he could see his loved ones seated at the end of a long table.

"God, I love this family."

There was other family news to disclose: the June wedding date of an aunt; how his 13-year-old baby brother, Kurt, has grown several inches in his absence, and the revelation his grandfather had recently purchased a new fishing boat.

"Oh, you can buy a new boat, but you can't buy someone a set of new (golf) clubs?" Spc. Boehms said, raising an eyebrow at John Siddons, otherwise known as Papa. The soldier said he would still beat his granddad with his old clubs, "when I get back."

And then came the realization of the distance that separated them, and which will continue to separate them for another two months.

An awkward silence fell on both rooms in this twin-view world. Brandon broke the quiet.

"I can't wait to see you. I miss the heck out of you guys. Not a day goes by that I don't think of you. You're my motivation to get out of here," he said.

Quiet settled on the room in Tennessee again. All too soon, it was time to say goodbye.

Tammy wiped her eyes and sniffled.

On the other side of the globe, her warrior son offered a smile and threw a kiss.