

Times Herald

Together, though so far apart

By: KELLY DEVINE, Times Herald Staff
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PLYMOUTH - Separated by war, two families were given the opportunity to share Father's Day with their loved ones serving in Iraq Sunday morning.

Sgt. Daniel Alvarez and Spc. Nicole Washington, both of the U.S. Army, shared the holiday with family they haven't been able to see in months. The live, closed-circuit connection enabled the families to share about fifteen minutes with their deployed relatives.

The faces of Washington's father, sister, brother and nephew lit up when she came on screen to tell them about 112-degree, dusty Iraq and catch up on the home front. Washington rapped some free verses and promised to wear sunscreen, at her family's request.



As a Father's Day treat, Washington said the troops ate steak, shrimp and lobster for dinner. "It had been frozen. It wasn't like what you cook, but it was alright," Washington said from Camp Taji, which is about 16 miles northwest of Baghdad, Iraq.

Washington's family, who traveled from North Philadelphia for the video conference, said they had a great time "visiting" with her.

"When you see your daughter on TV like that, you know you miss her. But it's the next best thing to seeing her in person, and it really felt good," Washington's father, Norris Worrell, said. "I couldn't ask for a better Father's Day in the world. Today was the best."

Alvarez and his 1-year-old son were thrilled to see each other for Father's Day, with Daniel Jr. excitedly cheering "Poppa! Poppa!" at his far-away father.

Between making silly faces to amuse his family, Alvarez assured his family he was eating and sleeping well, despite losing a few pounds.

Noting how everyone had grown since he'd seen them last, Alvarez blew kisses to his family and caught up on all he missed.

Not having seen her other half for four months, Yazmin Alvarez teared up when finally given the chance. Yazmin Alvarez, whose husband is stationed in North Carolina, was visiting her husband's family in Delaware.

"Everyone says it gets easier. The only thing that gets easier is learning how to deal with it," she said. "It's hard. It's like being a single parent without him. The opportunity to come and do this makes my day and keeps me going, and it's especially great for him to see everybody."

"I do it mostly for (Daniel Jr.). He's young, and I don't want him to forget who his dad is. Anything could happen."

While it was still sad saying goodbye, the family was happy to have the opportunity to see the soldier.

"It was awesome. It's a warm feeling to just talk to him, see him. He looks well," said Michael Alvarez, the soldier's brother, who said the war is stressful for the soldiers and their families. "Our hearts are pounding whenever the phone rings, anticipating that call."

Ed Bukstel, co-founder of the Freedom Calls Foundation, enabled the cheerful exchanges Sunday with the latest technology and generous donations.

Bukstel has helped soldiers connect with their families for graduations, adoptions, holidays, sporting events, a marriage, a home birth and a proposal. The Blue Bell resident's last local hook-up was a Mother's Day connection, also at the Plymouth Meeting DoubleTree Guest Suites.

"Whether you're for the war or against the war, we're connecting families. If you don't want to connect families, you might as well not eat apple pie," Bukstel said.

"This is probably one of the most frustrating and rewarding things you can ever do. You're not just sticking a yellow magnet on your car, you're actually bringing families together, which is amazing."

With daughters Jillian, 6, and Ally, 4, helping him set up the broadcast with only some minor technical difficulties, Bukstel said hundreds of people are always volunteering to help the nonprofit foundation, which began 18 months ago.

"So many people don't see all of this going on," Bukstel said.

With his only military connection a father who served in Vietnam, Bukstel said seeing people's reactions is a reason to keep the program going.

"I've made a heck of a lot of friends in the Army, Navy ... I've hit just about every branch of the military with all the connections we've been making," Bukstel said.

"It makes them happy," Ally said of seeing the families her father helps.

"Helping my dad do his work makes me feel good. I'm happy when I help the troops," Jillian said. "When they come here and see their uncles, mothers, brothers, it makes them cry real bad."

Families that would like to connect with deployed loved ones at Camp Fallujah, Al Asad or Camp Taji should contact the Freedom Calls Foundation at ebukstel@freedomcalls.org or visit www.freedomcalls.org.

Contact Kelly Devine at kdevine@timesherald.com or 610-272-2500 ext. 204.