



## Kids chat with soldiers at war 'Freedom call' offers students a first-hand look at life in Iraq base

By MOLLY MONTAG  
Times Herald

The sign above the door said "storage," but for 20 Garfield Elementary School students, the tiny room was a window to Iraq.

The students, armed with questions and wearing patriotic clothing, quizzed soldiers Thursday at Al Asad Air Base in western Iraq about everything from what they eat to what it's like in the Middle East.

The soldiers met the questions with responses such as "pizza," although it's not as good as what they get at home, and "hot."

The conversation was a real-time videoconference made possible by the St. Clair County Regional Educational Service Agency in Marysville.



Times Herald photos by MARK R. RUMMEL

**PATRIOTISM:** Megan Strachan waves a flag Thursday as she sings God Bless the USA to soldiers from Al Asad Air Force Base in Iraq. Strachan and her fourth-grade Garfield Elementary classmates asked the soldiers questions about their lives in a combat zone.



**ANSWERS:** Soldiers at Al Asad Air Force Base chat Thursday with fourth-grade students at Garfield Elementary School. Kids asked soldiers questions about their lives in Iraq, including what they ate and whether they were scared.

Several of the students, all fourth-graders, said showing their support was important.

"The kids want them to know how much they want them to stay and fight for our country," said Jason Badger, 10.

Students closed the conference with a rousing rendition of Lee Greenwood's *God Bless the USA*. They waved small plastic flags; touted patriotically-decorated "thank you" posters; and held up a large American flag.

The video connection, which RESA makes through a nonprofit group called Freedom Calls in New York City, provided a special moment for the students, said teacher Mary Lund.

"I think (the war) became real to them," she said.

The students are among only a handful of classes to have connected with soldiers since the videoconferencing program started last year.

Sue Rutkofske, manager of the program for RESA, said she wants to see more people take advantage of the Freedom Calls partnership.

Anyone who wants to connect with family members at Al Asad, Camp Fallujah or Camp Taji can come to the RESA and videoconference for free. Other than the few classrooms that have used the technology, the program has seen very little use, Rutkofske said.



By MARK R. RUMMEL, Times Herald

THANK YOU: Fourth-grade students in Mary Lund's class at Garfield Elementary School in Port Huron cheer and raise signs thanking the soldiers at Al Asad Air Force Base during a teleconference.

The last family videoconference to Iraq was between a soldier and his pregnant wife. The woman even brought their dog along for the conference.

Finding families is the hardest part, Rutkofske said, because the military will not release information about families of men and woman in the service.

"I don't know if people just don't understand how it works," Rutkofske said. "It's free, and I love to do (the calls). I feel like it's the least we can do to connect families

"I will do all the legwork. I just need to know their soldier's name or where they're at."

Ali Al-Uqdah, 9, one of the fourth-graders involved in Thursday's conversation, said he was glad to talk with the soldiers. He said he was surprised by the soldiers' answer to his question about what it was like to fight in Iraq.

"I thought they were going to say calm, but instead they said happy and sad," Ali said.

Their answer to that specific question also surprised 10-year-old Trisha Parker.

"I thought they would say scared because they could get hurt or lose their lives," she said.

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