

# THE BLADE

## Video links GIs, families

### Satellite allows soldiers in Iraq to catch up on news

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Andy and Elizabeth Gramek drove two hours yesterday to Toledo so they could see their son and wish him a Happy New Year.

The Sterling Heights, Mich., couple visited with 22-year-old Bart Gramek for over an hour, catching up on news about themselves, their relatives, and their son's friends. Though the Marine corporal was nowhere near northwest Ohio, a live satellite video uplink from the Radisson Hotel to Camp Fallujah in Iraq allowed him and his parents to see each other for the first time since he was deployed to the strife-torn Persian Gulf nation in June.

Mrs. Gramek's eyes were moist as she finished speaking with her son, who appeared on a computer monitor in a conference room at the downtown hotel. "It's a wonderful feeling," she said. "It's great to be able to see he's OK."

Mr. and Mrs. Gramek, who emigrated to the United States from Poland in the 1980s, sat in front of the computer screen talking animatedly to Corporal Gramek in their native tongue. Mr. Gramek held an arm snugly around his wife, who sat clutching a balled-up tissue as she watched her son.

Mr. Gramek grinned as he saw Corporal Gramek yawn. He noted that since Iraq is eight hours ahead of Eastern Standard Time, it was past 1 a.m. in Fallujah.

"He's falling asleep," the Marine's father said. "He waited since 10 o'clock to talk to us."

Both parents put their hands up to the screen as their son stood and slung his rifle over his shoulder.

"We love you," Mrs. Gramek said.

"Be careful," his father urged.

"All right," Corporal Gramek answered, waving goodbye.

Several other families were scheduled last night to visit the hotel to see and speak with relatives stationed at Camp Fallujah and Camp Cooke in Iraq. The satellite video conference was sponsored by BPNC of Toledo, which markets alcoholic gelatin shots called Zippers.



Andy and Elizabeth Gramek of Sterling Heights, Mich., talk from Toledo with their son, Cpl. Bart Gramek, who is stationed in Iraq. Local firms assisted with the satellite uplink.  
( THE BLADE/LISA DUTTON )

The company arranged the video reunions with the Freedom Calls Foundation, a not-for-profit in Brooklyn Heights, N.Y., that has been offering free satellite uplinks to overseas troops since May. Buckeye CableSystem provided the local, high-speed Internet link for last night's hookup.

The foundation and BPNC joined up for a similar event in October at Toys "R" Us on Monroe Street.

Brian Pearson, president of BPNC and a former Marine, said last night's video hookup was conducted in conjunction with the Toledo company's annual New Year's Eve party at the Radisson.

All proceeds from the party were to be donated to Freedom Calls.

Mr. Pearson said he hopes later this year to offer the service regularly in Toledo.

"It's just the best thing you can do to help people. ... I'm hoping to make it permanent," he said.

To the Grameks, the video link made their New Year's Eve special. "I think everyone should do it," Mrs. Gramek said. "It was worth it to come."