

Video technology connects troops to their families

30-minute sessions held on Saturdays

By Tanya Sierra

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Chatting up Dad about his Saturday afternoon basketball game and showing off his blue jersey seems like ordinary conversation for 12-year-old Xavier Simms of Poway.

But when Dad is more than 7,700 miles away in Al Asad, Iraq, and Xavier is sitting in front of a 50-inch LCD television at the San Diego Supercomputer Center, that ordinary conversation is a bit more of a feat.

Families from around San Diego County can talk with loved ones deployed to Iraq for 30 minutes apiece on Saturdays through a partnership forged with the Freedom Calls Foundation and the Supercomputer Center.

The foundation builds communication networks independent of the military to keep troops in Iraq in touch with their families. The Supercomputer Center, located on the UC San Diego campus, agreed to host the video teleconferencing on Saturdays until there are no more U.S. troops in Iraq, said Jim D'Aoust, a program manager at the center.

For Janine Koffel and her three sons, who haven't seen their father, Marine Lt. Col. Jeff Koffel, in weeks, the visit was an unexpected treat.

"I started to put perfume on and I said, 'I don't have to go that far, he's not going to get that effect,'" Janine Koffel said.

When her husband popped up on the screen, each son showed off his latest achievement. Joe, 7, showed his teeth and poked out his tongue. John, 11, dangled his second-place soccer medal in front of the camera and Jacob, 14, dapper in his Ramona High School JROTC uniform, displayed his ribbons.

"Let me see your chest there, boy!" his father said. "It's looking pretty good."

Since the old-fashioned days of handwritten letters that would take six weeks to reach the deployed, communication has drastically advanced. Through e-mail, phone calls and the occasional live video teleconferencing, loved ones keep tabs on each other better than ever.

“The impact it has on families is tremendous,” said Marine Lt. Juliet Calvin, who coordinates the visits. “Families don't realize how far technology has come.”

With troops being sent to Iraq for 12 months and 14 months at a time, the separation is stressful, Calvin said.

“That's a long time, especially for kids,” she said.

The Supercomputer Center gives scientists and engineers access to high-end computing that enables them to further their research, director Fran Berman said.

Teaming up with the Freedom Calls Foundation to link families with overseas troops on a weekly basis at no cost is a privilege, Berman said.

“This is the latest in a series of societal issues that we can help with information technology,” she said. “It's really a privilege to us to be helping these folks. It's just priceless.”

Troops can be from any branch of the military, but must be stationed in or passing through Al Asad or Fallujah, Iraq, to have access to video teleconferencing, Calvin said.

An effort is under way to raise \$25,000 to get video conferencing in Taqaddam, Iraq, for the 4,500 Marines stationed there, said Dick Bartlett, who volunteers with Freedom Calls.

For information on how to schedule a visit with a loved one, e-mail Bartlett at [**bartvtc@cox.net**](mailto:bartvtc@cox.net).

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