

Hi-tech visit from Iraq

Video conference connects Marine to Gardner kin

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GARDNER— Seeing a live picture yesterday of her uncle's smiling face wasn't enough to convince 8-year-old Olivia Dunham that he hadn't been harmed while serving in Iraq. The Gardner girl needed absolute proof that he was OK.

"Uncle Matt, do you have all 10 fingers?" Olivia asked Marine Gunnery Sgt. Matthew Larson as the pair communicated via video conference at Mount Wachusett Community College.

Gunnery Sgt. Larson, sitting in front of a camera at Camp Fallujah, held up both hands, displaying each fully intact finger for his concerned niece and family to see on a television screen in one of the college's studio rooms.

Olivia smiled, relieved, as she toyed with the homemade dog tags she wore around her neck in honor of her uncle. Throughout the call, she blew him kisses, which he happily returned.

Gunnery Sgt. Larson and his parents, sister and nieces spent an hour yesterday morning watching and listening to one another through a video conference call made



United States Marine Corps Gunnery Sgt. Matthew Larson speaks to his family yesterday from Iraq, via video conference at Mount Wachusett Community College in Gardner. (T&G Staff Photos / RICK CINCLAIR)



Sisters Kacie, 10, and Olivia Dunham, 8, laugh as they speak with their uncle, Gunnery Sgt. Larson.

possible by the Freedom Calls Foundation, which spends tens of thousands of dollars each month maintaining satellite links to a handful of military bases in Iraq and Afghanistan. Established in 2004, the New Jersey nonprofit provides millions of minutes a month in free conference calls.

“We were excited about the possibility of joining the organization,” college President Daniel M. Asquino said. “It really means a lot to the individuals who are in Iraq.”

Freedom Calls has made it possible for fathers to watch their child’s birth and for family members to witness graduations, weddings, and “practically every milestone event you can imagine,” John B. Harlow, the foundation’s executive director, said during a video conference call that preceded Gunnery Sgt. Larson’s call.

For Gunnery Sgt. Larson’s family, there was no milestone event yesterday — just fulfillment of an omnipresent wish to be in touch with their relative.

A 1991 graduate of Gardner High School, Gunnery Sgt. Larson was deployed to Iraq in December and has been in the Marines for 15 years, said his father, Kenneth Larson.

He will return next month to his home in Hubert, N.C., for a two-week leave to visit his wife, son and daughter. He will then return to Iraq until February.

Gunnery Sgt. Larson smiled and sipped water yesterday during the conference call.

The family chatted about the weather in Iraq (the temperature “dropped” to 100 yesterday); Gunnery Sgt. Larson’s children, Aaron and Isabelle; the 20 pounds the Marine has lost since going to Iraq; his nieces’ back-to-school shopping; and his craving for a deep-dish pizza when he comes home.

Kenneth Larson was eager to learn if his son had heard any more about a promotion expected early next year.

“You’re going to outrank the old man,” said Mr. Larson, a Navy veteran of the Vietnam War.

Quiet for most of the public portion of the call, Lisa Larson piped up a couple of times to express her relief that her son was safe.

“I haven’t left the base since the last time we talked,” Gunnery Sgt. Larson said.

“Good,” Mrs. Larson said.

“My job keeps me behind a computer for most of the day,” Gunnery Sgt. Larson said, describing his 12-by-12 air conditioned plywood office.

“That’s just where we want you,” Mrs. Larson replied.

Gunnery Sgt. Larson provided his family with other assurances that he was protected.

“If I ever have to use my pistol, we’re in deep, deep crap,” he said. “He would have had to get through a lot of people to get to me.”

Mount Wachusett Community College is one of 10,000 sites in the country where families can sit down and communicate with their loved ones through video conference, according to Mr. Harlow. The college joined the foundation’s “Operation Hometown Link,” this spring. Yesterday was the second conference hosted at the Gardner campus. Both calls have been with Gunnery Sgt. Larson and his Gardner family.

The commercial cost of a conference like the one yesterday is roughly \$500 an hour, Mr. Harlow said. But in a place with no infrastructure to support it, the total cost can be in the thousands.

“We dearly need funds,” Mr. Harlow said. “Our services are needed now more than ever.”

For more information about Freedom Calls, to request a conference, or to make a donation, visit www.freedomcalls.org.