

Group lets soldiers call home free

By Aaron Nicodemus TELEGRAM & GAZETTE STAFF

Sunday, July 6, 2008

HOLDEN— Four years ago, John B. Harlow II heard about a National Guardsman serving in Iraq who racked up a \$7,000 phone bill calling home. The bill, and AT&T's unwillingness to reduce it, infuriated him.

"They wouldn't give him a break on the phone bill," he said. "They've got the exclusive contract, and they charge 19 cents a minute. That can add up fast."

Mr. Harlow, who spent most of his career on Wall Street as a lawyer, investment banker and venture capitalist, thought he'd pull together his contacts in the telecommunications industry and see if a separate network could be developed. The basic tenet: Calls for soldiers would be free.

In 2003, he founded The Freedom Calls Foundation, a nonprofit group that oversees a satellite network that provides 1.5 million free minutes of phone calls and teleconferencing to the troops overseas every month. Mr. Harlow and his fiancée, Kathryn Hudacek, oversee the entire network from their Morristown, N.J., home. It was supposed to be a 10-hour a week side job. It's turned into his full-time job.

"I've taken a huge cut in salary. My fiancée has as well," he said. "As family, we're making a sacrifice. But it's nothing like these families are making."

He's got ties to Central Massachusetts.

It's been more than 40 years since Mr. Harlow has called Holden home, but the 1967 graduate of Wachusett Regional High School remembers his formative years in Holden with fondness.

"I try to get back for high school reunions, that kind of stuff," he said. "My kids are ski racers, so we get up to Mount Wachusett occasionally on that windy road."

He left Holden right after high school for New York. His family stayed in Holden for another decade, before finally moving to Maine.

There's no such thing as a typical day, he said. One day last week, he received a call at 3 a.m. from a mother whose daughter was going into labor with her first child. She wanted her husband to call her at the hospital.

Mr. Harlow woke up a few hours later, and began trying to track down the soldier. Husband and wife were able to connect, he said, free of charge.

He and his fiancée then headed off to New York City to make a pitch to a major insurance company about sponsorship. He's also negotiating with the U.S. government to use some of their satellite space for Freedom Calls, which would cut down on the organization's costs.

"I'm hopeful for an answer on that in about 60 days," he said.

At Mount Wachusett Community College in Gardner, relatives and friends of soldiers can see them on a large teleconferencing screen, a connection made possible by Freedom Calls.

The first to use the Mount Wachusett site was Marine Gunnery Sgt. Matthew Larson. In August 2007, sitting in front of a camera at Camp Fallujah, Iraq, Sgt. Larson was able to see and talk to his 8-year-old niece, Olivia. She wanted proof that he was OK, and asked to see all 10 fingers. He happily obliged, waving them to the camera.

Other soldiers have coached their pregnant wives through childbirth, gotten married via teleconferencing, and witnessed important family events.

Freedom Calls has no support from the government, and depends solely on donations from corporations and individuals. More information is available by calling (973) 290-7886, or visiting freedomcalls.org.