

Freedom calls allow troops to phone home

BY NICOLE E. SQUIBBS, SUN STAFF WRITER
Oct 22, 2006

Michele Strandburg was able to see and talk to her husband of 19 years, Shawn — for the first time in the seven weeks he has been deployed in Iraq — on Sunday via a video conference at the Yuma County Board of Supervisors auditorium.

Her husband is a major and an aircraft maintenance officer in VMA-211, "The Avengers," in one of the most dangerous areas in Iraq, the Anbar province.

The major was all smiles when he saw his wife and kids. Cole, 3, showed his dad a sword and later snuck up behind his mom to model a pirate hat, souvenirs from his recent trip to Disneyland, which made his dad laugh. Cole also showed his dad how he high-fived his favorite character, Captain Hook.

Daughter Sara, 5, was more shy and took her time getting in front of the camera. Her mom modeled Sara's Minnie Mouse ears princess crown for her father. Sara showed her dad the autograph book she got in Disneyland, and he told her she was "getting to be a big girl."

Following the video call, Michele said it was very nice, and there were no tears. "He was happy to see the kids," she said. "It's a really nice service."



MAJ. SHAWN STRANDBURG (on monitor screen) watches, from Anbar province, Iraq, his wife Michele; daughter Sara, 5; and son Cole, 3, Sunday during a video conference call at the Yuma County Board of Supervisors auditorium. Strandburg, of VMA-211 Squadron, has been in Iraq for seven weeks and expects to be there for seven months total. PHOTOS BY JACOB LOPEZ/THE SUN



MICHELE STRANDBURG, accompanied by her children Sara, 5, and Cole, 3, watches and speaks to her husband, Maj. Shawn Strandburg, via video conference Sunday

Michele said the kids did not really know they had to stay in one place in order for their father to see them. She said she really appreciated that people would spend a weekend day to provide video calls for families.

Shawn will probably be home in March, after seven months in Iraq. Michele said her kids know where their father is, but they don't really understand.

"It's difficult, more difficult, when you have little ones," Michele said. "It's a lot more work on the person left behind."

The director of Public and Legislative Affairs of Yuma County, Kevin Tunell, was manning the video calls. Each family had a half hour to talk.

Tunell said the Freedom Calls Foundation picks the families who will receive calls.

"We need to keep the connection going," Tunell said. "We set up the room."

There is a large auditorium screen picture of the soldiers talking, and in the bottom corner is a picture of what the soldier is seeing on his end. The soldiers wear a headset and microphone, and the families need to look at and talk into a camera on top of a computer, set up with a large light beaming on them.

Tunell said it is stressful when there are problems with the satellite connection, which was down for about 20 minutes at the beginning of the call session. There were 16 calls made Sunday, 13 with VMA-211 and 3 with MACS-1, Marine Air Control Squadron 1. He said there are about 200 families in the area with family in Iraq.

"They are 10 or 11 hours ahead of us," Tunell said. "Some of the Marines won't be talking to their loved ones until midnight or 1 a.m. their time."

Tunell said the hope is to be able to make these calls at least once a month.

Jennifer Worrell, 23, of Yuma was one of the first to receive a video call Sunday, along with her kids, Amanda, 2, and Johnathan, 1.

Worrell said this was her second video call with her husband, Sgt. Anthony Gunner, 38, who has been in Iraq for two months. She said the soldiers sign up for calls with Freedom Calls. She tells her daughter that her father is at work the whole time he is gone, but she does not think Amanda understands he is far away.

"It's difficult trying to take care of them and then the house and make sure everything's running smoothly," Worrell said.

Gunner talked to Amanda but had a difficult time seeing his son in his stroller. "There is a second or two second delay," he told Worrell. "There are storms in this area right now."

He also said mail has been slow because of the storms and that troops are most in need of care packages with snacks.

Amanda Kincaid, 30, and her son Austyn, 7, also had their second video call with her husband Shannon, 32, on Sunday.

"I'm doing it mostly for him (Austyn). It's his stepdad," Kincaid said. "He understands he (Shannon) has to go away and fight for our country. It's important for him to see. He gets in there, and they make faces and noises and act like they've never been apart."

She said the video calls make it seem "just like they're here."

"It makes the time go faster. If I've seen him twice, then I know it's only five more times (of seeing him on video) 'til they're home. It's like a countdown," Kincaid said.

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FREEDOM CALLS FOUNDATION

- It is a public charity which has built a satellite network under the authority of the Secretary of the Army to keep deployed troops in touch with family at no cost to troops or their families.
- It costs tens of thousands of dollars to make satellite transmissions each month for video calls.
- Finances are a problem, and the only way the program can keep going is through donations.
- Go to www.freedomcalls.org to donate.