

In touch, technically speaking

Local school hosts videoconferencing system with troops

BY CHARLES WEBSTER • COASTAL MONMOUTH BUREAU • JANUARY 13, 2009

If you have a loved one in Iraq or Afghanistan and find it difficult to talk to them because of the substandard cell phone services available in the war-torn countries, a local school is playing host to a new communication system that can link you up in real time.

The communication system — the work of Morristown-based Freedom Calls Foundation and being hosted locally by The Rugby School — is a satellite videoconferencing service that is hooking up soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines in Iraq and Afghanistan with people back home.



QuRan Harris, 14, a student at The Rugby School, questions soldiers during a videoconference with troops in Iraq at Camp Taji. The communications system is the work of Morristown-based Freedom Calls Foundation and is being hosted locally by The Rugby School.

"This is a great thing for our men and women overseas, but it's also a great way for our students to learn firsthand about what is going on in the world," said Steve Peterson, who is in charge of the technology programs at the school.

"The chance for our students to interact with the troops protecting our freedom is a rare educational experience," said Dolores DeSanto, principal at The Rugby School, a private school here.

The idea started with Peterson's desire to marry the distance learning technology at the school with other technologies that would link the students with people around the world.

"I wanted to see if we could use our equipment to interact with troops serving in the field and found the Freedom Calls Foundation, and they had the satellite capabilities that made the idea come to life," Peterson explained.

So last week, students at school received an introduction to a group of nine soldiers, airmen and Marines serving in Iraq thanks to the new system that enabled them to talk in real time. The names of the participating troops were not released for security reasons.

The students asked about typical things at first — the weather, food, family, hometowns and even their favorite football teams.

"It gets up to about 125 degrees in the summer, and it's in the 80s today," a soldier from Pittsburgh explained to the class.

Recurring questions from the students were about how the troops entertain themselves in their off-hours and if they can call home on their cell phones.

"I have a PlayStation3, so I spend a lot of time with that, but we also play football on Sundays, work out at the gym and a lot of other stuff," said a U.S. Marine from Seattle.

Though the troops seemed to have lots of fun, at times they reminded everyone just how dangerous it is where they are. "We're not allowed to have cell phones because they can set off roadside bombs," a U.S. Marine sergeant from Buffalo, N.Y., explained. He is currently stationed near Al Asad Airbase in Al Anbar province, Iraq.

And a U.S. Army soldier from Washington, D.C., also explained that cell phone service was "spotty" at best in Iraq, where she was currently stationed in Taji.

The communications services are free of charge to military families and represent an alternative to commercial services set up by military contractors in Iraq. Freedom Calls provides more than 2,000 family videoconferences and more than 1.5 million minutes of free telephone calls every month, saving military families \$4 million a year.

As the last scheduled session for the day came to a close, one of the Marines who volunteered to sit in with the students summed up what most of the military veterans had tried so hard to say during the 90 minutes of conversation and laughter.

"It's good to see faces from the homefront," he said.