

THE BEAUMONT ENTERPRISE

Videoconferencing lets troops in Iraq visit families at home

By: [BETH GALLASPY](#).

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BEAUMONT - Caleb Stegall put his boots in a chair Thursday afternoon and stood before a video camera to model head-to-toe desert camouflage for his dad, thousands of miles away in Fallujah, Iraq.

Caleb, 6, picked the outfit as soon as he got up that morning, his mother, Sherri Stegall of Lumberton, told her husband, Chris, during their hour-long video conference.

"He wanted to iron it and everything because he wanted to look spiffy for you," Sherri Stegall, 41, told her husband in their first face-to-face conversation since January.

"Well, you look spiffy," Chris answered from a room with plywood walls and an Army blanket backdrop after a few seconds' delay for satellite transmissions.

Chris Stegall, who spent 10 years on active duty in the U.S. Navy and the past eight in the Navy Reserves, was sent first to California, then in March to Iraq with a Navy Seabee unit.

The separation has been hard for the family, but Thursday's video reunion made the wait for Chris' return, hopefully by early October, a little easier. AT&T Telecom Pioneers, a volunteer group of company employees, organized the free video conferences for the Stegalls and two other military families in conjunction with the non-profit Freedom Calls Foundation.

Seated in a conference room at an AT&T building in downtown Beaumont, Sherri Stegall asked her husband if his Houston-based unit was starting to get short-timers syndrome.

"We're ready to come home, but we've got way too much to do to even think about that," Chris, 38, answered.



Dave Ryan/The Enterprise

Caleb Stegall, 6, stands up so his father, Chris Stegall, can see the uniform he wore for a video conference. AT&T's employee foundation set up one-hour video conferences for three families Thursday with loved ones stationed in Iraq. Caleb, and his mother, Sherri, have not seen Chris, stationed in Fallujah, Iraq, for almost six months.

To arrange a video conference with a military family member in Iraq:

Contact Dianna Henley of the AT&T Telecom Pioneers by e-mail at dh5175@att.com or by phone at (409) 839-6114.

Conferencing in Iraq is available at only four locations - Al Asad, Fallujah, Taji and Camp Victory in Baghdad.

More on the Net:

[Freedom Calls Foundation](#)

"I miss you, honey," Sherri said.

"I know. I miss you, too," Chris said. "This is pretty good, though."

Their conversation moved from fatherly teasing about whether Caleb planned to eat the Happy Meal in front of him or play with it, to what Caleb did in Vacation Bible School last week, to wry jokes about plans for the upcoming Independence Day holiday.

Chris mentioned a party next weekend. "They won't let us have a party on the Fourth of July," he said.

"Are y'all going to have fireworks?" Sherri asked, then laughed.

"We have fireworks almost every day, honey," answered Chris, a pipeline project manager in civilian life.

Caleb sat in silence for most of the call, smiling and staring at the 40-plus-inch television screen filled with his father's face.

The Freedom Calls program has helped families of deployed military stay connected for more than three years. Thursday's calls were just the fourth arranged in Beaumont.

In other cities, the program has allowed fathers to virtually attend high school graduation ceremonies and a husband to see his wife graduate from nursing school. One father coached his wife through the birth of their second son and another saw his son for the first time through a video conference, according to news accounts on the foundation's Web site.

For Marine Cpl. Sammy Sepulveda, the video conferences have been a way to see the rapid growth of his 15-month-old son, Levi. Jana Sepulveda, 21, was at the Beaumont office Thursday for her fourth face-to-face call with her husband, who left for his second Iraq deployment in February. Husband and wife both are 2004 Orangefield High School graduates.

With the first call, Levi reached out to touch the television screen and was upset when he couldn't feel his dad, Jana Sepulveda said. At the second, Levi's grandfather had him standing on a table in front of the camera.

"He took his first steps in front of Sammy on the conference table," Jana said. "I had to convince Sammy those were his first steps."

Jana said the calls give her a weird, wonderful feeling like she really is in the room with her

husband, followed by an empty feeling when he disappears from the screen. The connections have been encouraging, she said.

After one of the calls, someone asked her when she had last seen Sammy. "I realized, oh, yesterday," she said.

Pam Patterson of Beaumont and her children Lauren, 10, and Collin, 6, were looking forward to their first face-to-face talk with husband and father Parrish Patterson since February, just before he left for Iraq with the same Navy Seabee unit as Stegall.

"We've been lonely missing him," Patterson said. "... They like talking to him when he calls, and we e-mail every night. If we didn't have that, we'd probably go nuts."

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