



The virtual war family

A soldier in Iraq attends her brother's high school graduation by video – part of a new Internet intimacy in time of war.

By Carmen K. Sisson | *Correspondent of The Christian Science Monitor*
May 29, 2007

MOBILE, ALA. - A young woman clad in fatigues peers blearily from the screen, rubbing her eyes and shifting nervously in her seat. It's 4 a.m. at Camp Al Asad in Iraq, and the rest of her National Guard unit out of Mobile, Ala., has been asleep for hours. Not Army Spc. Ramona Hall. She is too excited.

Seven thousand miles and nine time zones away, Ms. Hall's brother is nervous, too. In a suite at the University of South Alabama here, James Hall, who has just come from his high school graduation ceremony, clutches his mortarboard. He jockeys for position in front of a Web camera with four dozen friends and family members. They're anxious to see Ramona, who's been in Iraq since March and moments earlier watched James's graduation from Murphy High School via a satellite link.



MORTARBOARDS AND FATIGUES: National Guard member Ramona Hall used a videoconference hookup to chat with her brother James shortly after his graduation. Other soldiers have used the technology to witness births, weddings, and children's milestones.

CARMEN K. SISSON

Now they're holding, in essence, a virtual graduation party. When Ramona's visage appears on the TV screen, everyone grabs for the microphone. They comment on her weight (she's lost a little) and her hair (she's wearing it in braids). They sing her a song. Eventually, after more emotional banter, Ramona addresses James directly. "I'm so proud of you," she says simply.

The war in Iraq may be a half a world away, but in the age of the Internet it's as close as the flip of a video switch – making it in many ways the most intimate war in history. Using video technology and the Worldwide Web, soldiers are tying into the most private moments back home – weddings, funerals, birthdays.

Today's soldier doesn't have to wait for a box of brownies: He can see his 4-year-old proudly making them. Some innovative couples have used the technology to get married, renew vows, or choose an insurance carrier. A father saw his daughter learn to tie her shoes. A brother said goodbye to his dying sister.

The age of the interlinked war is raising profound questions: Does it boost the morale of soldiers or add to longings for home and divert attention from the task at hand?

John Harlow, for one, knows where he stands. He's the founder of Freedom Calls, a group that provides the technology free to soldiers and their families. The New Jersey nonprofit has set up satellite links at four locations in Iraq, which serve some 2,000 soldiers a day. "This will have profound implications for family morale, and that's what we're trying to promote," he says. "A soldier with a happy family is a focused fighter."

At the moment, Ramona's giggles have dissolved into tears. "Don't be crying – it's a time for happiness," James tells her. Though nine years apart, the siblings are especially close. James was the first person Ramona told about her deployment. When she left, he took over her bank account and her three children, ages 2, 5, and 10. He makes sure they're dressed and fed, takes them to school and doctor's appointments, and plays with them to keep their spirits up. Always, he reminds them she loves them.

She says videoconferencing adds information lost through phone or e-mail. Her 10-year-old has grown taller. "This is a blessing and a good inspiration for soldiers," she says. "Just to know someone still cares...." Her voice trails off.

Others agree. Mel Traweek, a Korean War veteran and retired psychologist in Northport, Ala., says soldiers are so far from home, they often feel as if everyone has forgotten them. Mail call was once the highlight of the day, but videoconferencing is even more powerful.

"A wife can take one look at her husband and read him like a book," he says. "Face to face, you can see if they're well. You go back and you feel happy, and this lasts for days."

Still, military experts like University of Alabama history professor Mark Boulton say there are serious ramifications. Soldiers fight by day and write blogs by night. Earlier this month, the Pentagon banned soldiers' access to 13 sites, including MySpace and the video-sharing site, YouTube, in part because of concern that it was taking up too much bandwidth. But that doesn't stop soldiers from accessing the sites using nonmilitary computers.

"This is probably the first 'real' Internet war," Mr. Boulton says. "It's something they're going to have to evaluate, because if the military's not controlling information, there's the potential to lose control of the public's perception." In addition, Boulton says maintaining a technological umbilical cord between disparate worlds can make things harder instead of easier. "Psychologically, you have to separate yourself from the civilian world in order to do what you have to do," he says.

Spc. Jamal Holt, who watched his girlfriend, Brittney Evans, graduate from Blount High School in Mobile, Ala., Friday night, says it made him miss her more. "It felt like I was sitting in the room with her," he says. "When I got through seeing her and had to get off, it was like leaving all over again."

The videoconferencing isn't just limited to special occasions, though. Harlow notes that anyone with access to the technology can schedule up to three videoconferences per month, and families with broadband Internet receive a Web camera and software to talk from home, allowing fathers to join the family for meals or tuck their children in at night – virtually.

For his part, Harlow offers the service free to families, but it comes at a cost to his foundation – somewhere around \$1,000 a day. There are currently four satellite links at camps in Iraq – Al Asad, Fallujah, Taji, and Victory – with another slated for Al Taqaddum by the end of June and plans to add Camp Arisjan in Kuwait later.

Harlow says he had no idea how far people would take the project when it began three years ago. He and his fiancée, Kathryn Hudacek, now spend 12 to 16 hours a day handling the administrative and technical load required to connect soldiers to loved ones. He looks back on his life as a Wall Street lawyer and venture capitalist with longing, but he can't abandon the families.

"I get calls from women at 3 a.m. saying, 'My water broke, and I'm on the way to the hospital, can you find my husband in Iraq?' " Harlow says. "We make it happen."

Harlow relies heavily on volunteers to provide labor and support. One is University of South Alabama employee Glenn Davis, who wired today's connection. Standing in the corner, arms folded, Davis smiles. From time to time, he jumps in to hold the palm-sized speaker so Ramona can hear clearly.

"People think it's a computer network that makes this happen, but it's a people network," Harlow says. "There are guys like Glenn all over the country who never get any glory or money, just the satisfaction of helping one family."

For Ramona, Glenn's help means seeing James bouncing with excitement, newly turned tassel bobbing alongside his grinning face. They've been talking an hour, but time is drawing to a close. She shouts final words: she's proud of him; she loves him; she'll always be there for him.

After the screen has gone dark and Ramona's voice has gone silent, James stands in the hallway and shakes his head in wonder. All his life, she's cheered him on. When he was a running back in football, she was in the stands, shouting loudly. When he accepted his diploma, she was in the trenches, crying softly. And through the magic of technology, he saw every tear.