

Troops getting home during Christmas season

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By Jan Gaillard

Entertaining the troops took on a whole new meaning as shoppers mugged for American soldiers at Lynnhaven Mall last weekend.

Through a video conferencing event, "Holiday Cheers for Our Troops" brought smiles to folks in Virginia Beach as well as their loved ones overseas.

"Hi, guys, have a merry Christmas," said Kaleb Rhoads, on active duty with the U.S. Navy. Rhoads, shopping with his brother, also active in the Navy, waved at the two soldiers on the large video monitor.

"I just wanted to say 'hi' to the guys," he explained, as he continued down the mall corridor.

The technology was first installed in 2004 by Freedom Calls Foundation, which worked with corporations, individuals and the military to place wireless telephone and video-conferencing services at military camps in the Sunni Triangle, said John B. Harlow II, executive director of the foundation.

"Public sessions can be kind of funny," he said. "People will even dance for the troops."

Thousands of soldiers stationed in the camp are able to communicate with their families on a regular basis through the foundation's efforts.

The nonprofit organization continues to deploy equipment at home and abroad to give soldiers the opportunity to experience milestone events such as births and weddings, and keep families interacting while apart, free of charge.

"A satellite network enables us to connect with troops in Iraq and Afghanistan for live feeds," Harlow explained. "We do about 2000 of these a month for families, and we're working on getting video conferencing set up in more people's homes."

The event was initiated by Lynnhaven Mall owners, General Growth Properties Inc., said Lynn Gray, special projects manager with the company.

"We reside in the heart of a military area, and we wanted to do something to connect with the community that was relevant," said Gray.

Hundreds of people stopped by the monitor and wished the troops holiday greetings, said Gray. The schedule of events included entertainment by the TRADOC Army Brass Quintet, the Marine Corps Color Guard, local musician Lewis McGehee, and both public and closed video-conferencing sessions.

Lisa Hand of Norfolk tried to keep her emotions in check after talking to her husband, Bret Hand, in a conferencing session.

"He's only been gone about seven weeks, but he'll be gone for seven to eight months," she said. "We communicate by Webcam regularly, but it's the first time we could see and hear each other at the same time, because the delay is so long at home. I'm trying not to cry right now - it was great to be able see his face at the same time he was talking."

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