

HOME LIFE IN REAL TIME

Videoconferencing gives military families a chance to see and speak to relatives while sharing everyday events like birthday parties.

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'S'Say cheeseburger!" Huddling together for a photo, members of the Hanson family broke into a trio of smiles. There was mom Toni in a violet suit, daughter Calla in braces with red rubber bands and dad Mike in beige fatigues — his beaming face bordered by a black Panasonic television.

The situation wasn't ideal, as Gunnery Sgt. Mike Hanson was in Fallujah and his family was in suburban Minnesota. But the Hansons couldn't look happier on a videoconferencing call that made it seem like the active Marine was back with the gang at Eagan Hills Church.

"Bald is beautiful, man!" joked his friend and the church technology guru Greg Scott, whose head is mostly hairless by nature, referring to Hanson's freshly shaved one.

This week, the two tech buddies launched a videoconferencing station from the Eagan church with hopes of linking other families in the state to those serving in Iraq. The site was the first to use videoconferencing to tap into one of the 48 Internet cafes in Iraq that Hanson oversees as a network manager with the 1st Marine Expeditionary Force.

Troops increasingly are turning to videoconferencing — a technology also used to coordinate wartime efforts — to connect with family face-to-face. They have been there for milestone occasions, like high school graduations, the births of babies or even their own weddings.

In some cases, families pour into designated regional gatherings organized by outside agencies to communicate with the soldiers. But observers say the latest stage of wartime videoconferencing looks like the scene at the Eagan church sanctuary: friends and families routinely tuning the troops in just to say hello.

"You sound really good," Toni said to her husband.

"I sound good — don't I look good?" teased Mike, glowing and looking 40 pounds lighter since April, when he left Minnesota.

Toni studied her husband's movements. On her jacket lapel was a pin bearing the image of Nicolas, the couple's 8-year-old son, who died in February of leukemia. She told Mike, "It's so real, I feel like I can touch you," as she reached her hand toward the screen.

Mike Hanson previously tried tuning into church services via an inexpensive webcam, which in some ways was a punishment because he couldn't interact. "I could see everyone I loved, but I couldn't talk to them," he said.

The Eagan family also celebrated their twin girls' sixth birthday at the church so Dad could participate in just about everything but eating the cake. The congregation was planning to invite the Marines to Sunday's worship services and to Christmas celebrations. On Dec. 19, the church will host two special "virtual services," in which the Marines can socialize with other churchgoers before and after the service and participate in prayer.

"Those guys are over there fighting and dying," Scott said. "The least we can do is have them in church Sunday morning."

Polycom donated the stand-alone V500 videoconferencing device, worth about \$2,000. TDS Metrocom pitched in a powerful T1 line, a value of \$5,500, after Scott discovered that neither DSL nor cable-modem service was available at the church.

A marketing manager for TDS, Kurt Daugherty, said the company probably would consider future donations for other projects if the Eagan site is a success.

Over the past 1½ years, the Minnesota Army National Guard has connected 668 families to Guard members stationed in 14 countries, said Phil Stephan, a former member who sets up the videoconferencing calls in armories all over the state.

"Videoconferencing — I'm not sure we appreciated it at the time, but it has worked to transform (communications) beyond our expectations," said John Harlow, executive director of Freedom Calls, which has set up teleconferencing for families of troops nationwide. "We've had a soldier talk his wife through a 12-hour labor. The guy said, 'I'm so exhausted, it was like I was really there.' I said, 'Imagine what your wife felt like.' "

Harlow is teaming up with defense firm Raytheon to create 1,000 videoconferencing stations in universities, corporate campuses and schools all over the country to communicate with troops in Iraq and Afghanistan. If he raises enough money to pull it off, keeping in touch with soldiers will be "as easy as going to Starbucks," he predicted.

Michele Bergeman of Albert Lea and her three children cherished the 30 minutes in October that they spent in a videoconference with her husband, Bradley, a Guard member in Afghanistan. Bryce, 14, told Dad about a bowling award he snagged. Brittany, 10, gushed about the start of basketball season. In return, Bradley talked about the new backpacks and soccer balls he handed out to Afghan children.

"He looked good," Bergeman said. "You could tell he was proud."

Guard member Matthew Dahl's parents and grandparents in Duluth couldn't help but choke up at seeing him in Afghanistan. The 21-year-old said he was enjoying the military food and movies in his downtime. For security reasons, he could say little about the work he was doing or whether he was involved in fighting.

"He told my wife, his mother, not to cry," said Dahl's father, Dave. "But it's kind of hard."