

MSU Helps Connect Soldiers with Families Back Home



Submitted

While deployed to Iraq, Army Capt. Dale Lee Pittman visited with his family in Meridian via a Freedom Call Foundation teleconference.

By Keryn B. Page

On June 23, 2006, it had been seven long months since Navlean Pittman had seen her son, and she felt like hugging the television.

Pittman was one of the first two Mississippians to take part in a Freedom Call, which connects soldiers serving in Iraq to their families back home through videoconferencing technology. Interactive videoconferencing allows people in different locations to see and talk to each other over a television in real time, just as though they were face to face.

"We usually talk over the telephone every week, but to actually see him moving was like he was in the room with us," Pittman said of her son, Army Capt. Dale Lee Pittman. "It was really exciting. My father was there, and he cried through the whole thing."

Capt. Pittman also got a chance to visit with his brothers and sisters, grandmother, and nieces and nephews. Mrs. Pittman said her son was very excited and impatient in the weeks before their Freedom Call.

"He kept calling me saying, 'Mama, when are y'all going to do it?' I'd tell him, 'It's coming up. Give it some time,'" Pittman said. "He hadn't seen everybody since he left for Iraq. The Freedom Call made him feel like he had come home for a little while."

The Pittmans' reunion was the work of Freedom Calls Foundation, a New York-based nonprofit organization, in cooperation with the Mississippi State University Extension Service. Susan Seal, Extension distance education coordinator, said a Freedom Calls representative contacted her trying to locate a site for a Meridian family's Freedom Call.

"Once they realized we had videoconferencing sites in every county, as well as contacts with other states, they were excited to begin a relationship with us because one of their problems is finding sites for the calls," Seal said. "The Extension Service partnered with Freedom Calls to allow military personnel in Iraq to connect with their family members in Mississippi."

Fred Gordon, who lives in Meridian, has also had a Freedom Call with his niece, Warrant Officer Felicia McShan.

"For her to be able to see us and talk and communicate with each other and see how she's doing, you couldn't ask for anything better," Gordon said.

Seal said two other families currently are in the process of setting up times for their calls.

"We've really just started promoting the Freedom Calls, but we would like to encourage military families to take advantage of this unique opportunity," Seal said.

Freedom Calls are available at no cost to military families or the Extension Service. To find out more about setting up a Freedom Call, contact the county Extension office or Seal directly at (662) 325-8581 or susans@ext.msstate.edu.

Freedom Calls Foundation has worked closely with corporate contributors, individuals and the military to build a satellite network connecting three military installations in Iraq with the United States. The foundation's Web site, www.freedomcalls.org, states that three facilities in Iraq now serve 30,000 to 40,000 soldiers, marines and airmen. According to the site, the organization hopes to install facilities at every Army camp in Iraq and Afghanistan in the coming year.

"We are deploying state-of-the-art technology to transform the experience of soldiers on extended deployments to war zones," the site states. "Soldiers may now attend and participate in milestone family events such as graduations, births, birthdays and weddings via video conference over the Freedom Calls Network. One Army general recently observed that our effort represents the single greatest boost in morale for the troops in the past 25 years."

The foundation has received a personal letter and certificate of appreciation from Maj. Gen. Antonio M. Taguba, deputy commanding general support. The Defense Security Service awarded the foundation a certificate of appreciation and a "generous contribution."

Freedom Calls Foundation also has been recognized by the U.S. Department of Defense's America Supports You program.