



Family visits soldier in Iraq over video link through school

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By Tippi Rasp Staff Writer

Angie Watkins ran her fingers through her hair, held her daughter tight in her lap and took a deep breath moments before her husband appeared on the television screen.

"Are you ready to see Daddy?" Angie asked her husband's three children, Traven, 9, Tabor, 3, and Teagan, 11 months.

Leroy Watkins walked into the camera's view and leaned his rifle against the far wall. When he sat down and his face appeared on the television screen, the children smiled widely and tears glistened in Angie's eyes.

"You look wonderful," she said to her husband of nearly four years, now stationed in Iraq with other members of the Oklahoma National Guard's 45th Field Artillery Brigade.



Angie Watkins (right) wipes tears out of her eyes when seeing her husband, Spc. Leroy L. Watkins with the Oklahoma National Guard's 45th Field Artillery Brigade, on a television screen during a video conference at Enid Public Schools central office Friday. Watkins is deployed in Iraq and it was the first time he had seen his family in months. Watkins' children, (front, from left) Tabor Watkins, Traven Watkins and Teagan Watkins, and his sister-in-law, (back) Christi Watkins, and niece, Hayli Watkins, also attend the conference. (Staff Photo by MAIKE RODE)

The Watkins family spent more than an hour in an Enid Public Schools office watching and talking Friday thanks to Freedom Calls, an organization that helps families link up via video conferencing, and the EPS technology department.

"It's the best we can get for the time being," Angie said.

Angie Watkins sent greetings to her husband from friends and family and made small talk, telling him they were OK and getting plenty of help at home.

Angie brought her stepson, Traven, and the couple's two children, Tabor and Teagan, and her sister-in-law and her daughter to the video conference call at 3 p.m. Friday. It was 11 p.m. at Camp Taji in the Sunni Triangle near Baghdad.

"I cannot get over how great you look," Angie said.

Tabor chattered quietly and his mom translated: "He said "Daddy's cool."

The guardsman complimented his wife's hair -- she recently had it cut -- and coaxed his oldest son into talking a little more. Tabor was excited to tell his dad what he was going to be for Halloween, and Angie said Traven loosened up and was able to talk to his dad when guests cleared the room to give the family privacy.

"It was just wonderful," Angie said later. "I think the kids benefited from it most."

Angie doesn't expect her husband to return home at least until December 2006 and possibly later.

She doesn't think they'll get another chance to see and talk via video conferencing. Freedom Calls is available depending on where he is stationed and what technology is available, she said. Freedom Calls contacted Angie Monday and had the call set up by Friday by Enid Public Schools Technology Director Mike King.

King said the district is willing to accommodate families anytime they need to connect.

"It's a service we can provide from the school to the community," King said.

Families should log on to freedomcalls.org or call (718) 797-9154 for more information.

"It was truly amazing," Angie said. "I was very grateful. I will take any chance at communication I can get with him."

Later, Angie lamented the father of three missing "huge milestones" in his children's lives. Since he saw them last -- for five days in August -- Teagan began drinking from a "sippy" cup and is nearly walking. But, Angie said, the sacrifice in convenience is worth what he is accomplishing in Iraq.

"We're very proud of him," she said.