



Associated Press photo by JOHN ROWLAND
From left, Melanie Falcon and Stacie Sieber of Lafayette use a webcam to keep in touch with their boyfriends, Lance Cpl. Cye Courtois and Cpl. Curt Courtois, who are stationed with the Marines in Iraq.

Soldiers far, no longer unseen

Webcams, Internet, cell phones let families stay in touch

BY MARSHA SILLS

The (Lafayette) Advertiser

LAFAYETTE — Ten years ago, snail mail and a monthly phone call were the only way Debbie Courtois was able to keep tabs on her Marine son serving in Desert Storm.

The times have changed, though. Today, two more of Courtois's sons, 22-year-old twins — Lance Cpl. Cye Courtois and Cpl. Curt Courtois — are in Iraq, but now cell and satellite phones and the Internet help the family stay closer.

The family also keeps in touch with a webcam. Both men are reservists with the TOW Platoon, 23rd Marines.

Although, since the heavy fighting in Fallujah, the family hasn't been able to see Cye, who's with a unit there.

Curt is with another unit in Ramadi.

"We can see that they're doing well and they haven't lost any weight," their mother said. "Usually they're coming in early in the morning when they call us. They're sitting in front and we're messaging. There's no audio. They'd sit in front of the screen and yawn. We wouldn't let them go. We'd say, 'We just want to look at you.'"

While technology hasn't literally realized the promise of "reach out

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MELANIE FALCON, girlfriend of Cye Courtois, Marine stationed in Iraq

and touch someone," devices such as webcams come close.

While in Iraq, mothers and fathers can chart the growth spurts of their children at home, watch a spouse blow out birthday candles and see anything else they miss about home.

The Acadiana Marine Corps League donated a satellite phone to the platoon, enabling the troops to more easily communicate with family back home.

Courtois said she hears from her boys about once a week, but joked that she knows their girlfriends hear from them more often.

Cye calls whenever he can, said his girlfriend, Melanie Falcon.

"I cross my fingers for when he can call," she said.

When the platoon first arrived, the calls were more frequent and easier to plan. The two would set up times to meet via webcam.

"I know it certainly keeps his spirits up to be able to see us at home," Falcon said.

The first webcam link-up was the most memorable, Falcon said.

"We were hysterical the first time we saw him on the camera. You would have thought we were having the biggest party," Falcon laughed. "(Cye) was cracking up laughing."

Keeping in touch is expensive for families. No doubt the expense is worth it, but it's a hardship on families.

A Thanksgiving Day phone call to Iraq cost Brenda Hargrave's family \$72.

The call was short and sweet. Her son, Capt. Lance Hargrave, 34, is with the Louisiana National Guard's 256th Infantry Battalion company out of St. Martinville.

"The average is \$5 a minute," Hargrave said.

Aloud she tallied how much a 10-

minute phone call each week would cost if the 256th remained in Iraq for a year.

"Multiply that by (more than) 3,000 troops for 52 weeks, it's millions of dollars," Hargrave said.

The mother does not have Internet access.

"I can call him every day if I could afford it," she said.

She tries to keep in touch with him once a week and tries to write to him daily, she said. She has a second clock set for the time in Iraq next to a clock set for Carencro.

"I never thought my son would go to war," Hargrave said. "The hope would be to stay in touch with them."

Not having to wait for official word about how their loved one is doing has made the situation a little more bearable, the women said.

As the Courtois family learned of the intense fighting in Fallujah, they feared the twins were involved. Cye had missed a scheduled phone call to Falcon, and days passed before she heard from him.

"He's so lucky," Falcon said of Cye. "I tell him my guardian angel is good."

"He sprained his ankle a couple of days before they went to Fallujah, so he was limping and was put on a different job."