

Regional

Lions donate first-of-its-kind video link to families of troops

GALVA -- The Galva Lions Club officially turned the new video conferencing center at the National Guard Armory in Galva over to the local Guard units Family Readiness Group, Friday.

With the help of the IDC Tech Center, in Geneseo, Mediacom Cable TV and about \$2,300 in donations, the Lions Club set up what is believed to be the first community-based video conferencing center in the nation. "There are video hookups at military installations like the Rock Island Arsenal and at USC facilities, but as far as we know, this is the first time one has been set up by a community," said Lions Club member Frank Prosser.

The center consists of two computer stations set up in the conference room at the end of the east hall at the Galva Armory. Family members without access to a computer can also use the facilities to exchange e-mail messages and send or receive photos. Each station is equipped with a 17-inch monitor, keyboard, webcam and printer.

Due to the nine-hour time difference between Baghdad and Galva, access to the computers at late or early hours was a concern until Staff Sergeant Martin Gibson, Battery F's rear detachment officer, stepped forward. Gibson is on duty at the armory 24 hours a day, Monday through Friday and available to let family members in at unusual hours.

Video connections in which both parties can see and hear each other in real time are best set up in advance by e-mail or phone.

If the pre-arranged time is before 8 a.m. or after 5 p.m., a call to Sgt. Gibson at 932-2197 should be made to let him know you are coming. Prosser emphasized that the video stations are available to the families of any active duty military personnel, not just members of the Galva unit.

There is no charge for use of the service.

Two soldiers in the Galva unit have become fathers since they were deployed to Iraq and it is hoped they will soon be able to see their new babies with the help of the video conferencing center.

Sgt. Gibson said the members of the Galva unit are slowly getting internet access in their barracks and that some took webcams with them and should be able to link up directly from their rooms. They also have access to internet cafes at Camp Victory North, where they are stationed.

The center will now be the responsibility of the Family Readiness Group, which includes families of unit members from Galva, Kewanee and Dixon National Guard units which make up Battery F.

The Henry County Youth Services Bureau has donated unneeded room dividers to the center which will be used to set up cubicles and give those using the computers some privacy.

When the troops return home, the equipment will be donated to the Galva Education Boosters for use in the schools.