

# TECHNOLOGY HELPS MILITARY FAMILIES KEEP IN TOUCH

*By Scott Wasser*



DVD photo: Lynda Modaff, Keser, U.S. Navy photo by  
Photographer's Mate Airman Apprentice David B. Daniels

*Somewhere on a desolate stretch of desert highway between Kuwait and Iraq, a sergeant participating in Operation Iraqi Freedom gets an unexpected visit from his family.*

His wife and two young daughters have joined him in the desert...and not for the first time. In fact, they've averaged about two visits a month since his tour of duty began a year ago, including a few visits when he was on the front lines in a combat zone.

But they've never been in harm's way. That's because they've never actually left their Des Moines, Iowa, home. Instead, their trips to Iraq and Kuwait have been virtual ones, made possible by digital technology.

While their daddy and husband is serving his country overseas, mom and the kids use a digital camcorder to capture snippets of family life back home. Dance classes, softball games, school plays and birthday parties are the main events, but the discs mommy sends daddy to watch on his portable DVD player contain plenty of scenes of routine daily activities, too. And each one ends with a group greeting from mom and the kids, followed by individual messages that end each "visit."

Obviously, a hard plastic disc will never be confused with the warm touch of a loved one, but until someone creates a teleportation device like the those depicted on *Star Trek*, it can be the next-best thing. That's why DVDs, which can be made for pennies and played on self-contained portables costing surprisingly little, are a fantastic way for military families to stay in touch even when one member of the family is stationed half a world away.

Even the hardware required to make the family videos is fairly affordable, and is getting cheaper all the time. Camcorders that record direct to mini DVD discs, once untouchable for under \$1,000, are now selling for half that...or less. Within seconds of shooting a home video, the disc can be popped out of the camcorder and into most DVD players.

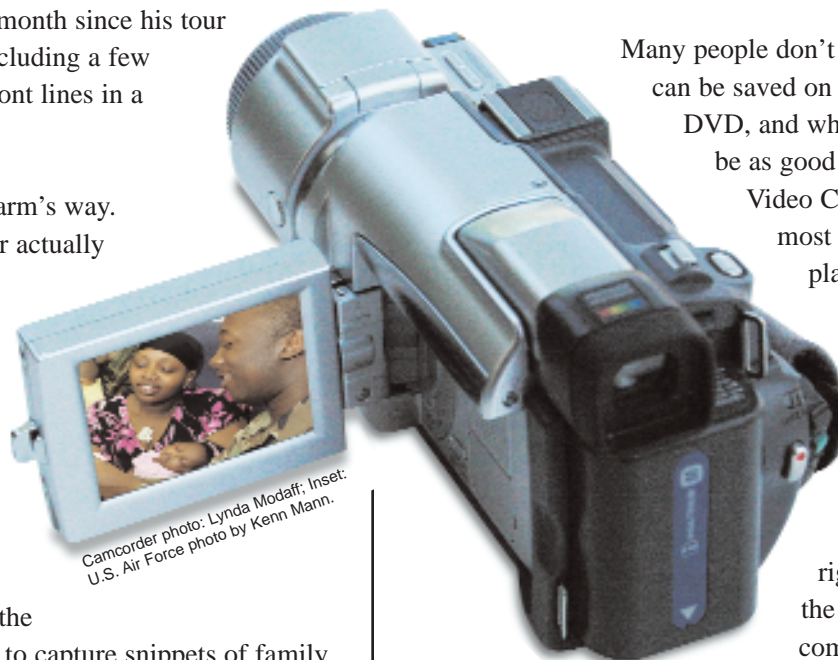
A less costly but somewhat more labor intensive alternative is to use a tape-based camcorder to shoot video, which is then transferred to a standalone DVD recorder or personal computer for burning. The least expensive DVD recorders cost less than \$100, while virtually every PC made during the past few years is equipped with a DVD or CD burner.

Many people don't realize it, but video can be saved on CD as easily as DVD, and while the quality won't be as good as DVD video, the Video CD is compatible with most portable DVD players.

Although video from any camcorder can be transferred to a personal computer with the right cables (and, in the case of older PCs, a compatible "capture card"), newer camcorders

that use MiniDV digital tape make the job easier. A decent camcorder that uses MiniDV digital tape can be had for as little as \$200 brand new, and the price almost always includes the software and cables required to connect the camcorder to a PC for transferring video to the computer's hard drive and then burning it to disc.

Discs are the preferred medium for sending video to a loved one for several reasons: They are compact, deliver high-quality video, can be played on different devices (portables, components and PCs), and are much more durable than tapes – particularly in hot, sandy environments such as the desert.



Camcorder photo: Lynda Modaff; Inset: U.S. Air Force photo by Kenn Mann.

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Military families who are more concerned with immediacy than image quality while making their long-distance “visits” have several other communications options at their disposal.

If both parties have access to a webcam-equipped PC and high-speed Internet (broadband) connections, they can harness the power of the World Wide Web to have live video conferences with each other. Image quality isn't great, and the voices and video are frequently as mismatched as the dubbing on a bad kung fu movie. But there's an undeniable thrill that comes with seeing a loved one “live,” and these video calls are essentially free.

Cell phone providers are just beginning to offer similar video conferencing capabilities, although most have been offering the ability to send pre-recorded videos for a while now. The quality, however, can make Internet videoconferencing look like HDTV by comparison. And the bill for sending a lot of still images or videos over a cell phone can make anyone on a tight budget start searching for a couple of tin cans and a string long enough to reach their loved one the old fashioned way.

Even if money were no object, using a cell phone to communicate with a loved one overseas can pose other problems. Some cell phones used in the United States simply won't work in other countries, and others may work in some foreign lands but not others. Finally, even cell phones that are capable of working where a relative in the military is stationed, often require a fee to be operated outside of the States. And then of course there's the problem that domestic cell phone users face every day — dead spots and areas that just don't have service. Unless you're a diplomat or spy, you can forget satellite-based mobile phones because they're too darn expensive to be practical.

Of course it's a whole different story when all members of the family trying to stay in touch are in the United States. Although the technology being employed in most of Asia and a good chunk of Europe is months if not

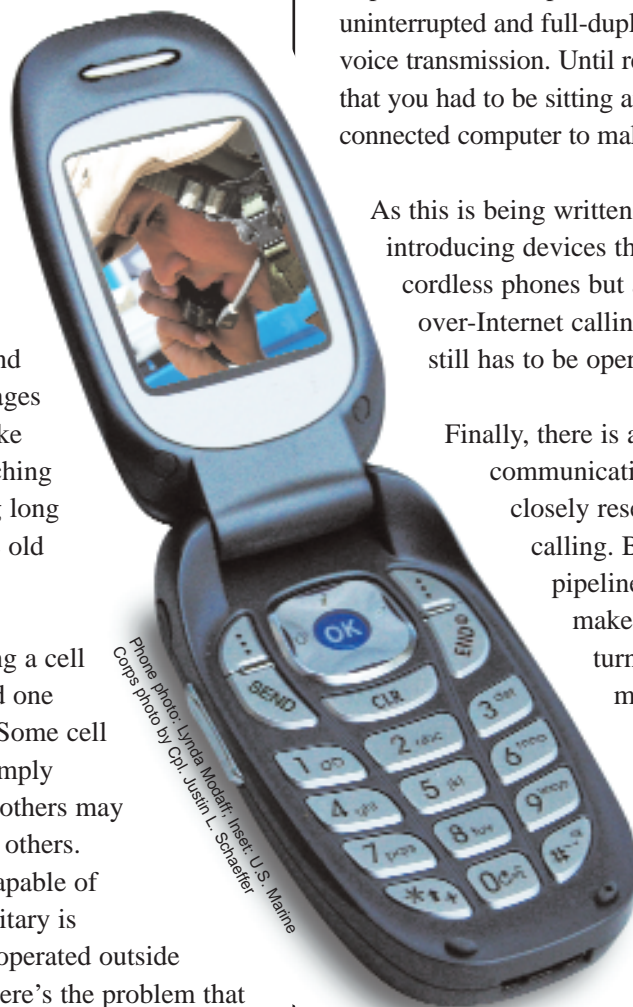
years ahead of domestic offerings, cell phone service is relatively cheap and universal for Americans. So families living on opposite ends of the country can talk long and often for pennies. Military families in that situation would be crazy not to take advantage of the “family plans” offered by most carriers, which provide free, unlimited calling day or night to other family plan members.

Another increasingly popular way to communicate free of charge with distant family members is by using the Internet. Unlike videoconferencing mentioned earlier, this method — made popular by a company called Skype — uses a special Internet “protocol” to deliver crystal clear, uninterrupted and full-duplex (both parties can talk at once) voice transmission. Until recently, the drawback has been that you had to be sitting at a turned-on and broadband-connected computer to make, receive and carry on calls.

As this is being written, however, companies are introducing devices that look and operate like cordless phones but are designed to facilitate voice-over-Internet calling. But an Internet-enabled PC still has to be operating for them to work.

Finally, there is another method of communicating over the Internet that more closely resembles conventional telephone calling. By using only the broadband pipeline and not the PC, users can make and receive calls without ever turning on the computer. Offered by many companies, including conventional carrier Verizon, these VoiceOverInternet services carry a fee. This fee is generally a bargain compared with conventional phone service, especially in light of the extra features offered. For example, a company called Packet8 ([www.get-packet8.net](http://www.get-packet8.net)) offers unlimited voice and videoconferencing — in excellent quality black and white or color — to and from anywhere in North America for less than \$20 a month for each service.

And when it comes to easing the pain of separation, today's technology is hard to beat — unless you know someone with a secret transporter tucked away.



Phone photo: Lyda Modaff; Inset: U.S. Marine Corps photo by Cpl. Justin L. Schaefer