

Technology has changed the way **we** communicate during deployments

By Tara Puckey

Letters have been a trademark of war for as long as anyone can remember.

Handwritten letters of love, horror and of happiness have made their way from the battlefield to the home-front. Sometimes days, weeks, even months would pass without any communication. But technology has almost eliminated the wordless gaps, changing the way military families deal with long deployments.

A 2010 survey by Blue Star Families reported that 89 percent of military families use email to communicate with their service member. The Digital IQ Index: Public Sector, a recent study ranking government, nonprofit and industry trade groups for their use of social media and online strategies, ranked the U.S. Army as fourth on the list for their use of the digital world.

U.S. Marine Corps Lance Cpl. Jasen Kratzer speaks via video teleconference with his wife and newborn son in the United Service Organizations office at Camp Buehring, Kuwait. Kratzer is a truck driver with Combat Logistics Battalion 22, 22nd Marine Expeditionary Unit.

U.S. Marine Corps photo by Cpl. Justin M. Martinez





U.S. Navy Logistics Specialist Seaman Vincent Miller, assigned to the amphibious assault ship USS Peleliu, chats with his wife and son during a video teleconference (VTC) session aboard the ship while under way in the Pacific Ocean. VTC uses a live video feed and gives deployed military members a way to communicate with family members. U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Michael Russell

And that digital world is something for which Emily Fisher is thankful. Her husband, Staff Sergeant Josh Fisher, has been deployed multiple times over their seven-year marriage. They recently welcomed a son, Jackson, into the world, making communication even more important during the first year of his life.

"I can't imagine how difficult it must have been for spouses before the technology we have now," said Fisher. "The separation is still hard, but at least we can communicate in some way on a regular basis."

Through the use of Yahoo Messenger and email, Fisher and her husband had some sort of contact almost daily during his last deployment overseas. For his upcoming deployment, she plans to try out new forms of communication, especially video, to capture some important moments in Jackson's life.

"We just installed a new security system where you can watch the cameras in our home from the Internet at any time," said Fisher. "Josh can watch Jackson playing or sleeping all the time. I'm just thankful we have the technology so he can enjoy some of the moments he would otherwise miss."

New programs and software are constantly hitting the market, making it easier for troops to stay connected with their loved ones. Here are some new—and old—ways to communicate with your loved ones during a deployment:

Qik www.qik.com

It's not always easy to capture life away from the computer.

Uploading videos from cell phones and cameras has made it easier to share moments with deployed service members, but Qik offers everything in one package, without multiple steps. Record video on more than 140 supported phones directly to a unique Qik homepage.

Faraway service members or other family can view the video live, or users can choose to archive and upload later. Videos can be shared directly with YouTube, Facebook or Twitter, through email and even can be downloaded to a computer.

PostEgram www.postegram.com

Facebook is a daily chronicle of many lives. From pictures to statuses, surveys and links, many Americans share their day-to-day updates with others through this popular social media site. But without an Internet connection, service members can miss out on the lives of their family and friends. PostEgram, a Detroit-based company, has a solution. The program turns status updates, uploaded photos and other content from up to 15 family members or friends into a personal Facebook magazine mailed directly to the service member. Subscriptions are required, but are reasonable, starting at less than \$5 per month.

Skype www.skype.com

Skype is likely the most popular way to communicate for military families, with news stories of live births on Skype popping up all over

Be Smart

Digital communication is increasingly prevalent among service members and their families. But an increase in access can also mean new risks and challenges. Be sure to keep these things in mind for everyone's safety:

OPSEC, OPSEC, OPSEC

Never give information about places, dates, times or names. The security of our troops (and your loved ones) is a top priority, and even sharing specific information through email with family members in the United States could put them at risk. That goes double for sharing such information on social media sites including Facebook and Twitter.

THEY'RE ALL SECRET (AND DIFFERENT)

Use different passwords for each of your sites. Having your information stolen from one social media site or email account is bad enough, but when passwords are the same, the result could be even more damaging. It's also a good idea to change passwords every so often, but be sure to write them down someplace and keep them secure.

HOMEFRONT OPSEC

Don't think that just because you aren't on the front lines, you shouldn't have some serious security measures of your own. If you're posting about your spouse being gone, don't tell people you've left the house, as well.

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the world. And recent changes to Skype have made it even easier for families to stay connected. Mobile apps for multiple platforms makes it possible for users to continue conversations away from their computer, and a new group video call feature allows a whole family to reach their service member. A recent software release, Skype 5.0, allows Windows users to connect with their Facebook accounts to check updates and call or text.



U.S. Army Master Sgt. Phillip Murphy, right, senior supply sergeant, assigned to Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 4th Advise and Assist Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division, chats with his son, Samuel, during the video teleconference session from Contingency Operating Site Marez, Iraq. The video teleconference was sponsored by Meadows Elementary School at Fort Hood, Texas. This was the first time Murphy was able to talk to his son by video teleconference while deployed in support of Operation New Dawn.

U.S. Army photo by Staff Sgt. Renee Wilson

OoVoo www.oovoo.com

Like Skype, ooVoo is a video and audio calling service, used with a computer, Internet connection and webcam. One of the nice features of ooVoo is that it allows users to communicate with others who don't have the ooVoo program—something Skype doesn't do. Users are also able to record short video messages and send them via email or save them to a computer to upload elsewhere. Many features are free, but extra plans start at less than \$10 a month. Users can also opt to pay only for the services they use.

Websites for Heroes

www.websitesforheroes.com

If families and service members are concerned about security or just want everything in one place, Websites for Heroes offers password-protected websites for military families for one year. The sites feature a video gallery, photo albums and a family calendar. Each child can have their own personalized page for updates while friends and family can share updates and stories on a message board. The best part? Thanks to generous donations, these sites are completely free.

Sesame Street Family Connections

www.sesamestreetfamilyconnections.org

It's always difficult for young children to feel connected when a parent is deployed for long periods of time. They can be confused by video chats and emails alone may not be engaging enough. Sesame Street Family Connections is a portal built for children and families to communicate with a faraway loved one. The page is completely customizable, with child-friendly backgrounds and their favorite Sesame Street characters. It is formatted in a way that even young children can operate the message board, post a photo or add video and audio messages. Children can also create artwork to share by coloring pictures through the site. Even better, pictures of family members and comments from the Sesame Street characters can help children feel truly connected.

Pilot Handwriting

www.pilothandwriting.com

In times where email is the only form of communication available, why not make it a little more personal? Pilot Handwriting allows users to scan their own handwriting with just a webcam, camera or scanner. The program then allows users to type personal, handwritten emails that are sent directly from the site.

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And ladies, keep in mind that it may not be a good idea to broadcast the fact that your husband is overseas for a year. Yes, it is sad to have to worry about such things, but you are responsible for your family and their safety on the homefront while your spouse is doing his part overseas. Do also be careful about geotagging pictures and status updates that share your whereabouts with the world.

PRIVATE: KEEP OUT

Most social media sites have multiple settings for privacy. Use them. Post information to friends and family only and start being selective about who you "friend." Do you really need all 12,000 of those people to know where you are and what you're doing?

LOCK IT UP

When you're finished updating, uploading and browsing a social media site, or done chatting on a video call, log out. This is especially important if you're using a computer someone else might be able to access.

Brightkite

www.brightkite.com

Family members often struggle to find ways to continue online communication when they are away from a computer. Brightkite is a free program for communication on all fronts. Messages are sent from computer to computer, similar to instant messaging, but can also be sent from computer to phone in the form of a text message. Multiple family and friends can be invited to join the conversation, keeping everyone connected. ●

Tara Puckey is a military spouse who has been through her share of deployments. She currently lives with her family in Indiana.