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New Internet café connects troops to families

By Harold J. Adams • hjadams@courier-journal.com • February 22, 2010

Local military personnel gained another way Monday to stay connected to family and friends when duty takes them away from home.

VFW Post 3281 in New Albany opened an Internet café that will let troops and their loved ones trade e-mail and even chat face-to-face through videoconferencing.

The \$10,000 project includes four computers set up in a former storage room of the post at 232 E 5th Street. Curtis Zoellers, the post quartermaster, said he began pushing the project to fellow VFW members more than a year ago as a way to support active duty personnel.

"If they're able to communicate with their families it keeps the morale up," Zoellers said.

The free service is available during the post's usual open hours from noon to midnight. If deployments to far-off time zones make it necessary, "we're more than willing to come in and open the club" at other times, Zoellers said.

Troops from the New Albany National Guard Armory were on hand for the ribbon cutting Monday.

Sgt. Robin Belleville, a combat medic from Louisville, said the café will be "really great for us when we are overseas because it means we can not only talk to our family, we can see them. It means a lot to us."

The café provides family members the opportunity to use the same kind of equipment available to their deployed relatives, Belleville said.

"My mom doesn't have Internet service" at home,

he said.

Lt. Josh Chastain of Sellersburg, who became a father for the first time less than a month ago, said, "At my house I don't have the ability to do the videoconferencing. I have a new child, and that would be a huge benefit to be able to see his development."

Chastain said similar services are available at local armories but only on a scheduled basis. "This will be more spontaneous," he said.

Zoellers said the service could be particularly useful for older people wanting to keep in touch with troops.

"Most elderly people don't like computers and probably don't have one," he said. Three general-use computers are together in one section of the café and one is set up for videoconferencing in a smaller adjacent room with a door that can be closed to shut out background noise.

The City of New Albany provided \$5,000 for the project. Another \$2,500 came from the Horseshoe Foundation along with other smaller donations of money, labor and material from others, Zoellers said.

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