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A Dish in the Desert: USO Piloting Expeditionary Satellite Internet Kit Program for Service Members Downrange

Programs:USO Connects



Rebecca Medeiros

By Eric Brandner

There was nothing left to do but watch.

After months of research, deliberation and coordination, two reinforced plastic cases left the United States earlier this summer destined for Camp Shorab, a once-bustling Marine Corps base in dusty Southwestern Afghanistan.

When unpacked, assembled and activated, the packages' color-coded contents provided a free internet connection for a few hundred American service members. As the Facebook status updates and phone calls home flooded the newly established Wi-Fi pipeline, Rebecca Medeiros stood in the background taking notes.

"[Service members here are] so happy that there's people who still care about them and want to be able to help out in these capacities," Medeiros said. "They're always grateful.

"The whole goal for the region and for the USO itself is to connect family, home and country. And what better way to do that if we can provide free Wi-Fi connectivity so they can actually see their family, update their social media, get access to a piece of home when they're so remotely away?"

Medeiros is the USO's point person on the ground. She started volunteering with the USO downrange in 2011 while she was still a military contractor. She took a full-time position with the organization in 2012 and is currently the USO Kandahar center manager, though she travels throughout the region providing expeditionary support, too.

And there are few things in the USO's arsenal more expeditionary than these satellite kits.



Photo credit Rebecca Medeiros

A service member unpacks a USO satellite internet kit at Camp Shorab, Afghanistan. The kit provides free internet to service members at the remote base.

The USO has often polled service members and families about what they need most. Their top request in recent years has been connectivity. This is only amplified as America's military deploys to more remote regions for longer periods of time.

"They're usually paying an exorbitant amount for internet that is provided [by contractors in the Mideast]," Medeiros said of service members who don't have access to USO-provided or other free internet connections downrange. "We understand that a lot of these soldiers are young men and women between the ages of 18 to 24 and generally the younger enlisted don't get paid very much. So when these companies are asking them to pay \$100 to \$200 for internet a month, it can definitely be a financial strain. So it's definitely nice to be able to provide free internet to the men and women out here."

Last fall, a team at the USO's corporate headquarters in Arlington, Virginia, began devising new ways to deliver satellite technology to farther-flung locations where service members had few or no options to connect back home while also bolstering current connectivity at major USO hubs around the region.

The USO worked with communications partner L3 to significantly boost current bandwidth for its 12 locations in Southwest Asia. Then it got to work for the service members who couldn't get a signal at all.

USO Director of Logistics Jonathan Matthews was part of the team that had to identify the right system for the job: gear that was both durable enough to make it to a remote forward operating base in one piece and affordable enough to maximize the nonprofit's budget.

"Once we found the sweet spot in the Venn diagram, we started testing," Matthews said. And Camp Shorab is that first test.

The satellite kit is designed to be both as lightweight as possible and to be plug-and-play for those who receive it on the ground, even if they aren't familiar with how the technology works when they open the box.

Matthews worked with USO partner FedEx to ship the initial system to USO Kandahar, where Medeiros and a military IT specialist deployed to the base loaded up the technology and took it 100 miles west to Camp Shorab. There, two more service members at Camp Shorab helped install the satellite dish and got the Wi-Fi network up and running.

While it's a luxury for service members in such austere conditions to have free internet, there are still unavoidable bandwidth limitations. Matthews said L3 helps with that on the back end, configuring the system to prioritize email, voice calls, and video connectivity in that order to optimize the number of connections service members can make back home.

And all those notes Medeiros was taking? They'll be used to make improvements later this year when the USO tests a second expeditionary satellite connectivity kit, this time in Iraq.

"I feel very grateful to be part of this organization that ... helps people who are serving who are literally on the front lines," Medeiros said. "It's a unique feeling."