

The Boston Globe

Soldiers find link to wed across globe

By Donovan Slack, Globe Staff | June 14, 2004

Many soldiers ordered to Iraq in recent months have made a pit stop at the altar before shipping out, eager to wed their significant others for fear they may never see them again. But just as technology has transformed war on the battlefield, it is altering the personal side of war for soldiers and their families; including the way they get married.

In a small video conference ceremony spanning some 7,261 miles, two members of the Massachusetts Army National Guard tied the knot this weekend, the bride in Iraq and the groom in Colorado.

"It was amazing," said Sergeant Rick Everton, 29, who married Staff Sergeant Shadow Evans from a small meeting room at a Doubletree Hotel in Durango, Colo. "I could actually see her and look into her eyes."

Providers of the video conferencing link said the marriage was the first of its kind between soldiers, but a precursor of times to come, when soldiers abroad will regularly witness and participate in family events such as weddings, births, and graduations in the United States or in other countries.

"These people have been estranged from their families during war time," said John Harlow, executive director of New York based Freedom Calls Foundation, a charity that plans to set up facilities for video conferencing throughout Iraq and Afghanistan. "We're now enabling them to participate in these milestone family events through new technology."

During Memorial Day weekend, Harlow said, a soldier in Iraq spent 12 hours coaching his wife in Columbus, Ohio, through the birth of their daughter. A week later, another soldier in Iraq witnessed the graduation of his son from a high school in Bush Prairie, Calif., and met his son's girlfriend for the first time. "Keep my boy out of trouble," First Sergeant Michael Kerie instructed her.

Then, there was this weekend's wedding ceremony, which required a little more juggling. Only a few states, Texas and Montana among them, allow weddings where one of the people to be married cannot appear, whether because of health problems, incarceration, or, in this case, war. Parents of the bride, Al and Randi Evans of Los Angeles, said that after many hours of Internet research, they were able to arrange the ceremony in Colorado, the closest state to allow proxy weddings.

Everton spent eight hours flying cross country, then 13 driving with the Evanses to Durango before the ceremony on Friday. At 7 p.m. in Colorado — Saturday morning in Iraq — his bride arrived at the video facility at Camp Cooke, just north of Baghdad, in the military's version of a limousine: an armored Humvee.

Evans wore a white sweater and jeans and carried a bouquet of silk tulips and carnations, her hair tied back with a bright blue bow. She stopped short in front of a video screen, tearing up at the sight of her parents and Everton in Durango.

"It was a lithe overwhelming," said Shadow (Evans) Everton, in a telephone interview yesterday from Camp Cooke. It was the first trip to the "altar" for the 30-year-old from Middleborough, who had been stationed at Camp Edwards on the Cape until last December. She hadn't seen Everton in five months, and she hadn't seen her parents in a year.

"The bride was crying before we even started, then the mother started crying," said Judge Martha Minot, the county official in Colorado who performed the ceremony. Minot said it was the most poignant ceremony she has ever performed. "Oftentimes you wonder whether the marriage is going to survive, but rarely do you concern yourself about whether the couple, the individuals, will survive."

Rick Everton, a Mashpee resident and corrections officer with the Barnstable County Sheriff's Department who met his wife about a year-and-a-half ago at Camp Edwards, received orders last week to be ready to ship out to Iraq tomorrow. Shadow Everton said the news prompted this weekend's video wedding.

"My major concern when I found out he was being deployed was that, God forbid, if anything should happen to either one of us, I wanted us to be able to get leave to see each other," she said.

The couple recited their vows, her mother signed the marriage license and other paperwork, and the judge pronounced them man and wife.

Scholars say technology, though not so fancy, has been connecting soldiers with their families for decades, including photographs exchanged during World War II in special "V-mail," or free postal services. Tape recorders were used during the Vietnam War and audiotapes sent back and forth from the front. E-mail came of age during the war in Kosovo, and as of this past December, scholars say, two-thirds of the troops in Iraq were sending e-mail at least once a week.

"The new technology has changed forms of communication and interaction, but this is not something new," said Charles Moskos, professor of sociology at Northwestern University and author of several books about the armed forces. "The digital camera is the real new frontier in Iraq."

But for the Evertons, video conferencing was magic. "It was the best thing ever," Shadow Everton said.

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