

Dad in Iraq meets newborn son online

By **Joanne Huist Smith**

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Their comments were typical for new parents, debating whether their infant son resembled mom's baby pictures or perhaps had dad's distinctive family nose.

U.S. Marine Sgt. Thomas Charles Combs, Jr., stationed in Al Asad, a base near the Syrian border in Iraq, met his 17-day-old son on Friday via a 10-foot-wide video conference screen at Miami Valley Hospital. The Combs family talked for about an hour.

"I wish I could just come through the screen, grab him and hold him," Combs said. "My heart is pounding so much right now with joy. ... I never thought in a million years that this would happen for me."

The Internet call was arranged by the Freedom Calls Foundation, a public charity that provides free communication services to soldiers stationed overseas with their families.

"We heard soldiers in Iraq were spending up to \$10,000 a year to speak with their families at home. We thought this was something the American people should do for the soldiers and their families," said John Harlow, executive director of the foundation.

Proud momma Jody Combs, nervous and somewhat shy as she presented Thomas Charles Combs III (T.C.) to his namesake, could not stop smiling.

"I'm thankful," she said. "It was very emotional."

The Combs parted on Aug. 1.

With six weeks left in a complicated pregnancy, Jody traveled to Ohio from her North Carolina home to stay in Springboro with her mother, Lisa Thompson. Combs left Marine Corps Air Station New River, N. C., two weeks later for Iraq.

The couple had seen a television special on the Freedom Calls Foundation and Jody had e-mailed the organization after she arrived in Ohio to schedule a meeting with baby and father around the baby's due date. The foundation arranges for soldiers and Marines to attend family events, such as new births, from the war zone.

But, baby T.C. didn't wait for the call to be arranged. He raced into the world Sept. 7 — at 7 pound 8 ounces — one month before his due date.

Still, technology came through and gave Combs the chance to be a long-distance participant in his son's birth.

Though Jody was at first told American Red Cross policy was to contact fathers only after a birth, someone went to bat for the family.

The Red Cross passed on the cell phone number of Jody's delivery nurse at Miami Valley Hospital to Combs. He called every 15 minutes for two hours until his baby was born.

"I was there for her labor. I got to hear my son cry for the first time," Combs said. "I just thank the Lord he came through alright."

Combs was notified he would receive Friday's video call about two weeks ago.

"I haven't slept since yesterday. I was up and ready to go this morning," he said.

The family expects to be reunited in March.

The Freedom Calls Foundation has three facilities in Iraq with 50 computers and 20 telephones at Camp Taji, north of Baghdad, and video conference facilities at Camp Fallujah and Al Asad. More than 2,000 soldiers use the facilities every day.

Miami Valley hospital borrowed the equipment for the video conference Friday and expects to have its own system operational in about two months.

To learn more about the Freedom Calls Foundation, visit the Web site at www.freedomcalls.org. The foundation is supported by corporate and individuals contributions.

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