



Minnesota Guard Soldier's VTC Vows



Amanda Swanson kisses her husband, SPC Keith Swanson, who is stationed in Al Asad Forward Operating Base, Iraq, after their marriage ceremony conducted via VTC February 14 at the Inver Grove Heights Training and Community Center, MN. Photo by CPL Joe Roos, MN National Guard Public Affairs.

2/26/07, Inver Grove Heights, MN — Bride-to-be Amanda Watson was nervous, ducking in and out of the bathroom with her mom in tow to dab on a little makeup, curl her blonde-brown hair and slip into an elegant strappy dress.

A two-tiered cake with pink rosettes arrived in the steady palms of a relative as pearl, pink and red balloons stood at attention. The groom, SPC Keith Swanson, 21, was cool and collected in his camouflage military fatigues. His attire was unorthodox, but then again very little about this wedding was traditional. Watson, 20, wore a red dress with an exposed back. "This is so unconventional I thought I'd make it more unconventional," she said.

That's because Watson was running around a National Guard Armory in Inver Grove Heights, MN, while SPC Swanson, a member of the MNARNG was at Al Asad Air Base in Iraq, his grinning mug projected onto a 72-inch screen via satellite. The couple's nuptials would take place via video teleconference (VTC). "I just said that to my wife on the way down, 'I never thought I'd be driving to a National Guard Armory for a wedding,' " said Watson's father, Steve Watson.

The couple planned to marry this July, in person, but scuttled those plans in favor of a VTC wedding when SPC Swanson's tour of duty was extended last month. He was scheduled to come home in March, but now he will return sometime in August. SPC Swanson provides convoy security as part of the 2nd Battalion, 135th Infantry, based in Mankato, MN.

A photographer, deejay and wedding location all had been selected for the July ceremony. Dresses had been bought. Hotel rooms had been booked. Details for the 400-person affair are on hold until SPC Swanson returns; a ceremony sometime in 2008 is now planned. On Valentine's Day Watson traded in her dream outdoor ceremony for a National Guard computer room with baby blue walls filled with flat-screen monitors.

"The only thing I'm scared of is having to say goodbye [to him] at some point again," she said hours before the 2:30 p.m. ceremony. "The camera has to go off." SPC Swanson's aunt, Nicole Kilanowski kick-started the unusual wedding in mid-January by e-mailing Gov. Tim Pawlenty's office to ask for help with a video conference wedding. "This is all my fault," she said with a grin.

The governor's office got in touch with the National Guard, which assisted in a similar wedding in 2004 for a soldier in Bosnia. This ceremony was the first time the technology was used for a wedding involving a MN Guard member in Iraq, said Phil Stephan, the MNARNG's video operations manager. Another is scheduled today and four more are in the works, all involving Guard members in Iraq, Stephan said. The Guard routinely links families via VTC, but weddings are rare. "This is the most important thing we can do: Take care of families," he said.

About 40 relatives and close friends donned suits and dresses, corsages and ties for the Swanson-Watson Valentine's Day wedding at the Armory in Inver Grove Heights, which sports the largest screen and best technology of the MN Guard armories. The live, three-hour satellite feed from Iraq started about 2 p.m.-11 p.m. Iraq time.

SPC Swanson's friend and MN resident, Chris Bergman, sat at his side, having flown in specifically for the wedding from his post in southern Iraq. Bergman's appearance was a double surprise; his wife and children were guests at the wedding but didn't know he would be there, by satellite.

Flanked by computer desks, knee-high flower girls in satin white dresses scattered rose petals. Watson's parents walked her down the aisle as the wedding march played from a computer. There was a five-second lag between MN and Iraq, but that didn't interfere with the plentiful tears and laughter.

"Keith," the Rev. Dan Weise said after the rings were exchanged, "now there's no problem with a number of gentlemen volunteering to kiss the bride here. "I think I'll just blow her a kiss," SPC Swanson said with a laugh. Moments later, Watson, who changed her name to Swanson, ran up to the screen and kissed her husband's image before taking several photos with him and family members.

Guests gave them a few minutes alone together after the ceremony. As for the wedding night, SPC Swanson said he planned to "have some pizza."