

Los Angeles Times

On The Internet: www.latimes.com †

SATURDAY, JUNE 17, 2006

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Happy Father's Day - From Half a World Away

Videoconference calls between Anaheim and Iraq help military families reconnect

By Sara Lin, Times Staff Writer
June 17, 2006

Renee Ritchie was surprised at how nervous she felt Friday before the videoconference call to her husband in Iraq.

Since his deployment five months ago, she had talked with the Marine corporal by phone dozens of times.

But this was going to be different.

Renee Ritchie, 21, wore the silver Tiffany bracelet her husband, Christopher "Carson" Ritchie, 23, had bought her for Mother's Day. In her arms she held their 7-month-old son, William Wyatt, who was just learning to stand.



DIALING FOR DAD: In Anaheim Cpl. Renee Ritchie and her mother, Jennie Garcia, compare baby William Wyatt Ritchie's facial features with Cpl. Christopher "Carson" Ritchie's in Iraq.

"I'm really, really nervous," said Renee Ritchie, who is also a Marine. "It's weird. He's my husband, but it's like I'm seeing him for the first time again.

"I have no clue what I'm going to say. I think I'll just sit there and stare at him for 30 minutes."

In honor of Father's Day, the Ritchies and about four dozen other Southern California military families were given free 30-minute videoconference calls to Iraq.

The event was organized by the nonprofit Freedom Calls Foundation, which helps military families keep in touch via satellite videoconferencing.

In Anaheim on Friday, 10 families from Orange and Riverside counties talked to husbands and fathers on large television screens courtesy of AT&T.

Nationwide, 300 military families — chosen by the Marines — were connecting with loved ones in Iraq as a Father's Day treat. John B. Harlow II, executive director of Freedom Calls Foundation, said he hoped to help more families connect on the Fourth of July.

When it was Renee Ritchie's turn in front of the camera, her eyes quickly welled with tears. Carson Ritchie, in Fallouja, grinned ear to ear.

As soon as he saw the baby, the Marine playfully stuck out his tongue.

Not accustomed to seeing each other on live video, the couple sat in stunned silence for a few seconds. William, sitting in his mother's lap, slapped the tabletop.

"You gonna say something or just sit there?" Renee Ritchie asked jokingly.

Other couples also appeared surprised by the intimacy of the technology, which gave them 30 minutes of uninterrupted conversation. One Marine saw his 2-week-old daughter for the first time. He stared and smiled, finally telling his wife he was speechless.

Talking to loved ones back in the States isn't cheap. A 20-minute phone call from Iraq to the U.S. costs \$9. And is unreliable.

Whenever the Ritchies talk, they try not to ask open-ended questions, never knowing when the telephone signal will drop.

The two met at Camp Blue Diamond near Ramadi, Iraq. Renee, who is also a corporal, recalled their first date: "He asked me to go to dinner and I said, 'Where? The chow hall? It's free.' "

The couple returned to Camp Pendleton last year and had a baby. Three days after they married, Carson left for his third deployment to Iraq.

On Friday, the Ritchies quickly got over their camera shyness. He leaned so close to the camera that she complained she couldn't see his chin.

"Sit back a little bit," she said.

"I'm trying to look at the baby — he's huge!" he answered. "Make him stand up for me. Wow, he's so big."

She told her husband that he looked thin. "No biscuits and gravy here," he replied.

"I miss you," he said.

"I miss you too."

After several minutes, everyone left the room so that the Ritchies and their baby could be alone.