

Rocky Mountain News

Marine dad in Iraq hears baby's first cry using videoconference

George Kochaniec Jr. © News

**By Fernando Quintero, Rocky Mountain News
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On such a somber day of remembrance, Marine Sgt. Zachary Denham, of Aurora, will recall Sept. 11, 2006, as the day he got to see his newborn daughter cradled in his wife's arms - from 10,000 miles away.

Wrapped in a soft pink blanket, Hailey Elizabeth Denham, and her mother, Andrea Denham, were patched through via video conferencing from the Medical Center of Aurora to the Marine stationed in Fallujah, Iraq.

"Awwww. She's a beauty," said Zachary as he watched his day-old daughter drift in and out of sleep. "We did pretty good, huh, honey?"

His wife's eyes then filled with tears.

"I love you, honey," she said. "I miss you soooo much."

Thanks to the Freedom Calls Foundation, a nonprofit group that provides military families with free telephone service and e-mail as well as videoconferencing, Zachary was also able to hear his daughter's first cry over the phone when she was born Sunday at 6:48 p.m.

"It only makes sense that families separated by tours of duty during wartime use existing technology to keep in contact with their loved ones abroad," said John Harlow, the foundation's executive director. "Too often, families only hear from them when there's bad news, or they just don't hear from them often enough."

"Soldiers can now keep their commitments to their families while keeping their commitments to their country."

The New York City-based foundation has also made arrangements for military personnel to "attend" important celebrations such as graduations, weddings, even professional sporting events.

It's the small family milestones that Andrea said she wishes her husband could be there for, like their 18-month-old son, Hunter, taking his first steps.

The restless toddler, who hadn't seen his father since he was deployed on his second tour of duty in Iraq nine months ago, smiled at the image of his father in camouflage fatigues.



Andrea Denham holds up her newborn, Hailey, for her husband, Marine Sgt. Zachary Denham, (who is based in Fallujah, Iraq) to see, via a videoconference set up at the Medical Center of Aurora on Monday morning.

"It's dada," said Andrea pointing to the large screen inside a hospital conference room.

After a few awkward exchanges in front of cameras and reporters, the couple and their children were left alone to spend time together.

"I'm glad that a sad day can be a happy one for us," said Andrea shortly before the video conference.

"Now, he just needs to come home safely."

Freedom Calls

2003 The year Freedom Calls Foundation was started to bring together families separated by wartime tours of duty.

2,000 The number of times each day that soldiers and Marines use Freedom Calls facilities in Iraq to communicate with their families.

30,000 Families which are able to videoconference from their homes or from more than 10,000 sites nationwide including hospitals, universities and corporations.

For more information, log on to the foundation's Web site, www.freedomcalls.org