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Satellite enables Vancouver mom to show off newborn to dad in Iraq

U.S. soldier elated to see day-old daughter the first time on a video call to St. Paul's Hospital

Randy Shore, Vancouver Sun
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U.S. soldier Joseph Chavez couldn't wipe the smile from his face at seeing his daughter Lilliana for the very first time on a video call via satellite uplink from Iraq.

"Oh wow, she's so pretty," a beaming Chavez said over and over from Baghdad as his wife Naomi held his sleeping one-day-old daughter up to the camera for him to see.



Proud military dad Joseph Chavez grins from Iraq as he sees daughter Lilliana for the first time via video call from St. Paul's Hospital.

Photograph by : Bill Keay, Vancouver Sun

The video conference, organized by the American non-profit foundation Freedom Calls, was held in the basement of Vancouver's St. Paul's Hospital and attended by throngs of media, at least for the first few minutes. Chavez was projected on a large screen, fuzzy but clearly elated.

"Look at her, she's beautiful," he said. "She looks happy to be alive right now."

Naomi, who lives in Vancouver, had talked to her husband after Lilliana's birth and sent pictures from her computer, but he was still beside himself to see his new wife and even newer daughter live onscreen.

"I saw all the pictures of everyone else getting to hold her," said Chavez. "I'm very jealous."

Chavez and Lilliana won't meet face to face until July during his mid-deployment break. Until then, the young family will manage the 11,000-kilometre distance over the phone and the Internet. Much as they always have.

Naomi and Joseph met through the MySpace social networking website and began exchanging letters and pictures. Chavez, a native of Spokane, Wash., was stationed at Fort Carson in Denver when Naomi flew down for their first meeting.

She called it "love at first sight."

Their relationship has already survived one deployment to Iraq and Lilliana is the happy product of a four-day home visit last July. The pair married last November in Vancouver. His current deployment has nearly a year to run.

Naomi admitted that finishing her pregnancy and going through the birth without her husband has been hard, but the last couple of days have been the hardest. Nurses kept Naomi supplied with oranges and apple juice to get the "slightly woozy" new mom through the hour-long call.

"I've been waiting to see his face for 48 hours," she told reporters after making sure to tell Joseph he was "looking really good."

Chavez called the video meeting the highlight of his tour, "at least until I come home to visit in July."

He admits he might have had the easier road being in Iraq the last few months and regrets missing Lilliana's birth.

"Naomi is the real soldier, she's the real hero," he said, laughing.

Chavez said video conferencing will ease the pain of separation, but not all of it.

"For all my bravado and massive amount of manliness, when I heard her cry I couldn't help but tear up," he said. "To know that I won't be around for the first year of her life, it kills me."

Naomi e-mailed Freedom Calls about a month ago to ask for a video conference so that Joseph could meet baby Lilliana.

"They just took over and did everything," she said.

Freedom Calls Foundation uses high technology to keep U.S. soldiers abroad connected with their families.

The signal from Iraq is bounced off a satellite and picked up in Germany, where it is sent by fibre-optic cable to Atlanta, Ga., and then by high-speed Internet to families in the United States -- and this time to Canada. The service is slick, with only a 600-millisecond lag, which is noticeable but not enough to scramble conversation.

"We can connect anywhere in the world via satellite, but this is our first-ever call to Canada," said Freedom Calls spokeswoman Kathryn Hudacek.

"When soldiers go to Iraq they have a habit of leaving a lot of pregnant wives behind," said Hudacek. "It's a real deployment phenomenon."

Freedom Calls organizes 2,000 video conferences a month and at least 200 are dads meeting new babies, she said.

After the initial 60-minute video conference, Chavez will get three 30-minute sessions a month to help dad and baby bond.

Although this was their first call to Canada, signals to the Great White North could become commonplace. Freedom Calls (freedomcalls.org) is currently raising money to set up operations in Afghanistan, which would serve the needs of Canadian soldiers as well as American.

Five video centers in Iraq cost about \$300,000 a year to operate and serve about 30 per cent of the 140,000 troops in Iraq. To set up from scratch in Afghanistan will cost about \$200,000.

Freedom Calls provides the video service and about a million minutes of telephone service a month to soldiers free of charge.

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