

A Marine in Iraq gets a high-tech hug from home

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Phillip Stevenson Jr. first laid eyes on Phillip Stevenson III on Friday afternoon.

Fathers meet their newborn sons thousands of times a day throughout the world, but the circumstances of this encounter were hardly routine.

Dad arrived with a rifle slung over his shoulder.

Cpl. Phillip Stevenson was in Iraq, serving with the Marines near Al Asad as a computer support technician.

Baby Phillip and his mother, Teresa Stevenson, were in the basement conference room at Community Memorial Hospital in Ventura, nearly 8,000 miles away.

This milestone moment was made possible by Freedomcalls.org, a nonprofit that provides a satellite video link between troops serving in Iraq and their families on the home front.

Cpl. Stevenson has been away from his wife, toddler daughter Nadine and his extended Oxnard family since September when he left for his first tour of duty in the Middle East.

The couple had met by chance in front of the Paris Resort and Casino in Las Vegas. They married two months later, on New Year's Eve 2005.

Baby Nadine was born a year and one day later.



Chuck Kirman / Star staff

Marine Phillip Stevenson Jr., 22, stationed in Iraq, speaks with his wife, Teresa, holding their newborn, via video link. His sister Krystine Stevenson holds the couple's other child.



Chuck Kirman / Star staff

Teresa Stevenson, 20, holding her infant son, Phillip Stevenson III, chats during a teleconference with her husband, currently serving in Iraq.

Teresa was about halfway through her pregnancy with Phillip III when her husband left for the front.

He had missed his daughter's first birthday and worried Nadine would forget him, Teresa told me.

Just 24 hours before, she had gone through the rigors of childbirth. But she was really nervous as she waited for the video hook-up to go through.

She was nibbling her thumbnail and rocking the baby as two Marines suddenly appeared on the screen.

They did not have good news. One explained there had been some mix-up. The call was supposed to have happened the day before.

But Stevenson's dad, Phillip Sr., jumped in. He explained he had just talked to his son by cell phone and that he was on his way to the on-base studio.

Soon enough, Cpl. Stevenson, known to his family as Bubba, arrived.

He squinted into the screen and after a delay a grin crossed his face.

"Is that my little boy?" Cpl. Stevenson said, as Teresa cradled day-old Phillip in front of a video camera.

Meanwhile, Nadine decided her daddy was inside the large screen where his image was projected. She toddled over and waved into it — unfortunately out of her daddy's view.

Baby Phillip was ready for his close-up. With the exception of the occasional errant burp, he kept his cool the entire time.

Teresa told her husband the labor hadn't been so bad.

"I'm proud of you," he replied.

The baby is long, 21 inches, and he has dad's long, slender toes, she told him.

They then talked about the things that top a new parent's agenda.

Does insurance cover baby Phillip's circumcision? Teresa asked.

"It did for Nadine, but she turned out to be a girl," he wisecracked.

Cpl. Stevenson was a little taken aback to learn there were about a dozen people in the room, including a few reporters.

So Estelle Brutton, the hospital's clinical manager of labor and delivery, suggested everyone clear the room so they could talk privately.

In the hallway, Cpl. Stevenson's mother, Carrie, said her only son looks the same except more tired.

His younger sister Krystine agreed, wiping away tears. For her, the video is too intense. She prefers the easy back and forth of e-mail.

The family was allowed back in the room just as the call was ending.

"I'm OK, sweetie," Cpl. Stevenson said, choking back tears.

"I know," Teresa replied.

The screen froze in a test pattern.

"I loved that," Teresa told me several hours later from her hospital bed. "Just seeing him light up like a Christmas tree when he saw his son was so nice. Now, he is even more anxious to get home."

Past generations of soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines had to wait days and even months to see a photo of a child born while they were away at war.

Through our ever-more intelligent technology, Cpl. Stevenson was on a one-day delay.

And until we human beings are smart enough to resolve our differences peacefully, this is the next best thing to being there.

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