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Dad sees birth from Iraq camp

Nonprofit connects Marine to wife's room in area hospital

By Connie Bloom
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Far from home while stationed in Iraq, Marine Spc. Shaun Oberlin was still able to be a part of the birth of his daughter at Canton's Mercy Medical Center on Friday.

The Louisville man was stationed half a world away in Baghdad, yet coached his wife, Lauren, through the birth of their second child from a computer screen.

Labor was induced at 9 a.m. and she delivered a healthy baby girl, Natalie Michelle, at 4:50 p.m.

"I was on my own during my pregnancy and I thought I'd be having this baby without my husband present," Lauren said. "I never could have imagined that my husband could be here to visit the baby when he is 8,000 miles away and fighting a war."

Natalie's big brother, Cameron, who is 3, got to share in the family reunion, too.

The video conferencing was arranged by the not-for-profit Freedom Calls Foundation, which has provided 50,000 troops in Iraq and Afghanistan with free conferencing, phone and Internet services since it was founded in 2003, said New Jersey attorney John Harlow.

He founded Freedom Calls after hearing about a soldier who rang up a \$7,000 cell-phone bill talking to his family from Iraq.

There is no Internet infrastructure in Iraq, so satellite links to Freedom Calls Centers at military bases on the front lines is a complicated and pricey business, Harlow said. It also goes against the grain of the military contractors who charge hefty sums for the same services.

"The hospital set up the end point, which connects to our satellite network over the Internet," Harlow said.

The data traveled to Atlanta, then over a private fiber-optic line to Germany and then over a satellite link from Germany to the frontline camp in Iraq, he said.

The logistics of getting troops and families in the right place at the right time can be daunting, especially in this case.

"The mom had some complications," said Kathryn Hudacek of Freedom Calls. "So the date kept moving back and forth. The dad had to come in from the battlefield and we didn't know whether he could be there."

At one point he was supposed to be at the call center on Thursday, but the induction was changed to Saturday.

"Last night, I went to bed thinking it was going to be Saturday," Hudacek said, "but that was changed to Friday and we hadn't heard from her husband."

Oberlin could call his wife, but she couldn't call him.

With the thousands of people swarming Baghdad, Hudacek asked a worker at the Baghdad call center to keep his eyes peeled for Oberlin. Somehow it worked. Word was that he was on his way to the call center just in the nick of time.

"I know, I know, I had chills, but he got there," said Hudacek, who has learned to finesse these things working with 200 births a month.

Military families that want Freedom Calls services should contact the agency directly online at <http://www.freedomcalls.org>.

'A beautiful day'

Most hospitals are glad to work with the agency.

"Mercy Medical is one of the most cooperative hospitals we've ever worked with," Hudacek said.

"Oh, it was a beautiful day here at Mercy Medical Center, said Lynne Dragomier, vice president of marketing and public relations. "It truly was. . . . Mom and Dad are doing beautifully."

She said the hospital has worked with the agency twice before, each time a success.

"It was so wonderful to see that family together sharing those moments," she said. "The labor and delivery team and doctor were very supportive to make sure the experience was joyful, even though Shaun was 8,000 miles away."

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