

## E-wedding in Montana unites couple thousands of miles away

By [GAIL SCHONTZLER](#), *Chronicle Staff Writer*

They met over the Internet and they married over the Internet.

Francie Mercado, 25, wearing a white lace wedding gown at the University of Florida, and Jason Druding, 26, wearing Marine desert camouflage fatigues at a base in Djibouti, Africa, got married Thursday in a ceremony held thousands of miles away at Montana State University.



Montana Justice of the Peace, Gordon Smith, officiates over the wedding of the bride, Francie Mercado in Florida and the groom, Jason Druding in Djibouti, Africa.

Although they were eight times zones and two continents apart, the jovial groom and smiling, tearful bride were able to see and hear each other's vows, thanks to a video-conference signal carried over the Internet.

"We decided to take the plunge, as it were. Get it done," Lance Cpl. Druding said from Djibouti, while waiting for the marriage license to show up in Bozeman. "I'm pretty nervous right now."

Some states allow weddings by proxy, in which one party isn't physically present, but is represented by someone who stands in their place.

Montana is the only state that allows a double proxy wedding, according to Marie Connolly, coordinator of the State Bar of Montana's Lawyer Referral Service.

Witnesses gathered at MSU's Burns Telecommunications Center, in a room usually used to hold classes or conferences via video.

"Francie, you look beautiful, baby," Jason said, his voice delayed a few seconds because of the distance.

"Do I look pregnant?" Francie asked him.

"Stand sideways, baby," Jason teased her.

The bulge in the wedding dress left no doubt that the couple had been in the same neighborhood sometime in the past.

Gallatin County Justice of the Peace Gordon Smith conducted the ceremony, while Bozeman attorneys Buzz Tarlow and Kirsten Core acted as proxies for the couple.

After Jason and Francie vowed to love, honor and cherish, for better or worse, until death did them part, the judge asked the attorneys to exchange rings on behalf of the absent couple.

The attorneys hugged and laughed in lieu of a kiss.

"When my wife hears about this ...," Tarlow joked. "Don't put our pictures on the wedding page, please."

On the split video screen in Bozeman, witnesses saw the Marines gathered with Jason and the relatives gathered around Francie break into applause.

She wiped away a tear. Jason asked his chaplain for a prayer, and afterward broke out cigars and shook hands all around.

Double proxy marriages could be risky, if couples ended up with licenses questioned by other states or by immigration authorities who suspect fraud, the attorneys said.

But Smith said he has no concerns about the legality of this marriage. In fact, he said, a video wedding seems better than most single proxy ceremonies. Both bride and groom were present, even if at long distance, and spoke for themselves.

Jason said he and Francie met last spring after he posted a personal ad on the Internet, an idea he blamed on his brother.

They met and, he said, "We've been together ever since."

They tried to get married at Camp Lejeune, N.C., but it didn't work out, he said.

After he went overseas, Francie contacted Freedom Calls Foundation, a nonprofit group that helps U.S. troops in Iraq and Afghanistan keep in touch with their families by video for free.

[Gail Schontzler](mailto:gails@dailychronicle.com) is at [gails@dailychronicle.com](mailto:gails@dailychronicle.com)