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Father serving in Iraq shares in birth of daughter via video conference

MARINE CPL. MICHAEL SHEA, IN IRAQ: “It’s priceless — amazing — to see her.”

By Henry L. Davis NEWS MEDICAL REPORTER
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In Buffalo on Wednesday, Madalyn Marie Shea wiggled her day-old toes and smiled at the camera, while in Al Taqaddum, Iraq, Michael Shea watched with the awestruck and dazed look of a new father.

He might have been more than 6,000 miles from home when his wife, Amanda, delivered their first child Tuesday in Mercy Hospital, but through a satellite video conference link, he got a chance to share in the excitement of her birth.

“It’s priceless — amazing — to see her,” Shea said as Amanda removed Madalyn’s pink knit cap and soft blanket.

The link was arranged through the Freedom Calls Foundation, a nonprofit organization that operates a satellite network to provide free video conferencing, phone service and Internet communications to troops in Iraq and Afghanistan to contact family and loved ones.

“Amanda contacted Freedom Calls. They contacted us. And in less than 24 hours, we set it up,” said JoAnn Cavanaugh, hospital spokeswoman.

The setup consisted of laptop computers outfitted with tiny video cameras at a base in Iraq and next to Amanda’s hospital bed. In Buffalo, Michael appeared on the computer screen, and Amanda and Madalyn in a smaller picture within the picture. There is no Internet infrastructure in Iraq, making satellite transmission a necessity, according to the foundation.



Derek Gee/Buffalo News

A laptop video link in Mercy Hospital lets Amanda Shea show day-old daughter Madalyn to husband Michael 6,000 miles away.



Derek Gee/Buffalo News

A family of three — Amanda and Michael Shea, with newborn daughter Madalyn — enjoys one another's company through the bond provided by satellite technology.

“Although he can't physically touch her, he will see her and know more about her,” Amanda said as she waited for Michael to appear.

When he did, he sat down in a chair in front of the camera, smiled, brushed his hand through his hair and leaned forward, as if to get a closer look at Madalyn.

“I see her. How you doing?” a tired Michael said a bit sleepily, thinking it was just the three of them.

Then someone informed him that Amanda's room was crammed with family members, hospital personnel, reporters, photographers and cameramen who were watching an enlarged image of him projected on the wall across from the hospital bed. “Holy —,” he replied and sat up straight.

Michael, a corporal in the Marine Corps, left for Camp Pendleton near San Diego shortly after his marriage to Amanda in August. They are both 21 and live in Lake View. He returned to Iraq, where he is a helicopter mechanic, in October for his second deployment.

The timing of the pregnancy elicited a confusing mix of emotions — euphoria over the prospects of being parents, sadness over being so far apart, anxiety over the constant dangers of war.

“It was upsetting and OK in a way, too,” said Amanda, who has not seen Michael since Sept. 1. “We knew he would be there for support on the telephone. We also get support from our families.”

Madalyn, whose name Michael chose, was born at 8:56 a.m. Tuesday. He said he almost felt as if he were there. Cell phones, e-mail and text messaging now allow military personnel to communicate daily with family and friends.

The Morristown, N.J.-based Freedom Calls Foundation conducts about 2,000 video conferences a month for military personnel, according to the organization, but it depends on donations to operate. The network may shut down at the end of the year, officials said, because of inadequate resources.

Amanda Shea has proven so adept at text messaging on her cell phone that she kept Michael in the loop all during her labor. “I would text him between contractions,” she said.

Michael called Amanda on Tuesday night, Buffalo time, and followed up with a steady stream of text messages to her, even though it is eight hours later in Iraq.

“It was great knowing what was going on. I didn’t get much sleep, but it wasn’t as difficult as what she went through,” he said of the labor and delivery.

As the couple chatted, their parents watched, snapped photos and enjoyed the happy moment.

“She doesn’t stop wiggling,” Michael said of Madalyn as he rocked back and forth in his chair.

“Neither did he,” joked his mother, Ann Marie Shea. “She looks a little like you, too,” she said.

Which prompted a lightheartedly disapproving remark by Michael.

Amanda keeps a framed photo of her and Michael by her bedside. He’s in uniform, and they are kissing while standing on the beach. She said she can’t wait until he returns home in about six months.

“It gives me shivers,” she said, “to think about seeing and hugging him again.”

hdavis@buffnews.com