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From Iraq, dad oversees daughter's birth in Buffalo

Video hookup allows Marine to share event

By Brian Hayden NEWS STAFF REPORTER
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Even though he was serving in Iraq several thousand miles away, Marine Cpl. Ryan Czekalski met his new baby daughter this week.

A live videoconference connected him Wednesday with the Mercy Hospital maternity ward, where his wife, Elizabeth, delivered their first child, MaKayla.

Appearing on a laptop screen, Czekalski encouraged her every step of the way and tried to make her laugh.

"It's the next best thing to being there for me," Czekalski said.



Harry Scull Jr./Buffalo News

With the image of Marine Cpl. Ryan Czekalski appearing on a laptop screen, his wife, Elizabeth, holds the couple's new daughter, MaKayla

In another videoconference Thursday with his wife in her hospital room, he got a better look at his 7-pound, 15-ounce daughter, noting that she had a pouty lip and dimples like her mother. But he said he also sees a lot of himself in her and was often at a loss for words as he watched over her.

MaKayla and her mother wore matching pink "Half my heart is in Iraq" T-shirts for the video event.

Thursday's high was about 127 degrees where Czekalski is stationed; he found a quiet area away from the action so he could focus on his new family. Although halfway around the world, he was engaging with everyone in the hospital room as his image was projected onto the wall opposite his wife as well as appearing on a laptop screen.

Elizabeth Czekalski said that her daughter had Czekalski's strong appetite and pointed out some of her other traits to the new father.

"Look, she has funky flat-shaped toes like yours are," she said to her husband.

For much of the videoconference, Czekalski looked on as his newborn sucked on a pacifier about half the size of her face. He watched as his wife tucked their daughter into a small blanket and choked up as MaKayla moved about in her mother's arms.

"All my other worries are gone right now," he said.

The teleconference was coordinated by the Freedom Calls Foundation, a national nonprofit organization that keeps members of military families in contact even when they are half a world apart.

MaKayla's birth, the first in Western New York on a live videoconference arranged by Freedom Calls, involved no charge for the family.

Czekalski, now on his second deployment in Iraq, is scheduled to return to Buffalo at the end of September.

Freedom Calls is installing equipment that will allow Czekalski to see and talk with his family about once a week until he comes home.

Jim Kryzykowski, Czekalski's stepfather, said the frequent teleconferences will allow the Marine to feel connected with his family. Once he returns, he won't be a stranger to his daughter, Kryzykowski said.

"The most important thing is that MaKayla is going to literally know who dad is now because she can see and hear him," he said.

Wednesday's birth was well-timed; MaKayla arrived at 10:06 a. m., which was early evening in Iraq.

Joyce Ezzo, Elizabeth Czekalski's mother, was on hand for the delivery and tried to make sure she didn't obstruct her son-in-law's view.

"I kept asking Ryan if my shoulder was in the way," she said.

As Thursday's teleconference went on, MaKayla grew tired and yawned.

"That was a daddy yawn," the baby's mother said.

Czekalski smiled.

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