

Special delivery: Newborn son meets dad via satellite

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By Sally Pollak
Free Press Staff Writer

Aiden Antonio King, nestled in his mother's arms, met his father Friday morning. He slept through the introduction.

His dad, a Marine serving in Iraq, saw his newborn son via a patchwork of electronic technology that linked an Army base in Fallujah with the maternity ward at Fletcher Allen Health Care, where Aiden was born Thursday evening.



Aiden Antonio King visits via satellite feed with his father Steven King, who is a marine posted in Iraq, while resting with his mother Sara at Fletcher Allen Health Care in Burlington on Friday.

ALISON REDLICH, Free Press

Sara King, Aiden's mother, stroked her baby's cheek just before his father came into view from the other side of the world. "Ready, Hon?" she whispered, staring down at Aiden.

She looked up and saw Aiden's father, Lance Cpl. Steven King, on a TV screen.

"Hi, Honey," he said. "You look beautiful."

Sara King, making certain her husband could see another person, propped up Aiden. "Can you see him?" she asked, talking to his image and holding up their son.

"I can see him," Steven King answered, smiling back at his tearful wife. "He's adorable."

The electronic hookup, a combination of Internet connection, fiber-optic cable and satellite link, marked the first time Sara King has seen her husband since he left for Iraq last summer. "It was so wonderful getting to see him," she said.



Steven King, a Marine stationed in Iraq, smiles as he sees his son Aiden Antonio for the first time and wife Sara via the Freedom Calls satellite network at Fletcher Allen Health Care in Burlington on Friday, January 11, 2008.

ALISON REDLICH, Free Press

Steven King, 26, came in from the desert, where he's a grunt on the ground -- to use his wife's term -- for the birth of his son. Sara King, 25, had her labor induced Thursday morning to be sure the baby was born while Steven King was at the base.

He was connected to his family by cell phone during the delivery, which Sara King said was "a lot of emotions and 'I love you'" from the hospital in Burlington to the base in Fallujah. Steven King was listening from Iraq just after 6 p.m. when his wife gave

birth to the couple's first child, a healthy 7-pound, 6-ounce boy.

"He is perfect," said Gail Haggarty of South Burlington, Aiden's grandmother, who was her daughter's labor partner. "He came out pink as can be."

Steven and Sara King were married in August 2006; a year later he was sent to Iraq from their home at Camp Lejeune, N.C. She decided to return to her hometown and parents' house in South Burlington to be with her family during her pregnancy and the first months of Aiden's life. She is a 2001 graduate of South Burlington High School, where she was a Rebel athlete who played basketball and softball.

Friday morning, before the connection was made to Fallujah, Sara King said she was overwhelmed at the prospect of her husband seeing their son for the first time.

"I don't know how he's going to feel about it," she said. "He's going to be emotional."

Judging by his big smile on the TV screen, Steve King was overjoyed to see his family. He smiled through the conversation as surely and steadily as his son slept. He told his wife she was beautiful and complimented her on a job well done. He said he was so excited to see his wife and baby, he barely slept the night before. He held up his injured hand, swollen from a fracture he suffered a month ago in an accident involving an explosive. He promised he'd be home in 56 days, when his tour of duty is scheduled to end.

"Just come home safe," Sara King said.

"I promise," her husband said. "Trust me. That's my prayer every night."

The high-tech connection that allowed Steven King, a Marine on duty in Iraq, to see and speak to his wife and newborn son Friday at Fletcher Allen Health Care, marked the first time the hospital's 12-year-old telemedicine unit was used to connect a newborn baby with his or her father. Typically, the technology is used for outlying hospitals to consult with specialists at Fletcher Allen, or for administrative or educational purposes, hospital officials said.

The link that connected the King family was made possible by Freedom Calls Foundation (www.freedomcalls.org), a nonprofit that uses technology to connect families who have a member in the military. The organization said it will arrange more family meetings during Steven King's service in Iraq.