

THE COURIER

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'She's just so Beautiful'

By Brad Meyer

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A first-time father couldn't make it to the hospital for the arrival of his newborn daughter, yet he was able to connect with her from more than 8,000 miles away.

Although he won't be home from Iraq until the end of the year, U.S. Marine Cpl. Wesley White was able to see his daughter, who was born Thursday at the **Women's Hospital of Texas at Conroe Regional Medical Center**, with a video conference call arranged by the Freedom Calls Foundation – a group dedicated to helping U.S. military personnel connect with their families.

"This is so exciting," said his wife Ashley, minutes before the link was connected. "She has his eyes and his lips. I can't wait for him to see her."

Wesley, stationed in Fallujah, Iraq, on his second tour of duty, was equally thrilled to see and speak to his wife and baby. Web cameras and microphones provided by Freedom Calls Foundation, a national nonprofit organization, enabled the couple to talk and see each other.

When the connection was made and Wesley's image appeared on the monitor, a big smile came to the face of Ashley. She held Payton up so he could see his daughter for the first time.

"She's just so beautiful," said Wesley, looking closely at the monitor. "We did such a good job with her."

After hospital officials and technicians confirmed the link, the family was given nearly an hour of private time together.

Hearing about the Freedom Calls Foundation from friends, she called the organization two months ago. Their response was immediate and supportive, Ashley said.



U.S. Marine Cpl. Wesley White, stationed in Fallujah, Iraq, meets his daughter Payton, who was born at Women's Hospital of Texas at the Conroe Regional Medical Center Thursday, via a global video link provided by Freedom Calls Foundation, a national nonprofit organization that helps military personnel stay in touch with important family events.

"They were very helpful and very responsive," she said. "What they're doing is a wonderful thing. I really appreciate it."

Shortly after Payton, who weighed 8-1/2 pounds, was born at 4:08 p.m. Thursday, Ashley called the organization to let them know about the birth and to set up the video connection. The group already had been notified and was working with hospital and military officials to establish the link.

"This is the first time we've done this at CRMC," spokeswoman Kelly Wortham said. "It's wonderful to be able to help this new father see his daughter for the first time."

Beyond this first video conference, Freedom Calls Foundation will help keep the family together by facilitating three video links – each approximately one hour long – from their Houston home.

"The foundation is committed to helping soldiers be part of milestone family events like weddings, first communions and births," said John Harlow, executive director of Freedom Calls Foundation. "We're using technology to keep families together."

The nonprofit organization is funded entirely by private donations from the public, Harlow said. For information or to donate, visit www.freedomcalls.org.