

Injured Army pilot promoted over the Internet

By Theresa Hogue
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Capt. Dwight Mears has been recovering since his helicopter crashed in Iraq five months ago

It's been five months since Dwight Mears' helicopter lost power during a security mission in Iraq and he and his co-pilot crashed to the ground, five months since he's seen the faces of his fellow soldiers in the 1st Battalion, 25th Aviation Regiment. It's been five months since the first lieutenant has piloted a helicopter. In fact, the only time the injured Mears has been airborne, it's been as a patient, flying first to Germany, then Illinois, then to Lewisburg to recuperate at his parents' home.

But Sunday morning, sitting in the sunlit splendor of Evelyn and George Mears' window-filled house, Mears came face to face with many of the comrades he had to leave behind. Thanks to technology provided by the Freedom Calls Foundation, Mears communicated with members of his regiment via Internet videoconference. During the conference, Mears was commissioned to the rank of captain by his battalion commander, Lt. Col. Michael Lundy, who, half a world away at Camp Cooke, Iraq, praised Mears' service to the United States Army.



TIFFANY BROWN/Gazette-Times

Capt. Dwight Mears of Lewisburg chats via Internet camera with his battalion commander, who is stationed at Camp Cooke, Iraq. He had the chance to speak with fellow soldiers online on Sunday and was elevated to the rank of captain during a short online ceremony in which his parents, Evelyn and George, sitting behind him, pinned on the bars signifying his new rank.

Through the use of computer video cameras and microphones, Mears was able to sit in front of his parents' computer wearing a uniform he'd borrowed from a local National Guard unit and talk to his old friends through a headset. Behind him, news crews, family members and friends watched him chat with soldiers whose faces appeared in jerky but clear images on the screen.

"This is pretty neat," Mears said as First Lt. Nate Russ chatted with him over the Internet. "I had no idea it was possible."

Russ was set to receive his commission the following day.

"I'll actually outrank you for a day," Mears joked.

Other than some sporadic e-mailing, Mears hasn't been able to keep up on the lives of his fellow soldiers and has had to spend most of his time in physical therapy and a series of medical tests.

"It's almost like being on vacation," he told Russ, "except for the hospital stuff, which doesn't count."

Mears is a West Point graduate and had been serving in the Middle East since January, when his OH-58D Kiowa Warrior helicopter crashed because of an engine malfunction. He and his co-pilot, Chief Warrant Officer Claude Boushey, were monitoring the situation over an accident site where National Guardsman Eric McKinley of Corvallis was killed when their helicopter crashed. Both men were injured in the crash.

Mears took the opportunity Sunday to hear the latest gossip and catch up on the details of his friends' lives, learning of recent weddings and the crowd at the mess hall now that more soldiers are sharing space at Camp Cooke. Behind him on another computer, photographs of Iraq that Mears took flashed up in a slide show across the screen.

One by one, men picked up the headphones and chatted with Mears.

"I don't know who this is," Mears said at one point as the screen filled up with an image of a camouflage-covered stomach. "I can't see him. Oh, it's Norm! What's up, Norm?"

Finally, Lt. Col. Lundy came onscreen.

"This is good stuff for us, too," he told Mears. "It's good medicine."

Mears' parents, George and Evelyn, stood in the wings, waiting to pin on the captain's bars their son had earned.

"Where do these go?" George whispered as Evelyn got the insignia ready.

Finally, they stood on either side of Mears, and each pinned two bars to his shoulders.

"We should have practiced this," Evelyn joked as they struggled to put the pins in place.

"They look good on you," Lundy said. "Promotions are very special, especially when you promote someone from first lieutenant."

Lundy said officers stay at captain's rank for a long time and that they are the ones really leading the troops.

"It's the most important officer position we've got," he said.

He said Mears had an extraordinary amount of potential and that the soldiers he leads are doing great things and awaiting his return.

"Your presence is over here every day as we execute missions," Lundy said.

Mears was grateful to be able to recuperate at his family home, rather than being stuck in a military hospital. He may get to return to battalion headquarters in Hawaii by the end of the year,

but his injuries may put him on office duty for awhile. He's waiting on another CAT scan to establish how well he's healing, but he's anxious to get back to duty. He doesn't know when he'll return to the Middle East.

"It really is a transition," he said of being at home. "But you find things to keep yourself busy."

Lundy, who called Mears' commission one of the most special ones he's done, appreciates what Mears has been through on his road to recovery.

"I know you are working hard there," he said, "like you were working hard here."