

Father, son connect

Video call links Fort Carson, Iraq

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Like many new dads, Cpl. Matt Ortiz was giddy when he saw his baby for the first time.

But he didn't have to worry about dropping "the cutest little thing I've ever seen."

Ortiz was in Camp Fallujah, Iraq. Baby Gabriel and mother Lauren were at Fort Carson's Evans Army Community Hospital.

They were in the same room Friday, connected face to face by technology — and surrounded by media cameras capturing the first video call of its kind at the hospital.

Two-day-old Gabriel didn't bat an eye.

"Sleeping? What's he doing sleeping?" his father said.

Lauren, tearing with emotion, cuddled the blanket-clad baby.

"He just ate," she said happily. "I'm not waking him up for you. Sorry."

When the talk turned to breastfeeding, she reminded him of the news cameras.

The 21-year-old Marine couldn't see those cameras. Live feed of his wife and baby filled the screen at his end as she watched his life-size image on a monitor.

He went to Camp Fallujah in March. Lauren, 22, moved from Camp Lejeune, N.C., to Colorado Springs to stay with her parents during the pregnancy.



Marine Cpl. Matt Ortiz in Fallujah, Iraq, got a live view Friday of his wife, Lauren, and 2-day-old son, Gabriel, at Fort Carson's Evans Army Community Hospital. The call was arranged through Freedom Calls, a nonprofit that links about 200 fathers with

(MIKE TERRY, THE GAZETTE)

She arranged the video call through Freedom Calls, a nonprofit organization based in New York that connects about 200 new fathers with their wives and newborns every month.

The hospital helped with the logistics of the call.

Gabriel Lee Ortiz was nine days overdue when he was delivered by Caesarean section to the petite mom at 2:30 a.m. Wednesday, weighing 8 pounds, 10 ounces.

"The doctor said, 'Lauren, you didn't have a baby, you had a third-grader,'" Lauren Ortiz said.

"You're known by everyone here as the 100-pound woman who had a 20-pound baby," Matt Ortiz said.

The couple, high school sweethearts, got engaged the day he got out of boot camp and married 2 ½ years ago.

She became pregnant while he was training to go to Iraq.

"He had to find out in a text message that I was pregnant," she said.

Text messages kept him informed of the progress of her labor this week.

Laughter punctuated the public part of Friday's video call between the first-time parents.

"Baby, I swear, you are going to make me bust my stitches," Lauren told him.

"You look good," he said.

"You look good," she said.

The grandparents and media were sent away after 30 minutes so the couple could have an hour of teleprivacy.

Freedom Calls, started in 2004, makes about 2,000 calls a month and has served about 25 percent of deployed forces. It keeps troops overseas in touch with families during major events and emergencies and is available at Camp Fallujah, Camp Taji, Al Asad Air Base or Camp Victory in Baghdad.

The struggling organization is funded through donations of laptops, webcams and cash from citizens.

"We'd like to have more, but we need to get Bill Gates for that," spokeswoman Kathryn Hudacek said. For the new dad, it was the next best thing to being there.

"It brings it home," Matt Ortiz said. "Any bad day you have you can think back to this day and it will be good."