

The Herald News

Christmas calling

John Moss, Herald News Staff Reporter
12/25/2004

FALL RIVER -- Army Specialist Nathaniel "Nate" Anderson put his M-16 rifle down, sat in a chair, looked at a television monitor and appeared to be overwhelmed by what he saw.

The 22-year-old soldier of 1841 Highland Ave. was getting the best Christmas gift a soldier could want as he serves his country in Iraq.

Although thousands of miles away from his family, Anderson was able to celebrate his first wedding anniversary to the day with his wife, Corey, and see their 3-month-old daughter, Keirsten, for the first time.



IRAQ LIVE - Corey Anderson and daughter Keirsten, 3 mos. gets a chance to see her husband Specialist Nathaniel Anderson, US Army via video conference sponsored by the Freedom Calls Foundation at their Highland Ave. home. Photo by Omar 12/24/04

The wonderful Christmas Eve surprise was provided for Anderson through a video conference over the Freedom Calls Foundation Network from his home.

And the event was a total surprise for the young soldier.

Anderson had received a directive to report to his commanding officer at Camp Cooke, north of Baghdad in the Sunni Triangle of Iraq. When he arrived for the appointment, he was surprised to see his wife and baby waiting on a large-screen monitor.

"Merry Christmas, Nate!" was the greeting he got from Corey, also 22, and the rest of the family.

"Here's your surprise," said Corey, holding their daughter, who was dressed in a Santa's helper suit for the occasion.

Anderson had only seen still photos of his daughter before the video conference.

"I see her," he said. "She moves a lot more (than in the photos)."



Specialist Nathaniel Anderson US Army sees his 3 month old daughter and wife and their families for the first time after being sent to Iraq via video conference through Freedom Call Foundation. Photo by Omar 12/24/04

He repeatedly called her by name, and when she began to cry at one point, a family member joked, "See what you're missing, Nate?"

His younger sister, Jessica Anderson, cried when she saw her brave brother.

"Hi, brat," he kidded with her.

He also talked to his 16-month-old nephew, Joseph Baptista, and they waved to each other.

"Hi mom," he said to Bea Anderson of Lincoln, R.I., who also had served in the military.

"I miss you," she told her son.

Adam Franco of Fall River, Corey's cousin and Keirsten's godfather, told Anderson, "I miss my drinking buddy."

"I miss drinking," he replied.

It is clear from newscasts that American soldiers are under constant threat of attack by insurgents and others opposed to democracy in Iraq.

Asked the first thing he wanted to do when he got home, Anderson said, "Walk around with no weapon." "You can have the baby instead of the gun," Corey told him.

"I wish I was there," he said. "She looks just like you, Nate," his wife told him.

The soldier was reminded of a planned trip to Aruba after he gets back.

"It'll be nice to have sand and water at the same place," he suggested.

Anderson appeared tired and a family member asked him if he was getting enough sleep.

"Somewhat," he answered.

"I'll take that as a 'no,'" the relative said.

"I'll be up at 4 in the morning," Anderson said, as it was just after 10 p.m. in Iraq.

He said he was playing poker when he was told to report for the surprise video conference.

"I lost more money," he said.

His video reception evidently was quite clear, as he noticed Franco in the background concealing a bottle of beer under his shirt.

"Hide that Corona, you bastard," he told Franco with a smile.

Another family member told Anderson that a big party would be held for him when he gets home.

He said he hoped to be home in about two months.

He was deployed on Jan. 6, then left Kuwait on his birthday, March 15, to go to Iraq.

Until the video conference, Corey said she was only able to contact her husband through e-mails and occasional phone calls.

Asked if she worried about her husband's safety, she responded, "Yes, constantly. It's a full-time job just to worry."

"He has good days and bad days," she added. "Some days he's OK, and other days he's not the same."

For security reasons, soldiers are not allowed to talk to family members about their activities in the war zone.

"I do know he's with the Quick Reaction Force," Corey said. "And he's said that he does gate duty and guard duty."

Anderson is with the 103rd Field Artillery Group, based in Cranston, R.I.

The event uses the Freedom Calls Foundation Communications Network, supporting connections between servicemen and -women in the war zone and their families at home in the states.

The foundation has integrated systems, services and equipment in military hospitals and bases around the world to reunite separated families across the United States, enabling soldiers and marines to attend milestone family events remotely.

"When I contacted the Freedom Calls Foundation, this was just a dream," Corey said Thursday. "Now that it is a reality, I am so excited."

"I thank the Freedom Calls Foundation from the bottom of my heart," she said. "It is just amazing that they do this kind of thing every day for soldiers' families all over the country."

According to foundation Executive Director John Harlow, "The foundation is transforming a long-standing family communication paradigm in time of war by enabling soldiers in the war zone to attend and participate in milestone family events. ... Soldiers are now in a position to keep their commitments to their families at the same time they keep their commitment to their country."

"The long-term vision of the Freedom Calls Foundation is that our war fighters will be able to come home from a day on the battlefield and virtually be with their families and tuck their children into bed every night, using state-of-the-art technology," Harlow said.

"This is a time to reflect and honor the sacrifices and service of our soldiers and their families," said Ed Bukstel, the foundation's director of operations. "It is especially important that all Americans support our soldiers during the holiday season."

The foundation is a public charity, building a communications network, dedicated to providing state-of-the-art video conferencing, telephone and Internet services to enable American troops in Iraq and Afghanistan to stay in touch with their families and loved ones at home 24 hours a day for free. The foundation provides services to more than 20,000 soldiers and Marines, and the Army has requested that the foundation install eight more facilities in Iraq and two in Afghanistan in the coming months.

The foundation is authorized by the secretary of the Army to provide communications services to the troops and their families, and recently received a commendation from the Army and a personal letter of appreciation from Maj. Gen. Antonio M. Taguba.

The foundation is supported by donations of corporations and the American people on the foundation's Web site, www.freedomcalls.org

E-mail John Moss at jmoss@heraldnews.com.

©The Herald News 2004

