

Proud dad attends birth from Baghdad

By ERIN MADISON
Tribune Staff Writer

Staff Sergeant Christopher Phinney of the Montana Air National Guard may be halfway around the world in Baghdad, Iraq, but he was able to witness the birth of his first child, Persephone Anne Lee, Wednesday at Benefis Healthcare in Great Falls.

Phinney spent Wednesday by his wife's side, via videoconference arranged by Freedom Calls, and Benefis' REACH Montana Telehealth Network.

Lori Phinney was induced into labor around 5:30 a.m. Wednesday. At 8 a.m., her husband joined her on a TV screen next to her bed. A camera pointed at her showed him what was going on.

When Lori began to give birth, the camera was aimed at the doctors so Chris Phinney could watch his daughter be born.

"He got to see the baby," Lori Phinney said Thursday morning.

Chris stayed on the videoconference until about 6 p.m.

It was a huge relief to find out he would be able to be with his wife during the birth of his child, even if it was virtual, Chris Phinney said Thursday during a videoconference from Baghdad.

"It was actually really nice," he said. "It's pretty amazing what technology can do."

After Persephone was born, Lori's mother, who stayed with her during the birth, brought in Lori's two other daughters from a previous marriage. The whole family then spent some time together on the video conference.



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Lori Phinney talks with her husband, Chris Phinney in Baghdad, Iraq, via Internet connection from her room at Benefis Healthcare. Chris Phinney was able to attend the birth of their daughter, Persephone, through a video link Wednesday.

Persephone is named after the Greek goddess of spring, Lori Phinney said.

Chris Phinney, a member of the 120th Fighter Wing of the MANG, was deployed Jan. 6. A month later, he was told he would be able to watch the birth from Iraq.

"It was huge," Lori Phinney said. "It was really nice having him there."

Things went smoothly Wednesday, she said. She even took a nap at one point, and her husband read a book while she dozed.

The Freedom Calls Foundation, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, provides video conferencing, telephone and Internet services for troops in Iraq. The organization uses a satellite network to provide its services because Internet infrastructure is scarce in that country. The foundation relies entirely on donations for its funding.

The REACH Montana Telehealth Network is frequently used by Benefis so out-of-town patients can meet with their doctors via videoconferencing and for continuing medical education for hospital staff, said Gene Kopyy, technology specialist for Benefis.

This was the first time Benefis used the REACH Network to connect a father overseas.

"In our business we help people everyday, and that's pretty special," Kopyy said. "This was really special."

Freedom Calls traditionally sets up shorter calls between families and troops, but arranged for the 10-hour call because of the significance for the event, he said.

Chris Phinney is scheduled to come home in May.

"I can't wait," he said.

Reach Erin Madison at 791-1466, 800-438-6600 or emadison@greatfallsribune.com.