

Experiencing the miracle of life through the miracle of technology

By Heather Owens, Carolina Living editor

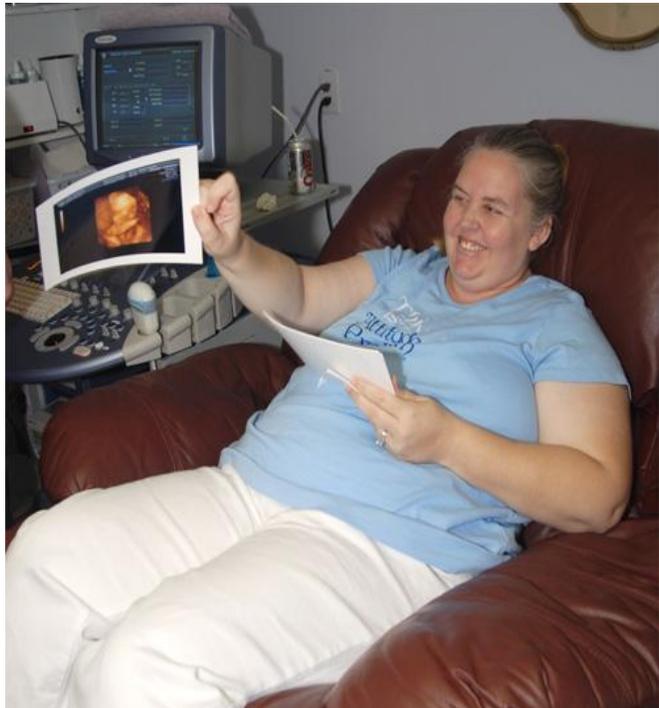
One of the hardest parts about being deployed is missing out on life's milestones back home.

Friday, one Marine in Iraq had the opportunity to participate in one such event back home even while still serving at his deployment site.

Sgt. Adam Ashe got to "be" with his wife Shannon while she had a very special ultrasound of their unborn son.

How was that possible?

Thanks to Freedom Calls, a non-profit organization whose mission is to build a communications network independent of military networks employing state-of-the-art technology to enable troops to communicate free of charge from their base camps with their families at home.



"As far as a Father's Day gift, I would have to say it's probably the best one I could ever have," said Ashe over the long-distance connection.

Shannon was at Womb's Window, a family owned and operated business in Wilmington, N.C., that allows parents to see three and four dimensional images of their babies in the womb. Her husband was at Al Asad Air Base in Iraq.

While she relaxed in an over-sized recliner in the clinic, he sat in a communications center at the air base.

As he watched a 4-D (that's 3-D plus the added dimension of live video) view of his son over the video feed, she was able to see her husband on a laptop screen mounted by the chair.

There are four installations in Iraq from which such video conferencing is available. In addition to Al Asad Air Base, the technology is available at Camp Taji, Camp Fallujah and Camp Liberty, according to Kathryn Hudacek, director of development for Freedom Calls.

The idea for Freedom Calls came when founder and executive director John B. Harlow II was in the shower back in 2003. After hearing a story on the radio about a service member who had rung up a substantial satellite phone bill from a war zone, Harlow decided the American public could help shoulder the responsibility of communications costs to and from Iraq in exchange for the sacrifices the service members were making on behalf of the American people.

Thus he founded Freedom Calls, a 501(c)3 public charity, to take on that challenge.

"The troops overseas get a morale boost from knowing that the family members at home aren't worrying about them as much, and that helps them do their jobs," said Hudacek of the technology.

Harlow hopes to grow the network in order to accommodate greater numbers of service members overseas.

"We foresee a time when all warfighters can virtually come home to their families on a daily basis after a hard day on the battlefield utilizing the foundation's state-of-the-art video conferencing technology," said Harlow.

Marilyn Crisp and her husband James had the idea of bringing 3D and 4D ultrasound to North Carolina after a co-worker shared his excitement at seeing a 3D and 4D ultrasound of his unborn daughter for the first time. Thus they started Womb's Window.

"As a nurse, I have dealt with a lot of parents. I feel that the earlier that you establish a bond between the parents and the baby, it has a beneficial effect for the whole family. Once they see the baby in 3D, it makes them want to take better care of themselves," said Marilyn Crisp.

Crisp said she has provided the technology to a large number of Marine families. "The first day that we opened, the first two couples in the door were Marines," she said.

"I can tell you that I have [performed ultrasounds] for a lot military families and for a lot of dads getting ready to deploy," she expounded. "I've had the feedback that this is a big morale boost."

For Shannon Ashe, the opportunity to see both her husband and her unborn son on the same day was amazingly exciting. "It makes me feel closer to the baby and to my husband," she said.

Ashe told a story about meeting a woman whose husband was deployed during Desert Storm in 1991. The woman explained that having the old-fashioned "letter" was the main form of communication with loved ones and it was necessary to number letters to be sure they were read in the right order. Ashe said she is grateful for the advances in technology that allow her to speak with her husband real-time from the battlefield.

Yet Hudacek of Freedom Calls says the organization is within two to four weeks of being shut down due to the rising cost of satellite time. It is in negotiations with the satellite company to forestall that possibility. Hudacek says though the kind of money that it would take to right the organization would likely come from a corporate grant, Freedom Calls does rely on donations from American citizens as well.

"We get lots and lots of donations from Americans who, instead of going out to dinner one night a week, send us a check," said Hudacek.

For more information on Womb's Window, visit its Web site at www.wombswindow.com

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