



Marine to Marry Fiancé in Videoconference Wedding

She's in Florida; He's in Africa

Dec. 22, 2005 — A U.S. Marine stationed in Djibouti, Africa, will marry his betrothed in Florida today in a ceremony performed by a justice of the peace in Montana.

Cpl. Jason Druding met Francie Mercado, 25, on Yahoo! online personals in March. They met in person in May and got engaged in August — the same day Druding, 26, left for Camp Lejeune in North Carolina. They will be married by videoconference today in a first-of-its-kind wedding.



Francie Mercado, 25, will be at the University of Florida when she gets married via videoconference today. Her fiancé, Jason Druding, 26, is a Marine stationed in Djibouti, Africa. (ABC NEWS)

The event is being made possible by Freedom Calls, a nonprofit in New York that offers videoconferencing, telephone and Internet services to help U.S. troops overseas take part in important family events back home. The justice of the peace is from Montana because Montana is the only state that allows double-proxy wedding, which means neither the bride nor the groom are physically present.

Mercado's parents are in Puerto Rico. Her brother will be with her at the University of Florida to give her away, and her 3-year-old son will be the ring bearer.

The bride and groom are still trying to figure out what to do when the justice of the peace says, "You may kiss the bride."

"The joke around the company is I'm going to find a sensitive Marine," Druding said. "I'm probably going to be stuck with my pillow and that's about it."

While the ceremony, scheduled for 3:15 p.m. ET, will last 10 minutes, the videoconference will last about 90 minutes so they can have a "reception." The events will be broadcast on a 6-foot-tall screen.

Freedom Calls arranged for donations for her dress, veil, tiara, flowers, cake and champagne flutes. The nonprofit plans to do another videoconference for the couple when their son is born next year.

John Harlow, Freedom Calls' executive director, said that about 2,000 soldiers used the network each day to keep their commitment to both their families and the military. Freedom Calls has been used for events like parent-teacher conferences, adoption proceedings, first communions and bar mitzvahs, as well as, everyday events like sitting down to dinner with the family.

"Right now, it's economically and technologically feasible for a soldier to come back from a day of battle and then spend virtual time with their family and virtually tuck their kids into bed at night," Harlow said.

The Freedom Calls Foundation is based out of Brooklyn Heights, N.Y.