

Iraq soldier raises toast at brother's marriage

By [Mike Leidemann](#)
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Growing up, brothers Rommel and Ruel Pacba were as close as can be, always together. Born less than a year apart, they acted like twins most of the time, according to their father, Arnesto.

So when Rommel fell in love and started planning his wedding, he knew Ruel would be there. He and his bride, Rizalyn Lucas, picked a date well in advance to be sure that Ruel would be home from his second tour of duty in Iraq in plenty of time.

But long after the invitations had been sent out, the banquet hall reserved and the flowers ordered, Ruel, a communications specialist for the Army, suddenly got his tour of duty in the war zone extended.



Rommel Pacba and his bride, Rizalyn, were joined at their wedding yesterday in Waikiki, via video hookup, by the groom's brother Ruel and his wife Mary Jane from Camp Taji, Iraq.

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"We just couldn't push everything back," Lucas said. "I felt so bad. We really wanted him to be there."

And in a very modern way, Ruel was there last night when about 200 friends and family members celebrated Rommel and Rizalyn's wedding.

"Here's to the bride and groom. Cheers," Ruel said, speaking to the reception via a live video conference screen that allowed him to join his brother's wedding even though he was thousands of miles away.

Then, live from Camp Taji, Iraq, Ruel hoisted a huge water bottle in front of the web camera and toasted the couple's health and happiness. His wife, Mary Jane, also a soldier deployed to Iraq, was at his side.

The crowd in Waikiki cheered. Cameras clicked. The bride cried. And Rommel looked as happy as could be.

The video hookup was made possible by Freedom Calls, a nonprofit foundation that helps keep military personnel connected to their families back home through a series of satellite hookups.

The foundation worked with the wedding's host, the Waikiki Beach Marriott Resort & Spa, to provide the first such video conference here, said John Harlow, the foundation's founder and owner of a Hawai'i financial software company.

Freedom Calls provided its first connections in 2004. Harlow said there are now four call centers in Iraq, including 50 computers and 20 telephones at Camp Taji, north of Baghdad, and video-conferencing operations in two locations in Anbar province.

The foundation has helped soldiers in Iraq see the birth of their babies, join in at christenings, and even watch a daughter tie her shoelaces for the first time. The goal, Harlow said, is to someday make such video conference an everyday part of military overseas deployment.

But he warned that funding for the foundation is running low and it may have to discontinue the operations next month if there isn't a new influx of private money. Satellite time is a major part of the foundation's cost, but soldiers like Ruel and his family pay nothing to use the network.

Last night, though, there was no talk of worry or problems. The technology worked perfectly and the brothers seemed pleased with the way Ruel could share in the festivities on a 6-foot screen at the head of the banquet room.

"I would never have imagined that my brother could be here for the wedding when he is halfway around the world fighting a war," Rommel said.

"I'll see you in January," Ruel said.

He meant in person, of course.

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