

THE COURIER

Local Marine sees newborn from opposite side of the world



Emily Schwarze/Staff

Chelsea Fryer and her newborn baby boy Riley visit with her husband, Lance Cpl. Jonathan Fryer (right), a Marine stationed in Iraq, via a video conference made possible by the Freedom Calls Foundation at Thibodaux Regional Medical Center Saturday. Behind Chelsea is her mother, Veronica Bueche (left) and Jonathan's mother, Cissie Fryer.

BEN LUNDIN
Staff Writer
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THIBODAUX -- In the barracks of Camp Fallujah, a U.S. military base in Iraq, tears crest over Lance Cpl. Jonathan Fryer's eyelids as he sees for the first time the face of his newborn son nestled mere feet away.

Resting in the arms of Fryer's wife, Chelsea, 18, is his 1-day-old son Riley, comfortably reclining in a hospital bed in Thibodaux Regional Medical Center Saturday afternoon.

More than 8,000 miles and eight time zones are between Jonathan, 19, and his newborn son. But with the aid of a satellite link, they see and hear one another on a laptop monitor as if they were in the same room.

"I really can't explain it. There aren't any words," Jonathan said. "It's the closest to being home without being home."

This day marks the first time the married couple have seen each other since Jonathan left their Houma home in April for his second tour of duty in Iraq as a member of the U.S. Marine Corps.

Jonathan, described by his mother, Cissie, as a "poster for the marines" at 6-foot-4-inches tall with a set of broad shoulders, is in the second of a minimum four-year term of service as a Humvee gunner.

But even he, an embodiment of military toughness who graduated from boot camp at the top of his company, can't contain the whirlwind of emotions that arise from seeing his newborn son.

"It's the best feeling I can ever ..." he said, trailing off as tears surfaced.

For nearly a minute, no one speaks. Jonathan and Chelsea watch their child and each other, intermittently laughing, sniffing and gasping with a hint of disbelief.

Jonathan is the first serviceman to peer through an electronic window to Thibodaux Regional from overseas, **said Toni Martinez, the hospital's marketing director.**

It came courtesy of the Freedom Calls Foundation, a nonprofit organization recently commended by the army that connects distant military families via satellite links.

More than 50,000 servicemen have connected to their families at no charge under their program since its inception five years ago, according to its Web site.

"I thought I'd be having this baby alone and could never have imagined that my husband could be here for the birth when he is 8,000 miles away fighting a war. This means the world to me and my family," Chelsea said.

Riley was born at 4 p.m. Friday, weighing 7 pounds 2 ounces. It's a better entrance to this world than that of his father, who was born more than seven weeks early. Jonathan had underdeveloped lungs and doctors gave him little chance to survive, Cissie said.

But it took only four weeks before he was released from the hospital and into his mother's hands. Jonathan's near death as a newborn, Cissie said, made Riley's birth that much more significant.

"To know what he went through -- the birth, ADHD in school -- to see where he is today, I thank God we were able to get here," she said.

Chelsea became pregnant after Jonathan returned from his first tour of duty that ran from January to August of last year.

Jonathan couldn't witness the birth because doctors can't pinpoint the exact delivery time and he needed to serve his country at an undisclosed location in Iraq.

The marines gave him 24 hours to head to Camp Fallujah and back to his station, meaning he had to wait until he knew the baby was born.

"To see him with my own eyes ..." Jonathan said, lowering his head in disbelief.

Jonathan is scheduled to return home from his second tour of duty at the end of October, but it could be extended as much as three months.

Chelsea recommended a plan to ensure Riley will know his father even while he serves in distant places.

"Every time you call, we'll have to put the phone by (Riley's) ear so he can hear your voice, and when you get home, he'll know who you are by your voice," she said.

More tours will follow until he reaches at least four years of service. Cissie said she hopes he'll stay in the Marines.

"When he told me he was probably going to war, he said, **Momma, I'm trained and I was trained by the best. ... If I can save a dad and his children and keep their dad home, that's what I'm going to do and this is what I need to do. And I'll be home too.'** "