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Happy Birthday from Iraq

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Soon after his mother left for Iraq, young Sergio Castellanoz looked for her at home. If he saw a picture or video of her, his eyes would open wide and he'd laugh and crawl right to the front door, waiting.

"Now he'll look straight at the TV," said Sergio's father, Juan. "He's still adjusting to not having his mom."

Marine Cpl. Tristeza Castellanoz left for Iraq last month. She's an aviation operations specialist serving with a squadron out of Cherry Point Air Station.

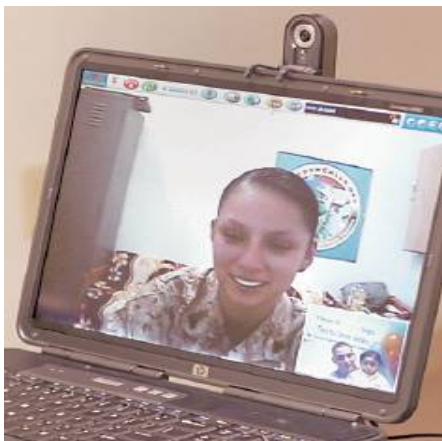
A dedicated Marine, she volunteered to go to Iraq, husband Juan said. But just because she's thousands of miles and eight hours' time difference away doesn't mean she couldn't attend Sergio's first birthday party.



the Daily News/John Althouse Sergio Castellanoz celebrates his first birthday in the lap of his dad, Juan Castellanoz, while keeping an eye on his mother, Cpl. Tristeza Castellanoz, on a live computer feed from Iraq where Tristeza is stationed. Holding the birthday cake is Sergio's uncle, David Castellanoz. The moment was made possible by the Freedom Calls Foundation and First Command Financial Planning. All of the Jacksonville office's advisors are military veterans.

Freedom Calls Foundation teamed with the Jacksonville office of First Command Financial Planning made sure mother and son would see each other in real time Aug. 10, if only over a computer screen.

"Hi, mi hijo," said Tristeza, crying and laughing at once when she spotted her son. It was nine o'clock at night at Al Asad Airbase.



"Thank you, mom, for being overseas, protecting and defending us," said Joe McLaughlin, district advisor and registered principal at First Command Financial Planning.

The Onslow County commissioner is also a retired Army major, and he remembers being on long overseas deployments, disconnected from family and friends except for letters and the occasional awkward MARS phone call.

"It's very powerful and moving to dream about your son at night and then be able to almost reach out and touch him," said McLaughlin. "It's really good for the soul to see that."

The Jacksonville office of First Command — all of whose advisors are military veterans — has facilitated the linkup from

faraway bases to about 100 military families during the past year, thanks to computer software and a video camera.

Freedom Calls Foundation made the connection possible by financing and building four video teleconference sites in Iraq.

"Our vision is that the warfighter can come in from the field and tuck in his kids at night," said John Harlow, a venture capitalist and lawyer who began the foundation in response to news stories he read about deployed service members spending thousands of dollars to call home.

If 1 million Americans donated \$30 to his foundation, Harlow said, every deployed service member could enjoy a family teleconference every week.

During Sergio's birthday party, the Castellanoz family had a luxurious 45 minutes face to face.

Juan updated his wife about their moving plans — he's taking Sergio to visit family while she's deployed, which will likely be another six months. By the time she returns, little Sergio will be walking and talking.

"When the video camera goes off, she has to put on her game face and go back to war," said McLaughlin. "That takes incredible discipline. That's why she's a U.S. Marine."

Interested in arranging a video teleconference with your loved one serving in Iraq? Call the Freedom Calls Foundation at (516) 456-3639.