

Long-distance family gathering

By Kara Lopp

Like most fathers, Marine Sgt. Terry McDowell boasted about his newborn son Tuesday.

But unlike most new parents, McDowell was seeing his child for the first time from more than 6,000 miles away.

The 24-year-old from Van Buren was the first dad in St. Joseph Hospital history to meet his child, Trey Alexander McDowell, long distance via a 20-inch monitor.

The New York-based non-profit group, Freedom Calls Foundation, set up the free two-hour video conference connecting Fort Wayne with Fallujah, Iraq, where McDowell supervises a detainee facility.

"That's the little man, huh?" McDowell said looking at his 8-pound, 8-ounce boy. "He's got a lot of hair on his head. He's beautiful."

During the first 30 minutes of the video session, McDowell repeatedly expressed concern over his own thinning locks. Drawing laughs from about 10 family members in the room, including wife Stacey, McDowell said his hair was falling out.

"I'm kind of upset now," he said looking into the camera running his fingers through his hair, "I can see myself now and my hair is falling out. I don't know if it's Iraq or what it is."



Trey sleeps as his parents talk during a video conference at St. Joseph Hospital.



Photos by Janelle Sou Roberts/The Journal Gazette

Marine Sgt. Terry McDowell, stationed in Iraq, sees his new son, Trey, for the first time during a video conference with his family.

It was about 10:30 p.m. in Iraq when McDowell met his family via video Tuesday, wearing gloves and wrapping a \$1 scarf he bought in Fallujah around his neck.

Despite a small delay from voice to video, Stacey's mother, Gail Goodpaster, said the experience was a wonderful Christmas present for the family.

"It's unreal," she said, tears in her eyes. "It's hard to believe that 20 years ago, five years ago, you never would have heard of this. I just can't believe it."

With the McDowells' 18-month-old daughter Haley growing restless sitting in front of the camera – once tugging at her new brother's feet – Stacey McDowell rocked the newborn as family members peppered McDowell with questions about the weather there and his plans for Christmas. They also told the Marine how proud they were of him.

McDowell joined the Marine Corps on Sept. 11, 2001, his father Kevin said,

and he has been in Iraq for about nine months with a reserve unit based in Terre Haute. He expects to return to his family by April.

Stacey, who remained tear-free as the reunion via video began, said she was surprised by how calm she was seeing her husband for the first time since August.

"I'm almost speechless. I don't know what to say," she said, holding a sleeping Trey in her arms.

Praising his wife for her strength, McDowell said that she has made the real sacrifice through his service.

"I tell Stacey 'thank you' every day," he said. "She thinks I'm the strong one, but it takes more courage to do what she does with two kids than what I do here."

klopp@jg.net

How to help

•For more information about Freedom Calls Foundation, or to donate visit: www.freedomcalls.org.