

A very, very long distance call

Peterborough man serving in Iraq gets to talk to (and see) his family, including his one-day-old son

PETERBOROUGH

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Meghan Close, 11, and her mother, Kerry Close, of Peterborough, show newborn Ryan to his father, Col. Jim Close, who is serving in Iraq. Jim Close was able to see his family thanks to a video connection set up by the Freedom Calls Foundation. The visit took place at Monadnock Community Hospital in Peterborough. Photo by STEVE HOOPER / Sentinel Staff

“Daddy?”

Five-year-old Connor J. Close of Peterborough called out over and over again, hoping to elicit some response from the man whose grainy image he saw projected on a screen.

Connor and more than a dozen other people crowded into a conference room at Monadnock Community Hospital in Peterborough Friday afternoon could see and just barely hear the man on the screen.

But the man couldn't see or hear them, at least not yet.

Dressed in military fatigues and standing under fluorescent lights in a nondescript conference room, he seemed to be what he was — 6,000 miles away.

All Connor could do was sit on a plush, upholstered chair and wait with his mother, Kerry A. Close, 38, his sister Meghan, 11, and his 1-day-old, as-yet-unnamed brother, while technicians in Virginia worked out the few remaining kinks in a video feed intended to connect U.S. Army Col. James C. Close to his wife and children.

Meghan had brought along her saxophone, planning to play for her father when the audio kicked in.

The conference room where Jim Close, 49, stood was at the Camp Victory Army base in Iraq, the country where he has been stationed for the past eight months. It was about 9 p.m. where he was.

In Peterborough, it was about 2 p.m., and Kerry, who had given birth about 20 hours earlier, said while she waited that her husband seemed to possess a little less hair than he had eight months earlier, the last time Jim Close was home and the last time they'd seen each other, on screen or in person.

Suddenly, Col. Close raised his hands, holding them aloft victoriously. Kerry raised her hands: a mirror image.

Everyone smiled.

The video link had been established.

A few seconds later, the audio kicked in as well.

"Can you guys hear me?" Jim called out. Seeing his newborn son, Jim asked, "Who's the little guy?"

"Well, we have to figure that one out," Kerry responded, and then brought the baby closer to the camera.

"Hold on," she said. "You have to see his dimpled chin."

"Kerry, you did a great job," Jim said, after congratulating Connor for his new math skills and Meghan for her increased height and fashion sense.

"You look so grown up. I'm so proud of you," he told his daughter.

This video conference, which allowed Jim Close to catch his first glimpse of his newborn son, was sponsored by the Freedom Calls Foundation, a nonprofit organization that raises money to connect soldiers abroad with their families at home.

Before her husband's connection was established, Kerry said she was grateful for the opportunity to reach her husband, with whom communication in recent months has been limited to occasional, brief phone calls and intermittent e-mails.

"E-mail is not always there because of missions" her husband is assigned to, Kerry said.

Freedom Calls offers video conferences for weddings, births and other special events, but the organization's executive director, John Harlow, says it has a more ambitious long-term vision: "That our war fighters will be able to come home from a day on the battlefield and spend virtual time with their families every night using state-of-the-art technology."

Kerry, who retired from the U.S. Army 13 years ago with a captain's rank, contacted the foundation about a month ago after seeing an advertisement about the organization on television, she said.

Kerry's husband has been in the military for 24 years, she said. He'd been away five years ago when Connor was born, seeing him for the first time when he was 1 month old.

At Monadnock Community Hospital, information technology staff said they'd been scrambling for about a week assembling the necessary equipment and setting up their end of the feed.

Friday's connection had two legs: a satellite link carrying Jim's image from Iraq to an Army base in Virginia, and an Internet connection bringing the image from Virginia to Peterborough.

After a few minutes of interaction with television news cameras and reporters in the room, most people left so Kerry and the kids could have some private time with Jim.

During that time, they settled on a name for the newborn boy, Kerry said afterward: Ryan Joseph Close.

It took the family about five to 10 minutes to arrive at that name. Patrick, John and James were also on the short list, Kerry said.

"We kept going back and forth," she said. She and Jim each wanted the other to choose, Kerry said, but the deciding vote may have come from Meghan, who favored Ryan over Patrick.

Jim is tentatively scheduled to return home briefly in April, but if that falls through, Kerry said, her husband's current deployment will end in August.

Peter L. Gosline, chief executive officer at Monadnock Community Hospital, thanked the Freedom Calls Foundation and the hospital's information technology staff for making the connection possible.

"Monadnock Community Hospital hopes this video conference call will help provide Kerry with emotional support at a critical time for her family," he said in a press release