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Lawton soldier in Iraq coaches wife through labor

By Julie Bisbee
Staff Writer

LAWTON — Army Capt. Andy Riise knew not to talk too much while his wife was in labor. She'd told him that much during the birth of their first son.

Seeing her husband's face was enough to give Katie Riise comfort — even if it was only his image that was beamed from Iraq onto a computer screen in her delivery room. Hers was sent back to Iraq on a webcam.

The Riise family used high-tech gadgets to make sure Andy Riise could be a part of his second son's birth Friday at Southwestern Medical Center in Lawton.

"Andy was supportive. He stopped talking. He played the part," said Katie Riise, 29.

"It was just really nice having him there," she said.

Five centers in Iraq

The conference call was facilitated by Freedom Calls Foundation, a nonprofit group based in New Jersey that helps those who are deployed stay in touch with folks back home.

Freedom Calls Foundation has five call centers in Iraq where service members can make calls or videoconferences home for free.

"Having communication eases the burden of separation and makes re-entry all the better," said Kathryn Hudacek with Freedom Calls Foundation. "When communication is easy and available, it can have a lasting effect on the bonds."

Andy Riise, 29, contacted the organization before he was deployed, knowing his wife would give birth while he was in Iraq. He works with a unit that trains the Iraqi army.

"They just told him that wherever his wife was, they would help set it up," Katie Riise said. "They would make it happen. They've been so wonderful."



Katie Riise holding her son, Jonah, who was born Friday. Jonah's father, Army Capt. Andy Riise, used video conferencing from Iraq to witness his son's birth at Southwestern Medical Center in Lawton.

Andy Riise, who is on his second Iraq tour of duty, had traveled with his unit away from the area with the Freedom Calls call center. To get back in time for the birth, Riise separated from his unit for nearly 10 days, Katie Riise said.

"I just crossed my fingers that he would be able to make it in time," she said.

It was the first time Southwestern Medical Center had a father use videoconferencing to be part of a birth, hospital community liaison Barbara Newton said.

"The staff said it was really touching watching them," Newton said.

Katie Riise said, "This has been a treat. You can take as many snapshots as you want, but to see him and for him to see the boys in motion, it was really a nice experience."

Freedom Calls Foundation connects about 2,000 conference calls a month. Some families make the calls from home, while others allow deployed parents to virtually participate in school activities, first communions or medical procedures, said Kathryn Hudacek of the organization.

The call centers in Iraq are manned by military personnel who volunteer their time to help families.

The organization was founded in 2003 after John Harlow saw a news story about a deployed soldier that had a \$7,000 phone bill. The company operates on donations and has corporate sponsors.

"It's a big morale boost," Hudacek said. "People go into the centers and talk to their girlfriends or their family. They see their dogs and they feel better."