

Log Cabin Democrat

Video conference connects serviceman with family

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At Conway Regional Women's Center on Wednesday, a mother cradled her newborn son as the proud father looked on. What made the scene unique was that Dad was actually thousands of miles away.

Chris Blacksmith of the U.S. Navy Seabees was connected with his wife, Ginger, via video conference to meet his son, who was less than a day old. The video conference was made possible by nonprofit group Freedom Calls, Conway Regional Health System and the University of Arkansas

for Medical Sciences. Freedom Calls has built a satellite network dedicated to providing video conferencing, telephone and Internet services to help troops in Iraq and Afghanistan stay in touch with their families, free of charge. They provide the services for occasions such as new babies, graduations and weddings.

At 4:17 p.m. Tuesday, Ginger gave birth to Aaron Christopher, the couple's third child. He weighed 7 pounds, 3 ounces and was 18 1/2 inches long. Ginger was seated on her hospital bed Wednesday holding Aaron, who was dressed in a sailor suit made for him by his paternal grandmother. The couple's other two children, Andrew, 10, and Audrey, 6, stood by their mother's side, beaming.

Chris was connected with his family via cellular phone during the delivery, Ginger said.

"I'm glad he was able to be on the telephone with us yesterday during the birth," she said. "Now he'll get to see him," she said.

The couple did not know whether they were expecting a boy or a girl.



Andrew, 10 and Audrey Blacksmith, 6, look on as their mother Ginger introduces their newborn brother Aaron to their father, Chris via video conference while at Conway Regional Medical Center. Blacksmith is currently serving with the Navy in Iraq.

"He got to hear them holler 'It's a boy!'" she said. "I'm going to be so happy for (Chris) to get to see (Aaron)."

She added they knew they would give the baby a name that started with A, whether it was a boy or a girl, so Chris simply called the baby "Little A."

Chris left for Iraq in late summer. Ginger has been on bed rest for the past three months, she said.

"My mom came and took care of us since I was on bed rest. Without my mom, we would have been in a whole lot of trouble," she said. "Under the circumstances, I'm thankful we have such a good family and church that have taken care of us. I'm thankful his upper command allowed him to call."

Regarding the video conference, Ginger said, "I think it's so neat. It blows my mind." She added, near tears, "It was really bothering me that everyone was going to get to meet his baby before he did, so it's good."

Audrey played with her new baby brother as the family waited for the call. They would have an hour of private family time. Also, the family will have video conferences with Chris at home three times a month. The family makes their home in Greenbrier.

Chris appeared on screen, and Ginger asked him what he thought of his baby boy.

"He's a dandy," Chris replied.

"He wrinkles up his forehead just like you do," Ginger said. "He's got your big feet," she added, pulling off a tiny sock.

Chris joked, "Reckon you can put him up to the TV and let me hold him?"

"Maybe they can rig up that technology next," Ginger teased.

"It's an incredible feeling. I'm excited," he said of the video conference. He added he is counting the days until he can see his baby boy in person.

Chris said while servicemen are often called heroes, "My family's my hero. The ones back home are the heroes. You're doing a great job. I'm proud of you."

John Harlow, executive director of Freedom Calls, appeared via video conference while the family was waiting for Chris to call. He said he started Freedom Calls three and a half years ago when he heard of a National Guardsman who had a \$7,000 cell phone bill from calling his family.

"We didn't think it was right for that to be happening at a time when you folks are making sacrifices," he said.

There is no Internet infrastructure in Iraq, according to a prepared statement from Freedom Calls, and it costs tens of thousands of dollars a month to maintain the satellite network. The

organization is funded entirely by private donations and may have to shut down at the end of the year due to lack of funds, according to the statement. To donate to Freedom Calls, visit www.freedomcalls.org.