

THE Marion Star

Dad, in Iraq, there for son's birth day Technology connects family separated by war

BY BRENDA J. DONEGAN

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MARION - Sgt. Charles Duane Van Voorhis heard his baby's first cry at birth, and a little over 12 hours later, he got to meet his newborn son, Jacob Edward.

Van Voorhis, 34 who is serving in Iraq, was able to take part in his child's birth via cell phone and a video conference made possible by the Freedom Calls Foundation and Marion General Hospital, a free service set up for members of the military serving overseas.

Duane's mother-in-law, Vicki Adams, was in the labor room with her daughter, Joy, 26, as she gave birth to her first child. Adams answered Joy's cell phone when Duane called Monday evening about 6:05 p.m.

"We talked between contractions," Joy said. "He was amazed that he could call at that time."

When Joy would have a contraction, Adams held the phone for her daughter, who had chosen not to know the gender of the baby.

"I was holding the phone during the last big contraction," Adams said. "I said, 'Duane it's here, hang on.'"

Then Joy got to tell Duane the couple's first child is a son.



For The Marion Star/Jim Hill

Joy Van Voorhis and her son, Jacob Edward, prepare to greet husband and father Sgt. Duane Van Voorhis via video conference. Sgt. Van Voorhis has been in Iraq for six months and this was his first view of his new son.

Hooking up families

The Freedom Calls Foundation is a 501(c)3 public charity formed by Ed Bukstel and John Harlow because they believed that our soldiers overseas deserved to have free communication services at their front line camps to keep in close touch with their families and loved ones at home.

"He (Jacob) has got a healthy set of lungs," Adams said, recalling the proud new father said.

Jacob was born at 6:16 p.m. He weighed 7 pounds, 5 ounces and was 19 inches long. He was due on Sunday and came right on schedule following a 12-hour labor.

Adams said her daughter had called the Freedom Calls Foundation to see if they could hook them up when the baby came. Sgt. Van Voorhis was flown two hours from his duty site in Kalitha to Al Asad, a base near the Syrian border in Iraq where the Freedom Calls Center is set up. Tech people at Marion General, an affiliate of Ohio Health, received assistance from technicians at Riverside to complete the connections, including downloading software to make it possible.

Joy said she had been trying to figure out a way to have her husband be a part of the birthing process and when she learned of the Freedom Calls opportunity, she decided to try to get it in place.

"This is a dream come true for my husband to see us so soon after our baby's birth," she said. The family also includes Sgt. Van Voorhis' son, Dustin, 16.

"Can you hear me? Can you see me?" Sgt. Van Voorhis asked as his wife, new son, parents, mother-in-law, brother Scott and Dustin all settled in at the beginning of the conference.

Sgt. Van Voorhis got his first up-close look at his son as he commented, "They said he had a lot of hair. Jacob looks like he's taking this all pretty good. This is awesome. This is indescribable. It's awesome what technology can do when you're halfway around the world."

Family members also shared in a little bit about what was going on with Sgt. Van Voorhis as far as what he could answer without breaching security.

The Foundation's services include secure high quality multiparty video conferencing on a computer over a broadband Internet connection, telephone service and e-mail.

- Three facilities are in Iraq with 50 computers and 20 telephones.
- Locations are Camp Taji in the Sunni triangle, Camp Fallujah and Al Asad.
- The free services are available to soldiers and Marines 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.
- More than 2,000 soldiers use Freedom Calls facilities in Iraq everyday.
- Via its Operation Hometown Link, the foundation also arranges for soldiers and marines to attend and participate in milestone family events in public venues such as graduations, weddings, and new births etc. from the war zone.
- For additional information, contact John B. Harlow II, executive director, Freedom Calls Foundation, 152 Montague St., Suite 7, Brooklyn Heights, NY 11201 or by e-mail at jharlow@freedomcalls.org or at www.freedomcalls.org and by phone at 718-797-9154.



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The small photo in the lower corner of the TV is the image that Sgt. Duane Van Voorhis can see from his position in Iraq.

"The weather's not too bad," he said, adding it was about 100 during the day. He is a security team leader in Kalitha that patrols the roads to make sure everything is in order. "Things seem to be going OK. We're doing an outstanding job here. That's about all I can say about that."

As the family conversed via the teleconference with Sgt. Van Voorhis, who was deployed in March, he told them he was grateful for the two days he had off to be able to fly to Al Asad to be a part of the family conference.

"I slept in an air conditioned tent last night," he said. "I had yesterday and today off and that doesn't happen too often."

Sgt. Van Voorhis was not sure when he would be returned to his place of duty. That would be determined, he noted, when a plane would be going that way. He expects his unit to return to the United States in the next few months.

Van Voorhis' mother, Annette, said being with their daughter-in-law through the labor and delivery process and with the baby's father off to war, gave her flashbacks of her experience when Duane was born.

"Your dad came home on a Greyhound," she said. "He missed your birth by a couple of hours, but he was able to get here."

"There's no Greyhound that can take me from here to there," Duane teasingly reminded his mother.

Chuck Van Voorhis had been deployed on a ship to the Caribbean and returned to North Carolina to scoot to Bellefontaine when his son was being born. He missed his birth by two hours.

The elder Van Voorhis said he is seeing having a loved one serving during war from another side of the fence.

"There for a while (when the Brook Park unit lost so many members), I avoided the news," he said. "It made your heart stop. This is different for me to be on this side and knowing what the family went through when I was in Vietnam."

Chuck said he and his wife were grateful for the opportunity to see their son's face and see that he was OK.

"It was a big relief to see him," Chuck said. "He's lost a few pounds, maybe 10 pounds. It just blows your mind that you can be that far and have that ability to communicate face to face. I'm glad it's the 21st century. Years ago they didn't have that."

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