

# NEWS & RECORD

## New dad counts fingers, toes — from Iraq

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WEDNESDAY, JUN. 11, 2008 3:00 AM

HIGH POINT — Like any proud father, Neal Clinard is obsessed with his newborn son. What's his eye color? Who does he look like? What will he and his wife hang above the crib? Unlike most fathers, he's having these conversations from half a world away — on the front lines in Iraq.

But Tuesday morning, Army 1st Lt. Clinard got a look at his first child, now 2 days old, via a satellite connection at High Point Regional Hospital.

Staring into a webcam at Baghdad's Camp Victory, he said hello to Aaron Neal Clinard III.



Army 1st LT Aaron Neal Clinard, Jr. in Baghdad smiles while looking at his new son, Aaron Neal Clinard III at High Point Regional Medical Center

"It's almost like being there," Clinard said from a flat-screen Dell computer monitor as family gathered around. His wife, Betsey, cradled their son in her arms.

"Y'all both look beautiful," he told his wife.

"That's the right thing to say," she said.

Aunts, uncles and grandparents were present as Betsey Clinard showed off the newborn. The baby's grandfather, Aaron Neal Clinard Sr., was there to give his son a first-hand accounting — 10 fingers and 10 toes.

"He's definitely got your feet," Clinard Sr. said, pointing to a large foot peeking from beneath a camouflage blanket.

Neal Clinard was able to watch his son's birth Sunday through the same satellite link. The set-up was provided by Freedom Calls Foundation, a charity linking U.S. military families to more than 50,000 troops at five camps in Iraq.



Army 1st LT Aaron Neal Clinard, Jr in Iraq checks out his newborn son, Aaron Neal Clinard III, and spends some quality time with his wife and his mom in a Freedom Calls video conference

"This is such an important time for us to see him and feel like he's here with us," Betsey Clinard said. "We're just so grateful to Freedom Calls and the High Point hospital. They've done so much to make this happen for us."

Making it happen isn't easy.

The Freedom Calls Foundation is a nonprofit organization run on private and corporate donations. It started connecting families to loved ones in Iraq in 2004 after founder and Executive Director John B. Harlow II saw a TV news story about a National Guard soldier with a \$7,000 phone bill.

"I was outraged," Harlow said in a phone interview Tuesday. "I did some research and I found out that AT&T has an exclusive contract for phone service for these troops, and they're charging them between 19 and 22 cents a minute."

Harlow said he believed troops on the ground should be able to stay connected to their families free of charge.

"When they get called thousands of miles away from their family to defend their country, whether they agree with the mission or not, they go and they serve," Harlow said. "That means leaving their families, many of which include small children. They shouldn't have to pay to stay in touch with the ones supporting them back home."

Harlow spent 25 years as a Wall Street lawyer, venture capitalist and the founder of two Internet startups. With that experience he went about trying to solve the problem.

Since 2004, the foundation has connected thousands of soldiers with friends and family, including hundreds of live births, high school and college graduations and marriages. It even helped one soldier be present for his wife's artificial insemination.

It costs tens of thousands of dollars a month to keep the satellite links going — money the foundation is having a hard time raising.

"We make the technology available in the board rooms of those who profit from the war available to those who fight the war," Harlow said. "That's expensive, but it's worth it. When you get a thank you from a family like the Clinards, when you help them out, that's special."

Neal Clinard has been deployed since March and has another year to go. During that time, Freedom Calls will provide his family with an in-home video link to him three times a month.

"It's going to be so great to see them regularly," Clinard said. "And in the fall I have some leave, so I can come home and meet my son."

"And change some diapers," his wife added.

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