

## Twins meet Dad in Iraq

**Proud Marine father moved to tears by video conference.**

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LAGUNA HILLS— "Here's Chloe."

With those words from his wife, Courtney, cradling their 6-week-old daughter in a Laguna Hills hospital room, U.S. Marine Gunnery Sgt. Gabriel Wilson – sitting a world away in Camp Fallujah, Iraq – for the first time met one of his twins today. Virtually.

Gabriel Wilson was at a loss for words, at least momentarily.

The image of the military man, sitting in front of a large Stars and Stripes draped on a wall in the background, beamed clearly via satellite video Internet link to a computer screen inside a Saddleback Memorial Medical Center neonatal intensive care unit room.

"She's really hungry," continued Courtney Wilson, 29, quelling the butterflies in her stomach. Then, keeping a calm demeanor in front of her husband, she got ready to bottle feed the infant.

Her husband, who viewed the image of his wife and daughter on a computer screen more than 7,600 miles away, broke down and wept. He put his head down and rubbed his eyes with his hands.



As Marine Gunnery Sgt. Gabriel Wilson watched from Iraq, Courtney Wilson fed daughter Chloe Yvonne Wilson in the neonatal intensive care unit of Saddleback Memorial Hospital. Wilson was able to meet his twin daughter and son for the first time through an internet video conference.

PHOTOS BY BRUCE CHAMBERS, THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER



Wilson watched his wife Courtney feed daughter Chloe

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and continuing to feed. "Every three hours."

"Is that your milk?"

"Yes, fresh milk."

Courtney Wilson talked about infant care, while her husband soaked up the moments, frequently crying and smiling as he witnessed his children's first movements.

He asked questions about their health and feeding times, listening intently to the sweet gurgling sounds that Chloe made.

"She's beautiful," he said, smiling.

A little later he saw Colby, swaddled in a blue blanket and asleep, with a tiny tube that is used to feed him a few times a day attached to his nose.

Wilson, a career Marine, was scheduled to return home in April, a couple of weeks after his wife was expected to give birth.

The Wilsons were surprised to learn five months into the pregnancy that they were having twins. And then, the twins came 10 weeks early, just days after the couple through e-mails had finally agreed on their names.

In the next 90 minutes, Wilson got acquainted with his son Colby, who arrived 10 minutes before his sister Chloe on Jan. 21, while their father was on his second tour of duty in Iraq.

Courtney Wilson fed about 2 ounces of milk to Chloe, stopping to burp the baby in a pink outfit, with a pink bib bordered in white trim and a pink ribbon across her head.

She lifted the camera and focused in close on her girl so her bewildered daddy could get a better look.

"She's a good eater," Courtney Wilson said, settling in a chair

So, while the gunnery sergeant fought insurgents in Iraq, his wife braved through the first few precarious weeks of the tiny twins' lives.

Born on base at the naval hospital at Camp Pendleton, also home to the Wilsons, Chloe Yvonne Wilson weighed in at 3 pounds 6 ounces and Colby Parker Wilson tipped the scale at 3 pounds 4 ounces.

The children were transferred to Saddleback Memorial for intensive care the same day. Both were on ventilators, got blood transfusions, were on antibiotics and needed feeding tubes.



Wilson reacted emotionally to his first sight of baby son Colby, via the internet.

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Courtney Wilson, a speech language pathologist, said while it's been difficult not have her husband home, "His job is very important to both of us and serving the country. It's a sacrifice we're willing to make."

Chloe was able to leave the hospital today because she's been progressing well and feeding on her own. She now weighs 5 pounds, 10 ounces. Colby, at 5 pounds, 5 ounces, his mother explained to her husband in Iraq, was not far behind.

Freedom Calls Foundation, a New Jersey-based charity, has been making the satellite video and telephone links possible for thousands of military families.

"Can't describe it," said a nervous Gabriel Wilson of the video meeting with his children, whose 40 pictures he has seen via e-mail. "I am so looking forward to holding my babies with my wife."

When asked about future diaper duty, Wilson laughed. "I guess I am leaving one battlefield for another," he said.

"Bye, bye, Chloe," he said when his wife tucked the little girl in a carrier, and picked up Colby. When asked who was cuter, he quickly replied: "My wife."

"You wish you were there and in a way you feel guilty for not being there," said Gabriel Wilson, who has been in Iraq since September.

But while at Camp Fallujah, a sprawling and well-fortified base outside the still-volatile city of the same name, or when he goes on his next mission, the gunnery sergeant will be carrying some special images in his mind.

"It helps," he said.

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