

## Keeping family together

Satellite video from Wheeling to Iraq allows Mom and Dad to welcome newborn

Sunday, May 11, 2008

By Amy McConnell Schaarsmith, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette



Michelle Midcap holds newborn Paige Marie.

With her husband fighting a war 7,000 miles away in Iraq, Heather Midcap thought she'd have to give birth to their daughter at Wheeling Hospital without him.

But on Friday, a live satellite video conference call arranged by the hospital and a military support organization let Marine Cpl. Roger Midcap virtually stay by his wife's side during the more than 10 hours of her labor and delivery. And it let him see his baby daughter, Paige Marie -- all 7 pounds, 10 ounces of her -- as she took her first breath.

"We could talk and he could talk me through it, so that was really exciting," Mrs. Midcap said yesterday. "It's our first baby, so I was really nervous."

Heather, 20, and Roger, 24, were high school sweethearts, she from McMechen and he from Moundsville, W.Va. They married in 2005 and had been living at Camp Pendleton, Calif. for the past few years, but when her husband was deployed to Iraq in March, Mrs. Midcap moved home to live with her parents.

Until about two weeks ago, Mrs. Midcap thought she'd just have her mother and her sister, who drove from Philadelphia to attend her, in the labor and delivery room. But then she found out about the video conferencing available at the hospital, and discovered that her husband could coach her as well.

The video conference call on Friday was the third the hospital has offered to a military family this year, according to Ronald Violi, the hospital's chief executive officer. It used a Web camera, a laptop and the hospital's wireless network to set up the link at the hospital, while Roger Midcap participated through a satellite link from his base at Camp Taqaddum, west of Baghdad.

The hospital plans to expand the service within six months to other patients with family members serving in the military, while continuing to offer the video conferencing to expectant families, Mr. Violi said.

Many soldiers are young men having their first children, he said, so helping them participate in the births boosts morale for them and their families.

"This is something that makes it a little more bearable, that they didn't miss that key part of their married life and their child's life," Mr. Violi said. "They might not have been in the room, but they were there."

Freedom Calls Foundation, which helped set up the video conference call, provides 2,000 free video calls a month to soldiers, including 200 a month for new babies. Other soldiers have participated in weddings, graduations, parent-teacher conferences, and their wives' ultrasound sessions and, in one case, the in-vitro fertilization of the soldier's wife.

The service, which is paid for by donations, is available free to anyone with an Internet connection -- the foundation will send the software to make it work -- whose family member is serving at one of five camps in Iraq, or at one of the foundation's thousands of available sites.

In Iraq, camps Taqaddum, Fallujah, Victory, Taji and al Asad Air Base offer the network's satellite connections. The foundation also offers soldiers limited amounts of free telephone service.

The foundation's founder, John Harlow, began the operation after seeing a news report in which a National Guardsman from Rhode Island had amassed a \$7,000 telephone bill with AT&T. The company provides telephone service to troops in Iraq for 22 cents a minute.

"I thought, 'This is wrong,' " said Mr. Harlow, who is one of the foundation's two employees and runs the organization from his home in Morristown, N.J. "Whether you're for or against the war, these folks volunteered to protect our country and they go where they're told and they're separated from their families."

The foundation, however, only has enough money left to provide three more months of service and might have to curtail or end its services without additional donations.

Mrs. Midcap would like to be one of the military family members to use the service again in the coming months, so her husband can see how Paige has grown and changed.

Her husband will serve in Iraq until September -- his second tour in two years -- manning a gun atop a tank as he and his comrades search Fallujah for insurgents, she said. She will move back to Camp Pendleton in August to find an apartment for them before he returns home.

And then, Mrs. Midcap said, they are hoping to take Paige on vacation to the Caribbean.

"He's looking into cruises because we didn't get a real honeymoon," she said.