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Live, from Iraq

Dad makes it to graduation, virtually

By Diette Courrégé
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School of the Arts graduate Samantha Hill received her diploma Wednesday at the North Charleston Performing Arts Center. Her father, Air Force Tech. Sgt. Ray Hill, led the audience in the Pledge of Allegiance at the beginning of the ceremony via live broadcast from Iraq.

This isn't the first time that Air Force Tech. Sgt. Ray Hill has missed birthdays, his wedding anniversary and Christmas as a result of being deployed.

But when he left in August for a year in Iraq, there was one event that no one wanted him to miss: his oldest daughter's graduation.

"That's all we wanted — him to be able to witness it," his wife, Shellie, said of her daughter Samantha's high school graduation. "It means a lot to her. It's just not something you're going to see again."

For most of the year, Ray thought he'd be able to find a way back to the states. But as of a few weeks ago, he found out that wasn't going to be possible. He and Shellie delayed telling their daughter the bad news because they knew it would devastate her. And it did.

"It's the one thing she really wanted him to see because she's worked really hard for it," his wife said.



Tyrone Walker/The Post and Courier

School of the Arts graduate Samantha Hill received her diploma Wednesday at the North Charleston Performing Arts Center. Her father, Air Force Tech. Sgt. Ray Hill, led the audience in the Pledge of Allegiance at the beginning of the ceremony via live broadcast from Iraq.



From Iraq, U.S. Air Force Tech Sgt. Ray Hill leads his daughter, School of the Arts student Samantha Hill, and her classmates in the Pledge of Allegiance at their graduation at the North Charleston Performing Arts Center.

"It's been hard to not have my dad around," Samantha said. "He's been there for pretty much everything else."

A few days later, Ray was reading an article that mentioned a New Jersey-based nonprofit, the Freedom Calls Foundation. The donation-funded foundation has built a satellite network to keep military families connected because there is no Internet infrastructure in Iraq. Ray called the group, and they agreed to set up a teleconference so he would be able to see his daughter graduate from the Charleston County School of the Arts on Wednesday night.

As Samantha walked into the North Charleston Performing Arts Center, her dad was broadcast live from Baghdad onto a large screen on the stage. School of the Arts interim Principal Myrna Caldwell began the ceremony by explaining that the graduation was being shown to Ray in Iraq so he could be a part of the night.

The audience broke into wild applause, and Samantha started to cry.

Her tears turned into sobs when Caldwell asked her father whether he could hear and he responded, "Yes, I am here." He then led the group in saying the Pledge of Allegiance.

After the ceremony, while families gathered in the lobby and outside, Samantha ran toward the computer to talk directly to her dad. She took off her cap, put on headphones, said "dad" and immediately began to sob. Only she could hear what her dad said, and he did most of the talking while she sat in front of the computer for a few minutes.

He asked her what she was wearing, told her he was proud of her and that he might be able to come home early.

She told him she loved him before getting off the phone and falling into one of her good friend's arms and crying for another few minutes. She barely could talk about the night without dissolving into tears.

Her dad said afterward that the experience of watching Samantha's graduation remotely was a great one, and he was happy he didn't have to miss it.

"I couldn't ask anything more from her," he said. "She's a good kid. I'm really proud of her."

Shellie said they planned to keep the broadcast a surprise for their daughter, but one of the school's teachers who didn't realize it was a secret asked Samantha the night before graduation whether she was excited to see her dad. Shellie then had to explain the situation.

Ray has been deployed overseas several times before now for shorter stints, but he never has been gone this long. Samantha said her dad leaving was made even harder because the two just were beginning to get close after she had gone through "my little rebellious stage."

She said she hasn't gotten to talk to her dad much this year because he often calls when she's working as a ballroom dance instructor or when she's sleeping. And he's only been home once. She looks forward to when he comes home, and the family plans to take a trip together.

Although her dad missed her high school graduation, Samantha said she's already thinking ahead to when she completes the nursing program at Trident Technical College.

"At least he'll be here when I get out of college," she said.

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