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Technology links loved ones at home to their soldiers at war

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By Aaron Gifford
Staff writer

It was love at first ring.

By introduction of a mutual friend, Christopher Roberts and Kaitlyn Kincaid chatted on the phone one afternoon. They had a blast and talked to each other after that as often as they could.

They were married a few months after Roberts flew to Central New York to see her in person for the first time.

"He had me from hello," recalled Kaitlyn Kincaid Roberts, a 2006 graduate of Oneida High School.

They've never been able to live together.



Kaitlyn Roberts, a 2006 Oneida High graduate, talks to husband L/Cpl. Christopher Roberts in the Maxwell School of Syracuse University via a live video conference from Fallujah, Iraq. The conference was held thanks to the Freedom Calls Foundation.

Celia Tobin / The Post-Standard

Chris Roberts returned to Camp Lejeune in North Carolina to finish his Marine training. His new wife continued classes at **Mohawk Valley Community College** in Utica and later moved in with Roberts' relatives in Denver, where the couple hopes to buy a home some day.

Earlier this summer, less than a year into their marriage, Lance Cpl. Roberts was deployed to Fallujah, Iraq. At that point, Kaitlyn could count on two hands the number of occasions she had visited her husband.

So in a relationship comprised of mostly e-mails and phone calls, Kaitlyn's visit to the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs at Syracuse University on Thursday provided them a sweet opportunity.

They were reunited by video conference technology. Kaitlyn sat in a classroom surrounded by giant television screens, a half-dozen cameras and 65 microphones. The call was placed to the base thousands of miles away, where the technology was less refined.

A few rings. The screen went black for a second. And then her husband's tired but smiling face appeared on screen.

"Hey hon," Kaitlyn started.

"Hey. What's up?" Chris replied.

"This is kinda weird . . ."

After some initial nervousness, the couple started to relax. Kaitlyn playfully nagged that her husband needed a haircut. Chris joked about his receding hairline, held up his assault rifle and displayed two silly hand puppets he brought for the occasion. He said couldn't wait to go hunting again when he gets home.

John Harlow, founder of the Freedom Calls Foundation, which coordinates GI teleconferences from Iraq, said his organization now handles about 2,000 conferences a month.

"Everything from sharing the birth of their first child, adoption proceedings, parent-teacher conferences. We had a Marine tune in real time for four in vitro fertilization (procedures), and he's actually going to see the birth of that child this way," he said.

"A soldier can come home from the battlefield and virtually tuck in his kids at night," he said. Harlow said he established the public charity and its satellite network after hearing about a soldier who couldn't pay his \$7,000 cell phone bill. Hospitals, colleges and other equipped institutions donate video conferencing facilities for the friends and relatives back home.

Tom Fazzio, an instructional technology analyst at Syracuse University, said the technology overseas is a work in progress. But the sometimes grainy images and occasional delays in sound don't cheapen the thrill of seeing a loved one's face on a big screen in real time.

"It's not the fastest of connections. It gets you video. It gets you audio. What else do you need?" he said. Aaron Gifford can be reached at agifford@syracuse.com or 470-3254.