

ReporterHerald

Troops, families connect via satellite at Thunder in the Rockies

*By Anthony Bowe
Loveland Reporter-Herald*

In celebration of his 1-month birthday, Ryder Figler was the one doing the gift-giving on Saturday, even if he didn't quite realize it.

Cradled in his mother's arms, Ryder yawned and blankly stared into a webcam as his father, Sgt. Josh Figler, watched the first live images he'd seen of his newborn son.

"He actually looks happy instead of crying the whole time," Figler said from Al Asad Airbase in Iraq, laughing with his wife, Michelle Figler, while she watched her husband on a computer screen in Loveland.

The Figlers were able to reunite Saturday thanks to a live video satellite feed provided to troops and their families at Thunder in the Rockies at The Ranch.

Starting at 10 a.m., troops at five bases in Iraq were able to hear and see live messages from family, newly inducted cadets and supporters until 2 p.m.

Larimer County Commissioner and eight-year Navy vet Randy Eubanks said connecting troops and their families is invaluable for troop morale.

"I know when I was in, any contact that looked, smelled or felt like home was very reassuring and comforting," Eubanks said.

Saturday's live feed was provided by Freedom Calls, a nonprofit service that has been connecting troops and their families by video conference since 2004. The service is the only free line of communication troops can use in Iraq to connect to loved ones.

"AT&T charges troops 19 to 22 cents per minute for telephone calls," said Kathryn Hudacek, director of development for Freedom Calls. "This is available because it's 100 percent free.

"It's a good way to reduce stress, boost morale, and it allows little kids to see their parents," Hudacek said.

From their own homes, families can talk to their relatives in Iraq up to three times per month if they sign up for the service, she said.



Michelle Figler of Johnstown holds her one-month old son, Ryder, as she chats via webcam Saturday with her husband Sgt. Josh Figler who is stationed in Iraq. A live video satellite feed was provided to troops and their families at The Ranch during Thunder in the Rockies so that they could hear and see live messages from each other. Reporter-Herald/Steve Stoner

For Michelle Figler, Saturday's reunion with her husband was an exercise in resolve. In front of nearly 200 people attending the event, she was able to keep the tears in check in order to benefit her husband.

"You get so used to controlling that (emotion). It doesn't help him if I just bawl," she said. "But it's definitely overwhelming just to see his face."

Other people found it more difficult to restrain the extreme emotion.

Behind dark sunglasses, tears spilled down Deb Belitz's face when she first saw her husband, Bill Belitz, who is serving in the 17th Construction Battalion.

"I didn't know if I was actually going to the talk today because he's coming home in four weeks and that makes it tougher," said Belitz who lost 40 pounds to surprise her husband for his return. "It's hard seeing each other but still being so far apart."

Remaining calm, baby Ryder rested in the shade with his mom after making his father's day.

"(My husband) should be back in February or March," Figler said