

Long-distance party

By Matt Baker

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GREENSBURG — Amanda Lohrum is used to missing her husband's birthday.

Since they started dating in 2001, they have frequently been apart as her husband, Sgt. Elrod Lohrum, served overseas in the Army.

But Amanda celebrated her husband's 26th birthday with him Thursday — from a few thousand miles away.

About 16 friends and family members joined Amanda in the home of Elrod's best friend, Jeremy Bridgewater, seeing and speaking to Elrod in Iraq through cameras and a high-speed Internet connection to a satellite link.



Amanda Lohrum, left, laughs with her mother, Connie Reed, as they talk to Amanda's husband Elrod (inset), who is in Iraq, during a video conference birthday party for the Army sergeant Thursday at a Greensburg apartment. (Photos by Andrew Laker)

"It makes me miss home, but God, I'm happy," Elrod said from a base in Iraq.

Elrod's image was projected on Bridgewater's family room wall as family members crowded in front of a Web cam to wish him a happy birthday.

Elrod had been lying on his bed with his head buried in a pillow — it was 11:30 p.m. there — when an officer woke him.

Elrod rumbled out of bed and went into a room, where his family burst into a chorus of "Happy Birthday" on a computer monitor.

"I'm shocked," Elrod said. "I don't know what else to say."

Amanda coordinated the videoconference with the Freedom Calls Foundation after her husband mentioned it a few months ago. The foundation provides free video and phone calls to soldiers over its satellite network.

It reaches about 25 percent of soldiers in Iraq and averages 1,000 videoconferences a month, helping soldiers feel included and easing stress for families back home.

"A three-minute phone call doesn't resolve the anxiety, but in a videoconference you can see the person hasn't changed," said Freedom Calls executive director John Harlow.

"Seeing is relieving."

Emotional visit

Elrod's father, Ronnie Lohrum, said the 90-minute conference succeeded in calming his constant fears more than a phone call ever could.

"To see him face to face, it's amazing," Ronnie said, choking back tears.

While emotions ran strong during the surprise party, it almost didn't happen.

Bridgewater spent six hours late Wednesday night working out connection bugs with Harlow.

"I was ready to pull the thing," Bridgewater said. "But God has his ways, and this pulled through."

Amanda said the party was especially important, because she rarely sees her husband.

Elrod left for a tour in Korea a few months after they started dating. Amanda visited him there twice, to watch him be pinned as a sergeant and to marry him in September 2003.

They have spent only six months together since then, and though they talk once a week and swap letters daily, they had not seen each other in 191 days until the video.

"Not that I'm counting," Amanda said with a smile.

The Lohrums joked around, caught up on gossip and ate birthday cake during the party.

Although he had no candles to blow out, Elrod still made a wish.

"I'd like to get home and spend my nights with her rather than here," he said.

Amanda said Elrod could be home in a few weeks.

But her family's support and calls to her husband will help her fight her loneliness until then.

"You learn to do it," she said. "Love can make you do anything."