

# Rockford Register Star

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## Bringing the soldiers a little closer to home Teleconferences allow families to talk to troops.

By Geri Nikolai  
ROCKFORD REGISTER STAR

Mark Friel got to see his 4-month-old son Tuesday for the first time in a month. Friel tried to get little Andrew to smile and intently watched every move as the baby squirmed on his mom's lap.

"You're such a good boy," soothed Mark as Andrew snuggled into his mom's chest for a nap. "Somebody's getting sleepy."

The visit, said Friel, a U.S. Army first lieutenant stationed at Camp Taji, Iraq, "was the next best thing to being there and holding him."



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Diane Friel holds her son Andrew while she watches and listens to her husband, First Lt. Mark Friel who is stationed in Iraq North of Baghdad, during a teleconference call Tuesday at the University of Illinois Extension office in Rockford

Friel and his wife, Diane, visited face to face, albeit half a world apart, on a video link provided by the Army and University of Illinois Extension for families in the U.S. and soldiers at Iraq's Taji or Camp Al Asad. The Friels were among six families who took advantage of the hookup at Extension's east Rockford office.

After the Friels had 30 minutes alone, reporters and cameras were allowed to share in the conversation. Friel kept his eyes on his wife and son while answering media questions.

"This is outstanding," he said of the video connection. "It's indescribable to see him live and in action."



U.S. Army 1st Lt. Mark Friel, who is stationed in Iraq north of Baghdad, gets to see and talk with his wife, Diane, and 4-month-old son, Andrew, during a teleconference call Tuesday at the University of Illinois Extension office in Rockford.

tonight. Yeah, right.”

Mark and Diane, both 24, met as students at Marquette University and married two years ago.

After college, Mark fulfilled his ROTC obligation by joining the Army. He went to Iraq, where he is in charge of vehicle maintenance at Taji, in November but got a two-week leave in March to see son Andrew born.

Mark calls nearly every day, Diane said. When he doesn't, it's because something bad has happened and the Army doesn't want word to get out unofficially. Those are the worst times.

“Last week was not a good week,” Diane said. “He was somewhere else and couldn't tell me where.”

Mark took time for a few words for his fellow citizens.

“We really appreciate America's support. The letters and packages are awesome,” he said. “There is a lot of good going on over here, and we definitely are making progress.”

His goal, added Mark, is to “do my job and make sure every single one of us in the unit goes home. I couldn't care less about medals and awards.”

It was the fourth video conference for the Friels. Mark's U.S. base is Fort Hood, Texas, where such hookups are done nearly every day, Diane said. She came from Fort Hood to spend the summer with her parents in Aurora and drove to Rockford for the visit Tuesday.

The two focused on their son. Mark observed that since last month's video session, Andrew's arms and legs have grown thicker, the baby is more aware of his surroundings, and he's lost hair.

“He slept on the way over. He knew he had to see his daddy a little bit and then he could fall back asleep,” Diane said. “Maybe he'll sleep all night

The Friels have made plans for his homecoming, and are crossing their fingers it will be before Thanksgiving.

“We’ve already discussed the whole menu. Everything is going to be homemade,” Diane said. “If he’s not here by Thanksgiving, we’ll do the whole big dinner when he comes home.”

It doesn’t matter where, Mark added, “as long as the three of us are together.”

Bill Woessner of the Extension office said another video hookup may be offered in December. Right now, the sessions are limited to families who have soldiers at either Taji or Al Asad.

The Friels would like to see the program expanded, agreeing that video sessions are more meaningful than phone or e-mail conversation.

“I can see how he looks,” Diane said, “and you can look into each other’s eyes.”

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Diane Friel wipes away a tear as she holds her son, Andrew, after a teleconference call Tuesday with her husband 1st Lt. Mark Friel, who is stationed in Iraq, at the University of Illinois Extension office in Rockford. A video was provided by the Freedom Calls Foundation and University of Illinois Extension for families in the U.S. and soldiers at Iraq’s Taji or Camp Al Asad