

Wives, families connect live with overseas loved ones

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Sailor Lino Martinez got his first live glimpse of his 6-week-old daughter, Isabella, on Friday from halfway around the globe.

"She's so beautiful," he exclaimed during a video conference. Isabella was born while her dad was in Iraq. Martinez, a U.S. Navy petty officer 1st class, has been gone since February. His wife, Peggy, and two daughters — including 8-year-old Gabriella — live in Tyler, Texas. The family spent 30 minutes together during a call linking Camp Fallujah, Iraq, with an AT&T conference room in Shreveport.

"It's almost like being in the same room with him," Peggy said before seeing her husband on a midsize TV screen.

She hopes he will return within four to six weeks. "Basically, I want him to meet his daughter."

Peggy held their pink-bowed daughter closer to the camera so her husband could get a better look.

"She has a bunch of hair," Martinez said. "Gabi, what do you think of your sister?"

"She's so cute," said Gabriella and then nestled into her chair to watch a moving image of her dearly missed dad.

Peggy talks with her husband two or three times a week by phone. She never knows when he will call, and she can't call him. They exchange pictures by e-mail. But seeing each other move, despite a few seconds of satellite delay, is more personal.



Peggy Martinez and daughter Gabriella show off the newest addition to the family, 6-month-old Isabelle, to Petty Officer Lino Martinez while he is on duty at Camp Fallujah, Iraq. The video conference made possible by the Freedom Calls Foundation. This was the first time Martinez saw his younger daughter. (Douglas Collier/The Times)

The video conferencing is made possible locally by AT&T Pioneers, a social service group made up of AT&T employees and retirees, and the Freedom Calls Foundation, a national charity that connects deployed military personnel with their families at no charge through video conferencing, telephone and Internet services.

"The least the American people can do is provide them with free telecommunication," John Harlow, executive director of Freedom Calls, said during a video conference. The organization, which is privately funded, is seeking more donations to stay afloat.

Coordinating schedules that are oceans apart isn't easy, especially when military personnel can be called to duty at a moment's notice. "It's a bit like herding cats," Harlow said.

Michelle Blue, of White Oak, Texas, brought one of her four sons, Jonah, 5, to see his dad, Ronnie Blue, a Navy petty officer 2nd class. He was called away from Camp Al Asad, Iraq, about an hour before their scheduled call.

Blue reached his wife on her cell phone to break the news. She was disappointed but happy to hear his voice.

They connected via video conference through the Freedom Calls program a few months ago, and she's grateful for the program.

On Friday, Jonah held his mom's cell phone tight to his ear and talked with his dad about a future father-son outing. "I'm going fishing and going on a big boat," Jonah said. "And you and me are going to be pirates."

Blue might be coming home within a month. "I'm glad he's coming back because the boys do need him," Michelle said. "His job is irreplaceable as a father."

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