



Next best thing

By Samantha Yale/Staff writer

Aug. 12, 2006



Air Force Maj. Lance Kawane is stationed in Baghdad, Iraq, but he was able to meet his newborn daughter Lindsay via a video conference over a satellite network Friday at Marian Medical Center in Santa Maria. Above, with Lance on the monitor, his wife Grace holds Lindsay as daughters Kaitlyn, 2, waves to her Dad and Lauren, 5, draws a picture for him. Mike McAndrew/Staff

As soon as her husband appeared on the screen, Grace Kawane was wiping away tears. Sleeping in her arms was her newborn daughter Lindsay, a glowing, rosy-cheeked and hearty new human being at 9 pounds, 10 ounces, and 21 inches long.

Her husband, Air Force Maj. Lance Kawane, was able to speak Friday with his family and look at his new daughter by way of video conference over satellite network from Camp Victory in Iraq, even though his family was in a hospital in Santa Maria.

Kawane is stationed in Baghdad as a space weapons officer, and he is expected to return home to Vandenberg Air Force Base in early October, his wife said. He left home in May. The Kawanes are originally from Oahu, Hawaii. Lance Kawane's parents flew in from Hawaii for the occasion.

Grace Kawane said her tears were happy ones, possibly egged on by hormones. After all, she'd given birth less than 24 hours prior on Thursday afternoon.

"We haven't seen my husband since May ... just seeing him ...," she said in explaining her emotions.

Video conferencing technology is not new to Marian Medical Center in Santa Maria, where Grace Kawane gave birth and where she and her three daughters spoke to their husband and father. It is used for meetings, for example, hospital officials said.

However, Friday was the first time video conferencing technology was used at the hospital for a deployed member of the military to visit with the mother of their newborn child.

Lauren, 5, and Kaitlyn, 2, giggled and waved at the blurry image of their father on the television in the hospital conference room as hospital staff members worked to smooth out the kinks in the connection.

At last, a clear voice emerged that matched a steady picture on the screen.

“Hi, Lauren, can you hear me?”

“Hi, Daddy.”

“All right.”

“My mom has baby Lindsay,” Lauren said, pointing to the infant.

Lauren and Kaitlyn sat drawing pictures for their father during the conference.

“Wow, that’s really good, Kaitlyn,” Kawane said.

He asked his wife how she was, and turned his attention to their new child.

“Wow, she has really big cheeks,” he said of his daughter, later adding that she is “absolutely gorgeous.”

When questioned by reporters who watched the exchange, Lance Kawane called the video conference opportunity wonderful and a blessing.

“It’s the next best thing to actually seeing my child and family,” he said.

Grace Kawane echoed his sentiments.

“Having an experience like this, I really can’t put into words what I’m feeling. It’s like he’s here with us. And he looks fine and he’s doing well,” she said.

Kawane said she wasn’t aware of the video conference option until just weeks ago when her husband’s executive officer told them about the program.

A charity called Freedom Calls Foundation established the satellite communications network that Marian connected to Friday for the video conference. John Harlow, executive director of the organization, said 10,000 sites around the country have been set up to enable members of the military to be a part of special occasions and milestones of loved ones back home.

Dr. Chuck Merrill, vice president of medical affairs for Marian Medical Center, said the video conference in instances such as this is a worthwhile use of technology. He said the hospital is open to the possibility of extending video conferencing for other similar purposes.

“Anyway we can serve the patients ... through this technology, we'll explore,” he said.