

## Long-distance Valentine's vows

This couple opted for Plan B when plans for a July wedding were thwarted by extended Guard duty.

By [Chao Xiong](#), Star Tribune

Bride-to-be Amanda Watson was nervous, ducking in and out of the bathroom with her mom in tow to dab on a little makeup, curl her blonde-brown hair and slip into an elegant strappy dress.

A two-tiered cake with pink rosettes arrived in the steady palms of a relative as pearl, pink and red balloons stood at attention. The groom, Keith Swanson, 21, was cool and collected in his camouflage military fatigues. His attire was unorthodox, but then again very little about this wedding was traditional.



Photo by Tom Sweeney, Star Tribune

Amanda Watson stands in front of the large video screen display of her husband, Spec. Keith Swanson, at the conclusion of their wedding ceremony at the National Guard Armory in Inver Grove Heights. He is in the Freedom Calls Center at Al Asad, Iraq.

Watson, 20, wore a red dress with an exposed back. "This is so unconventional I thought I'd make it more unconventional," she said.



Photo by Tom Sweeney, Star Tribune

Newlywed Amanda Swanson laughs as the brother of the groom, Carl Swanson, signs a document for Pastor Dan Weise, as Keith Swanson appears on the large screen via video link from Iraq.

That's because Watson was running around a Minnesota National Guard Armory in Inver Grove Heights on Wednesday afternoon while Swanson, a specialist with the Guard, was at Al Asad Air Base in Iraq, his grinning mug projected onto a 72-inch screen via a satellite link provided free of charge by the Freedom Calls Foundation.

The couple's nuptials would take place via video teleconference.

"I just said that to my wife on the way down, 'I never thought I'd be driving to a National Guard Armory for a wedding,'" said Watson's father, Steve Watson, of Cambridge.

The couple planned to marry this July -- in person -- but scuttled those plans in favor of a video teleconference wedding when Swanson's tour of duty was extended last month. He was scheduled to come home in March, but now he will return sometime in August. Swanson provides convoy security as part of the 2nd Battalion, 135th Infantry, based in Mankato. He had a scare this past September when the Humvee he was riding in hit a roadside bomb; he suffered a contusion, no one was seriously hurt.

A photographer, deejay and wedding location all had been selected for the July ceremony. Dresses had been bought. Hotel rooms had been booked. Details for the 400-person affair are on hold until Swanson returns; a ceremony sometime in 2008 is now planned.

On Wednesday, Watson traded in her dream outdoor ceremony for a National Guard computer room with baby blue walls filled with flat-screen monitors.

"The only thing I'm scared of is having to say goodbye [to him] at some point again," she said hours before the 2:30 p.m. ceremony. "The camera has to go off."

Swanson's aunt, Nicole Kilanowski, of Kasota, kick-started the unusual wedding in mid-January by e-mailing Gov. Tim Pawlenty's office to ask for help with a video conference wedding.

"This is all my fault," she said with a grin.

The governor's office got in touch with the National Guard, which assisted in a similar wedding in 2004 for a soldier in Bosnia. Wednesday's ceremony was the first time the technology was used for a wedding involving a Minnesota Guard member in Iraq, said Phil Stephan, the Guard's video operations manager.

Another is scheduled today and four more are in the works, all involving Guard members in Iraq, Stephan said.

The Guard routinely links families via video teleconference, but weddings are rare.

"This is the most important thing we can do: Take care of families," he said.

About 40 relatives and close friends donned suits and dresses, corsages and ties for the Swanson-Watson Valentine's Day wedding at the Armory in Inver Grove Heights, which sports the largest screen and best technology of the Minnesota Guard armories. The live, three-hour satellite feed from Iraq started about 2 p.m. -- 11 p.m. Iraq time.

Watson's friend and Minnesota resident, Chris Bergman, sat at his side, having flown in specifically for the wedding from his post in southern Iraq. Bergman's appearance was a double surprise; his wife and children were guests at the wedding but didn't know he would be there -- by satellite.

Flanked by computer desks, knee-high flower girls in satin white dresses scattered rose petals. Swanson's parents walked her down the aisle as the wedding march played from a computer.

"Keith," the Rev. Dan Weise said after the rings were exchanged, "now there's no problem with a number of gentlemen volunteering to kiss the bride here." "I think I'll just blow her a kiss," Swanson said with a laugh.

Moments later, Watson-- who changed her name to Swanson -- ran up to the screen and kissed her husband's image before taking several photos with him and family members.

Guests gave them a few minutes alone together after the ceremony.

As for the wedding night, Swanson said he planned to "have some pizza."

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