

7,000 miles apart

By Jennifer Reeger
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Sean Stipp/Tribune-Review

Alicia Taluskie introduces their newborn son, Elijah Matthew Taluskie, to his father Army Capt. Michael Taluskie on Wednesday at Excelsa Health Latrobe Hospital. Michael Taluskie is stationed at Camp Taji, a U.S. base near Baghdad. Elijah arrived at 12:15 a.m. yesterday, weighing 7 pounds, 11 ounces.

Army Capt. Michael Taluskie came into view on a television screen.

"Here's your daddy," Alicia Taluskie told the baby boy in a blue bundle in her arms.

"Say hello."

Elijah Matthew Taluskie pointed one of his tiny fingers at the screen, as if he already knew the man in an Army T-shirt with a huge grin on his face.

"He looks good," Michael Taluskie, 30, said. "He looks real healthy. He looks good, baby."

From a conference room at Excelsa Health Latrobe Hospital to a military base in Iraq, the Taluskies were connected via satellite Wednesday to share in the joy of their new baby less than 24 hours after Elijah entered the world.

The link was made possible by the Freedom Calls Foundation, which provides video, telephone and Internet links at no cost to more than 30,000 soldiers and Marines in Iraq and Afghanistan to help them communicate with their families back home. The Army has requested that the foundation install eight additional facilities in Iraq and two in Afghanistan in the coming months, to provide access to more soldiers and Marines.

John Harlow, executive director of the charitable organization, said the service members have used the video uplinks to help celebrate birthdays and anniversaries, take part in parent-teacher conferences, adoption proceedings or even marriage ceremonies.

He said of more than 1,000 video conferences performed each month, about 50 or 60 allow the service members to see a new baby.

The foundation relies on donations to build satellite capabilities and operate centers in Iraq and Afghanistan where soldiers can go to communicate 24 hours a day.

The Taluskies first used the technology on April 10 when they were able to see each other via a home computer and broadband connection.

Michael Taluskie's been on his second deployment to Iraq since November. He serves with the First Battalion, 377th Field Artillery Regiment out of Fort Bragg, N.C., and is stationed at Camp Taji, near Baghdad.

The Unity Township native joined the Army about five years ago. His wife grew up in Derry Township, but the two first met on a blind date several years ago. They'll celebrate their second wedding anniversary Monday.

After her husband left, Alicia Taluskie, 27, a social studies teacher in North Carolina, moved back home with her parents, Jim and JoAnn Ridilla, to be with family during her pregnancy.

While Alicia Taluskie missed her husband during the birth, she was surrounded by family and friends, including her in-laws, Greg and Rose Taluskie.

And they were there for a long time.

Alicia Taluskie got to the hospital at 6:30 a.m. Tuesday so doctors could induce labor. But Elijah decided to wait until 12:15 a.m. yesterday to arrive.

He was healthy, though, and weighed 7 pounds, 11 ounces.

Fittingly, Elijah was delivered by Dr. Robert Donley, himself a National Guardsman who has been deployed three times to the Middle East.

"We were trading stories to sort of lighten the mood, sort of keep it calm," Alicia Taluskie said.

She looked no worse for the wear a half-day later. Alicia Taluskie wore just a hint of makeup and deep-blue silk pajamas and bright-red slippers to the high-tech reunion. Her son, pink-faced and sleeping most of the time, was swaddled in blue.

Alicia Taluskie had planned to rely on pictures and videos to introduce her son and her husband. The video conferencing opened up new possibilities.

"It's going to be a very good experience for my husband to see his son after only a few hours," Alicia Taluskie said.

"It's a wonderful thing for these families that are split up like this," her mother said.

The conference was set to begin at 2 p.m., but Michael Taluskie was nowhere to be found. Alicia Taluskie tried to cut the anxiousness that had settled into the room with humor.

"If he forgot, he's not going to be very happy," Alicia Taluskie said. "But I won't yell at him in front of all of you."

But he didn't forget. Michael Taluskie was out on a mission that took longer than he anticipated and he arrived about 40 minutes late.

That was forgotten quickly with screams and waves as he entered the screen.

"He looks like you, so he is a Taluskie baby," Alicia Taluskie told her husband, who is bald.

"No. He has your hair," Michael Taluskie said, pointing out the dark mop on the baby's head.

"I think we're all glad he has mine," she said, laughing.

Michael Taluskie got to see his father and mother-in-law and his wife's aunt. Then the family spent some private time together.

He will get to hold his son for the first time in late summer. He's expecting to get a two-week leave then.

He'll be home from his deployment in November.

In the meantime, the couple hope to continue their video visits.

Michael Taluskie said his second tour has been made much more bearable with the technological resources now available.

"Being able to see my wife and my newborn son is a tremendous opportunity," he said. "Even though I'm 7,000 miles away, it's incredible. You're not there, but this is as close as you can get."

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