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Video link lets soldier in Iraq see birth of son

By **PATRICK BUCHNOWSKI**

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SOMERSET — From about 9,000 miles away, an American soldier stationed in Iraq witnessed the birth of his first child at Somerset Hospital.

"I was really surprised and excited when I found out I could do this," Cpl. Nathan Richards, 24, a Berlin native, said Friday from Camp Taji.

He appeared on a video link to the hospital where **Richards' wife, Danielle, held the newborn.**

A day earlier, Cpl. Richards watched as his firstborn, Carson Charles Richards, entered the world.

The 8-pound, 12-ounce baby came into the world at 8:13 p.m.

Surrounded by family and holding her son, Danielle Richards, 20, spoke with her husband, a National Guardsman serving his second tour of duty in Iraq.

"The first time I saw him yesterday I started to cry," she said. **"I haven't seen him since January. This means the world to me and my family."**

The video conference was the work of Somerset Hospital and the Freedom Calls Foundation, a nonprofit organization based in Morristown, N.J.

"It's a great moment for Somerset Hospital and the family," hospital spokesman Greg Chiappelli said.

The Freedom Calls Foundation was started by John Harlow II, who heard about a soldier in Iraq who rang up \$7,000 in phone bills calling home. The phone company would not reduce the amount owed, infuriating Harlow.



Cpl. Nathan Richards watches Friday on a video link from Iraq as his wife, Danielle, holds their infant son, Carson Charles Richards, who was born Thursday at Somerset Hospital. **Todd Berkey/The Tribune-Democrat**

The foundation has facilities at a number of military sites in Iraq and Afghanistan, connecting troops with their families to celebrate births, weddings, first Communion and other events. A computer and telephone are supplied at no cost.

The foundation is “enabling soldiers in the war zone to attend and participate in milestone family events,” Harlow said in a statement. “The contribution of resources by community citizens like Somerset Hospital enable the foundation to fulfill its mission.”

The foundation provides more than 2,000 video conferences each month from homes, hospitals and churches.

Cpl. Richards, serving with the 56th Stryker Brigade, said he hopes to visit his wife and son in September. Until then, he plans to see and talk to his family via video as often as possible.

Danielle Richards’ mother, Denise Kroon, said she was grateful for the hospital’s effort.

“The hospital staff was extremely supportive,” she said.

“The whole outlook was to get Mom, Dad and baby together. They closed a 9,000-mile gap.”