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# THE VALDOSTA DAILY TIMES

## Dad deployed in Iraq makes it to daughter's first birthday

By Heath Griner, [heath.griner@gafnews.com](mailto:heath.griner@gafnews.com)

VALDOSTA -- Army SPC Joshua Strickland sang "Happy Birthday" to his daughter Shelby Wednesday afternoon -- from Iraq.

Strickland was deployed overseas in January. Not wanting her husband to miss Shelby's first birthday, wife Dorothy used the technology provided by the Freedom Calls Foundation to link Joshua to his daughter's party.

Members of the couple's families gathered in front of a large-screen TV in the living room of Dorothy's brother, Richard Oelkers III, on Wednesday. In real time, Joshua could be seen sitting down at a screen in his current location, Army Camp Cook. Joshua's eyes widened as he saw Dorothy and Shelby for the first time in seven months.



"Well, we decided we would surprise you for Shelby's birthday," Dorothy said to her husband through the videolink. "I was hoping you would be surprised."

At Camp Cook, Joshua's fellow soldiers had taken him to a Freedom Calls Foundation Facility -- on the false premise that he would speak with his wife and daughter by phone. Joshua's surprise came at 3 p.m., local time, when he saw his daughter and heard her say "Daddy."

Visibly moved, Joshua gazed longingly at Dorothy and Shelby. "I was going to get on the Internet tonight and talk," he said.

According to a press release, thousands of soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan are taking advantage of the free Freedom Calls Network video conferences. The foundation is a public charity building a communication network dedicated to providing Internet telephone service, video conferencing, email and Internet access to troops deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan for communicating with their families. The foundation is authorized by the Secretary of the Army.

Richard Oelkers, who works in computers at South Georgia Medical Center, said his sister had asked him to hook up the equipment necessary for the link.

"(Freedom Calls) walked me through what I needed to do," Oelkers said. "We ran a test run (Tuesday), and we were ready to surprise Josh."

The technology, Oelkers said, is unbelievable. "It's like you're talking to them in person."

The Stricklands live in Hawaii where Joshua is stationed. When Joshua shipped out to Iraq, Dorothy moved to Valdosta to stay with her brother Richard and his wife Julie and daughter Savannah.

Dorothy's father, Richard Oelkers, retired from Moody Air Force Base and lives in Valdosta with his wife, Susan.

Though her daddy is serving his country far away, blue-eyed Shelby interacted with him Wednesday by taking a step for him toward the large-screen TV. She opened a present and tasted her birthday cake, smearing her face with blue icing in the process.

Joshua, talking with family members, sipped bottled water and described the heat in Iraq. When he returns home, he said he wants a nice meal of "anything you can make in the South." A glass of sweet tea sounds especially inviting, the soldier said.

Joshua is expected to return home between March and April.

For information about the Freedom Calls Foundation, visit [www.freedomcalls.org](http://www.freedomcalls.org).

Without donations, this type of communication between soldiers and their families won't be possible, the foundation's press release said.

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