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Helping Troops On Front Lines Stay Connected To Loved Ones

Group Offers Free Calls, Videoconferencing

By [Jennifer Buske](#)

Washington Post Staff Writer

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Missing the birth of his fourth child was the hardest reality Navy reservist Matthew Ebert said he had to face when he walked out the door of his Manassas home and headed to Iraq two months ago.

So, on Tuesday, when a satellite connection and a few helping hands were able to virtually bring the intelligence specialist into [Potomac Hospital's](#) birthing center, the proud father couldn't hold back his tears as he got to see his son, Matthew Ashton, who was less than 24 hours old.



Deborah Ebert talked to her deployed spouse via a videoconference after her delivery. They have four children, including Mia, left, Elijah and Avery.

"This is fantastic and makes me feel like I'm a part of it," Ebert said. "I was worried I'd miss the whole hospital experience, and one of the best parts of each of my other kids' lives was seeing them when they were born, when they are so little, so fragile."

Ebert was able to connect Tuesday with wife Deborah Ebert, their three other children and mother-in-law Elizabeth Sutton thanks to the Freedom Calls Foundation, a nonprofit group that links military members serving overseas with their families through phone calls and Internet videoconferences.

The family was all smiles when Matthew Ebert appeared on the screen. Deborah Ebert was quick to take 7-pound 14-ounce Matthew Ashton out of his hospital bed so her husband could get a better look. "I think he has your chin," she said. "We did good."

The couple's other children, Avery, 2, Mia, 4, and Elijah, 7, were ecstatic on seeing their father, albeit virtually. A broadly grinning Elijah went closer to the Web camera to show his missing front teeth, while Mia wanted to give her father details about the new family member.

"He's this many inches," she said, holding her arms open in front of her. "He has blue eyes, and he has tiny hands and a tiny chin."

The children were surprised to see their father's chin covered in a long, dark beard. "I want him to shave," Elijah said. "I remember when he left. I gave him a hug and he walked out of the room, and then I woke up and he was gone. I miss him."

Deborah Ebert, who went into induced labor Monday, asked the hospital Sunday whether there was any way to connect with her husband.

"I kept saying it's okay, and I didn't expect this to happen," Ebert said about the videoconference. "But when I heard that it could, there was a wave of relief that came over me. I knew when I was giving birth that I was going to get to see him."

The couple selected the name Matthew Ashton before Matthew Ebert headed to Iraq. When asked what she might tell her son about the day he was born, Ebert said, "I think it's important he knows what his dad is doing and how important it was to him to serve his country."

This is the first videoconference the foundation has arranged in the Washington area in a while, said Kathryn Hudacek, Freedom Calls' director of development. There were similar conferences about two years ago at Potomac Hospital and at [Colin L. Powell](#) Elementary School in Centreville, when a father surprised his son by reading a book to the class via the connection.

The foundation was started in 2003 by John B. Harlow II, who said he felt compelled to do something when he learned how much military families spend to stay in touch.

"I heard that a [National Guard](#) soldier had a \$7,000 phone bill while calling his family," Harlow said. "I thought this was wrong . . . and firmly believe families deserve free communication back home" while serving.

The foundation has five satellite stations in Iraq that allow for videoconferences at which people can connect face-to-face or make regular phone calls. The organization provides 1.5 million minutes of free phone calls and more than 2,000 videoconferences each month.

"This is fantastic that they do this," Matthew Ebert said. "I talk to people out here every day, and it's so hard to miss the little things -- or big things -- in life. This is great that they are doing something like this for our family."

The three children told their father, who is due home in October, that they were thrilled to have a newborn brother. And although it has been tough having their father away, each child has a special stuffed animal to help them out.

"It says 'I love you, I miss you, see you soon, goodnight' in daddy's voice," Mia said while holding a bright pink bear. "I hug it every night."