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After 5 months, couple finally get face-to-face Shelley and 1st Lt. Justin Hooker talk for an hour by teleconference

By Lisa O'Donnell
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Last week, Shelley Hooker told her husband, Justin, that she would see him Tuesday.

She said it felt strange to say that.

The Hookers haven't laid eyes on each other since February. That's when he was deployed to Iraq to serve a seven-month tour at Camp Fallujah in western Iraq. Hooker is a first lieutenant in the Marines.

Yesterday, they saw each other for an hour through a video teleconference set up by Freedom Calls Foundation, a nonprofit organization established to help troops in Iraq keep in touch with their families.



Shelley Hooker and her husband, 1st Lt. Justin Hooker, talk by video teleconference at WSSU.
(Journal Photo by David Rolfe)

The Hookers' reunion was at the video-teleconference room at Winston-Salem State University.

Karen Dominique, the program coordinator for video-classroom technology services, got a call from the foundation two weeks ago, inquiring about using the school's facilities.

"It was great, the fact that we could give back to the community and see her eyes light up like they just did," Dominique said.

Inside the teleconference room, Shelley Hooker, 23, exchanged small talk with Justin, 24, on a 67-inch screen.

"So how are you doing?" he asked as he sat on a chair against a black backdrop. "You look nice."

"I wore my white Capris like you requested," she said.

And he was dressed in his camouflage fatigues as she asked.

After about 10 minutes, members of the media were scooted out of the room so that the two could speak privately.

The Hookers went to school together at West Forsyth High School and got married in December. She has been living with her parents in Clemmons and works at a local architectural firm. When Justin Hooker returns in September, they will move into a new house in Holly Ridge near Camp Lejeune.

About a week ago, she got a call from Freedom Calls about setting up a teleconference with her husband. She jumped at the chance to participate.

Before yesterday, they have communicated mostly through e-mails and sporadic phone calls.

"I can't describe how special it was to see and hear him at the same time," she said. "It was amazing to see each other's facial expressions."

Freedom Calls has installed and maintains video teleconferencing equipment at Camp Fallujah, Taji and Al Asad. But it relies on places such as Winston-Salem State to serve as stateside teleconference sites. The organization sets up about 2,000 teleconferences a month, said John Harlow, the executive director of the foundation.

Any serviceman or family member can request a teleconference. Hooker isn't sure who set up the teleconference with her husband.

Outside of photographs, this was the first time that Shelley Hooker got to see her husband's new look - a bald head and mustache. She said she preferred the old look.

"But if he came home with a mustache, I'd take him anyway," Hooker said.

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