

Videoconference Lets Marine In Iraq See Newborn Daughter

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At 9:39 a.m. Wednesday morning, Mariella Hotart gave birth to a little baby girl, Breanna, at St. Francis Hospital. By 1:40 p.m., she was meeting her daddy, Cpl. Brandon Hotart, a Marine, by video link provided by Freedom Calls Foundation, which connects servicemen and women with loved ones on active duty overseas. Hotart has been in Iraq since early April.

Brandon Hotard has waited 10 years to become a father. So when it finally happened at 9:39 a.m. Wednesday, he couldn't wait to see his new daughter — even if he was halfway across the world.

With the help of a satellite hookup and some pretty sophisticated computer equipment, Hotard, a corporal in the Marine Corps serving in Fallujah, Iraq, got his first look at Breanna Sophia Hotard four hours after she was born at St. Francis Hospital and Medical Center in Hartford.

Exhausted and in some pain after a Caesarean section, Hotard's wife, Mariela, smiled, waved the baby's tiny arm and whispered "Hi, Daddy" when Hotard's face appeared on a flat-screen computer monitor at the foot of her bed.

"I told you when I saw the sonogram she looked like you," Mariela told her husband in the long-distance conversation.

"I'm so happy," Brandon Hotard said. Then he pointed to a small corporal pin on the collar of his fatigue shirt. "You see, sweetheart," he said.

"You got promoted," Mariela answered.

Brandon Hotard enlisted in the Marines about three years ago and started his second tour of duty in Iraq at the beginning of April, according to his mother, Julie Hotard, who assisted her daughter-in-law during the birth. The baby weighed 7 pounds, 2 ounces, and was 20 inches long.

The couple met while working at La Casona, a restaurant in Hartford, four years ago. Mariela, 30, also has a 5-year-old son, Leo, whom Hotard is raising. Brandon Hotard, 28, said he has always loved children and has been waiting since he was a teenager to become a husband and father. He has had the name Breanna picked out since he was 17.

Because he had been on leave in June to go to his stepfather's funeral in New Orleans, he said the military would not allow him to attend the birth. So he kept in constant phone touch with Mariela. He even called her at 3 a.m. Wednesday, when he found out that she had been scheduled for a C-section.

The videoconference was arranged by the Freedom Calls Foundation, a nonprofit group that arranges about 2,000 free videoconferences a month between soldiers and their families. About 10 to 15 percent of the conferences are new-baby calls.

But unlike the one in Hartford Wednesday, most of the conferences are set up weeks in advance. St. Francis had only a few hours' notice to set up the call.

Brandon said he had been trying for weeks to figure out a way that he could see his newborn as early as possible, but even a few hours before the teleconference, there was some doubt that the logistics could be pulled together in time for a birthday meeting.

"I'm really excited. It's melting my heart to see my wife and baby," Hotard said. "I've waited a long time for this day."

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