



FROM OKINAWA, WITH LOVE

Deployed father meets daughter day after her birth

Lance Cpl. Stefanie C. Pupkiewicz
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CAMP LESTER, Okinawa (October 10, 2008) -- This, Oct. 2, may yet be the happiest day of their lives, so long as Capt. Robert Spalla and wife Laura can get over a little issue they're dealing with - more than 4,000 miles of geographical separation.

Their daughter, Elizabeth, breathed on her own for the first time the day before, when Laura gave birth at U.S. Naval Hospital Okinawa Oct. 1. Unfortunately for Dad, he's busy supporting Operation Iraqi Freedom.

Luckily, the technological progress of the past 50 years has been good to the new parents' situation. As recently as 20 years ago, Capt. Spalla may have had to wait weeks for a stamped piece of paper to cross an ocean to hear the good news. Today, he'll see his child a mere 24 hours after she was born.



Laura Spalla cuddles her newborn daughter, Elizabeth, hours after her birth Oct. 2, at U.S. Naval Hospital Okinawa.

Photos by Lance Cpl. Stefanie C. Pupkiewicz

Although teleconferencing is not an entirely new phenomenon, the Freedom Calls Foundation coordinates with family readiness officers, deployed units and the family members themselves to connect individuals back home to their loved ones serving overseas in deployed environments. The foundation does this for both life and death situations - either brand new birthdays or an ailing relative's final hours.

USNH has had the ability to perform these teleconferences for several months, however the Spalla family was the first to use the program at the hospital due to deployment, birth date and service availability all matching up, according to Cheryl Collins, the family readiness officer for Spalla's unit: 9th Engineer Support Battalion, 3rd Marine Logistics Group.



Laura Spalla holds her daughter, Elizabeth, up to the webcam for her husband to see from Iraq. This web conference between newborn child and deployed parent was the first ever performed at the U.S. Naval Hospital Okinawa.

"I was surprised no one takes advantage of it," Laura said. "It's a great way to be in touch with daddy or mommy."

The preparation did not happen overnight. Rather, it began several weeks prior when Laura saw an advertisement for Freedom Calls and submitted a request to use the service. Collins took over the job of coordinating the event over the next few weeks, Laura said.

The actual set-up of the teleconference on Oct. 2 took approximately six hours to arrange, because of logistical issues with Internet protocol addresses and the time zone differences between Japan, Iraq and New Jersey, where Freedom Calls is located, Collins said.

In the end though, everything worked. Capt. Spalla sits in front of a laptop half a world away while his wife shows him their firstborn. Streaming across the Freedom Calls satellite link, the images pass for a precious 20 minutes before the transmission ends, eliminating, temporarily at least, an issue deployed family members sometimes face.

For more information on the program visit the Freedom Calls Foundation website www.freedomcalls.org