

Dad in Iraq joins wife in delivery room

By Colleen Flaherty
Staff Writer

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Trini Leonard of Stamford holds her son, Andrew Thomas Leonard, while resting in a bed at Greenwich Hospital as she speaks with her husband Marine Corps Capt. Timothy Leonard via an Internet video conference Thursday. Capt. Leonard is stationed in Al-Asad, Iraq. (Bob Luckey Jr./Staff photo)

GREENWICH - Trini Leonard smiled as she held a sleeping baby boy up to his father, 9,000 miles beyond the computer screen in front of her.

"He definitely has your nose," she said from Greenwich Hospital.

U.S. Marine Corps Capt. Timothy Leonard nodded in agreement. "Yes," he said, sitting in a video-conferencing center Thursday in Al-Asad, Iraq.

It was the second time the Stamford resident had seen his new son. Thanks to modern technology and a New Jersey-based charity, Tim was able to witness his birth the day before.

"It's a great feeling being able to witness this event far from home," Leonard, 30, told members of the media Thursday during a video conference arranged by the Freedom Calls Foundation. "And I'm just so happy he's healthy. He's a big boy, 8 pounds, 12 ounces. Yesterday, he was screaming and crying, so it's nice to see him so calm in his mother's arms."

Established in 2003, Morristown, N.J.'s Freedom Calls Foundation is a nonprofit organization that connects military families in the United States by video conference with their loved ones for milestones such as the birth of a child, graduations, weddings and parent-teacher conferences. It makes 2,000 calls, paid for with donations.

With four teleconferencing stations in Iraq, two in Kuwait and one in Afghanistan, Freedom Calls is within reach of about 50,000 troops, of 180,000 stationed in the region, according to Director of Development Kathryn Hudacek.

"We are able to meet a little bit better than 35 percent (of troops' requests) only because we don't have satellite centers on the ground in every military base in Iraq," Hudacek said. "But with every dollar donated, we're able to put more up."

Centers cost more than \$150,000 to build and maintain annually. One hour of connection time costs \$1,000.

The service is free to military families.

"We didn't know this was going to be possible," said Trini Leonard, who began searching for ways to involve her husband in the birth before he was

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deployed in August. She contacted Freedom Calls after reading about it in a newspaper, and everything soon fell into place with the help of Greenwich Hospital.

"Greenwich Hospital has been amazing in making this happen," Hudacek said. "It didn't take any convincing when I spoke to their public relations department six weeks ago."

Christine Beechner, vice president of patient and guest relations, said it was only a matter of pulling a team together from many willing staff members.

"We had all the technology already for conference calls," Beechner said. The only other considerations were making sure the conference didn't interfere with the birth and privacy, she said.

After a trial run last week to test technology and meet hospital computer technician Carl Feidner, who wheeled Timothy's screen around the delivery room, all parties were ready for Wednesday.

Trini arrived at Greenwich Hospital at 6 a.m., was connected with Timothy, and delivered Andrew at 8:25 a.m.

"I was there for the labor and delivery, and I got to follow Andrew to the nursery while he got checked out and cleaned up. It was almost as if I was there," Timothy said.

Trini, smiling while fighting back tears, said, "He gave the news to the hospital staff. He was able to announce it like a normal dad."

This is Timothy Leonard's second tour of Iraq. He is scheduled to return in the spring. Trini, Andrew and the Leonards' older son, Patrick, 2, will keep in touch until then through video conferences arranged by Freedom Calls three times a month in

their Stamford home.

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