

Wives Joined by 'POTUS' at Video Conference

by Ulli Robinson, Times Staff Writer

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FORT DRUM - As I watched the events of Sept. 11 unfold on my television screen in Hawaii, I never imagined that 10 months later my husband would be in Afghanistan and I would be talking to him via satellite - with President George W. Bush sitting nearby.

My husband, who has served in the Army for 14 years, was assigned to Fort Drum in March. Soon after we arrived in the north country, he left to fight the war against terrorism, while I was left behind to find my way around a new community. The last time I "saw" my husband - appearing on a shaky television screen - was in early May. Now, I have seen him again, thanks to President Bush's visit.

While here, the president joined in a video conference with soldiers who are still in Afghanistan. Army officials invited spouses to share the experience, and I was fortunate enough to be part of that group.

It was hard to fathom that I was going to have the opportunity to shake hands with the president of the United States.

Still, the other spouses and I were more excited that we were going to see our husbands again, even if only on a television screen.

As we waited for the president's arrival, I tried to separate White House officials from local officials.

The Secret Service agents stood out, dressed in dark suits with stoic expressions and "eagle" eyes. Nothing seemed to faze them; even jokes by some Army officials did not cause facial movements.

White House staffers, with cell phones and other communication devices, were also present. Military officials, much more relaxed than I anticipated, were open to answer any questions we had.

But the most important item in the room was the big screen TV that would send me an image of my husband. Before the event started, a White House official reminded us to smile a lot. "How could that be hard?" I was thinking to myself. Just the thought of seeing my husband brought a bright smile to my face.

And then, a Secret Service agent announced that the president had entered the building and the level of nervousness in the room grew. Suddenly meeting the president became a much bigger deal to me than I had anticipated.

The first-row seats were marked with names of spouses whose husbands would be in the video conference, and sure enough, the President of the United States, or as his nameplate read, "POTUS," was sitting just four seats to my right.

My stomach turned in knots and my hands were getting sweaty. I could feel my blood pressure going through the roof.

Then, national security adviser Condoleezza Rice and several other officials entered the room. Seconds later, "POTUS" arrived.

Everyone rose and applauded and the tension that had been growing disappeared immediately.

The president greeted us with a firm handshake as we introduced ourselves. He then reminded us why our husbands are deployed.

"We have to do this," he said. "This is for freedom."

As he said it, my eyes filled with tears. I wasn't alone.

The president turned to another spouse and said, "One tear from you and one from me..." He wanted her to stop. "If you start crying, I will." It was true. I saw his eyes begin to fill with tears as well.

He sat down among us and the video conference started. Surely, the White House official who had encouraged us to smile a lot didn't have to worry about that anymore as the television screen came alive with the faces of soldiers; not just any soldiers, but our soldiers.

Gen. Franklin L. "Buster" Hagenbeck was introduced, causing the president to chuckle for a moment, since not many generals go by the name "Buster." Gen. Hagenbeck proceeded to address his wife, inadvertently cutting off his commander-in-chief who was in midsentence. The general looked a bit uncomfortable when he realized what he had done from 12,000 miles away, but President Bush didn't mind. "Who am I to interrupt a husband and a wife talking," he asked. "Please go ahead."

Every soldier got to address the President for a minute or two and send a greeting to his spouse. When it was my husband's turn, I was on the edge of my seat. He recounted the time he had Thanksgiving dinner with President George H.W. Bush during Operation Desert Storm. Now, he said, it was his honor to serve and talk with the elder Bush's son during Operation Enduring Freedom.

(Later, I told my husband that if the president's brother, Florida Gov. Jeb Bush, ever becomes president, he must promise me that he won't ask to be deployed to a combat zone just so he can say he served in a war under all three Bushes.)

Another soldier then asked President Bush if he wouldn't mind giving his wife a kiss on the cheek for him. The president happily obliged as everyone chuckled. But the room filled with laughter when the spouse then responded by looking at the TV screen and asking Gen. Hagenbeck to return the favor to her husband. The general decided to pat the soldier on his shoulder.

After the 20-minute session, the president proceeded to greet everyone else in the room. He also made sure to write some "happy birthday" notes to some of the children of the deployed spouses. He then said there are many great soldiers, spouses and parents in the room. "That's the most important thing, being a good father and mother," he said. Then he made a specific reference to his twin daughters, who have been in the news for underage drinking. "But there is an end to the teenage years," he said. "My girls are 20 now."

Soon the president left to give his public speech to all the troops. He said the soldiers of the 10th Mountain Division are doing a fantastic job in Afghanistan, fighting a war this nation can't afford to lose. But he now also knows that the spouses are doing a fantastic job as well, making sure their husbands hear only happy voices and news during phone calls and in e-mails; the tears and frustrations can be saved for later.

We were thankful for the time with our husbands Friday. We know they will achieve the goals set by President Bush. And we look forward to the day when all of us hear the words "Mission completed," and our husbands are again with us in the north country.

(Editor's Note: Ulli Robinson, a native of Germany, is the education reporter for the Times.)

(USAWOA Webmaster's Note: Ulli's husband is CW3 John Robinson, USAWOA Life Member, former webmaster of Aloha Chapter, and currently a member of the USAWOA Web Committee.)

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