

Military members who proudly fight to protect the nation's constitution and citizens are often bonded through life-altering experiences. Yet, for two New Jersey Air National Guard mothers of the 108th Wing, their bond is forever forged by the unique event of delivering their baby in their car, just four days apart!

Master Sgt. Janae Tisdale, a financial management technician of the 108th Wing Staff, and Staff Sgt. Shakeia Reyes, a personalist of the 108th Mission Support Group, have often passed one another in the hallways of the headquarters building. While pregnant at the same time, the two never in a million years expected to deliver their babies around the same date, in the same way, and be admitted to the same hospital.

"From start to finish, my son's birth was a surprise," said Reyes. "And the surprises just kept coming!"

On Friday, Dec. 30th, Reyes went to her last scheduled doctor's appointment for a routine check-up. This would mark 40 weeks of pregnancy. Though routine, that morning her 'water was leaking' and her doctor was concerned.

"She wanted me to go to the hospital, so, I went," said Reyes. "I was going to deliver at [Virtua Voorhees Hospital in New Jersey]. At the hospital, the doctor did a thorough screening, and test results concluded everything was 'within normal limits', so they sent me home. I arrived at Voorhees around 11 am and it was about 2 pm by this time."

Reyes noted, that due to developing gestational diabetes, she was told by her doctor that she could not go past 41 weeks in pregnancy. If so, the doctor would have to induce her labor by the end of the week.

"After leaving the hospital, my sister and I went to lunch," said Reyes. "For the most part, I was relaxed, but in the back of my mind, I was nervous that the doctor would have to induce my labor."

"As I was headed home to refrigerate the leftovers, I ran into my next-door neighbor," said Reyes. She was an older woman who had over five children and recommended that Reyes try castor oil to initiate her delivery. "Wanting to deliver naturally, I was willing to try it."

Around 11 pm, Reyes began to feel contractions but was not alarmed, she said, because earlier in the week she had experienced similar discomfort for short periods of time. As she and her sister left her in-law's house to prepare for bed, she arrived home and immediately rushed to use the restroom!

"I was in the bathroom for nearly 17 minutes, when my water broke," said Reyes. "My sister who was helping me at the time, noticed blood and was concerned for the baby, so I knew I had to head to the hospital." It was around 1:30 am.

Now in the car, her husband, Jarvin, anxiously navigated the dark, empty roads toward Voorhees. “I was on the front passenger side, holding on the [grab handle],” said Reyes. “I couldn’t sit down, so I was in a standing position.”

With the hospital entrance in sight, Reyes was upright, sullied, and uncomfortable, but remained focused.

“I didn’t think about it,” recognized Reyes. “It just all happened! I was up in my seat. We pulled up to the hospital and Jarvin went to grab a wheelchair, a few feet away from our truck. As I braced myself for one more contraction, for some reason I unlocked my legs, and felt completely relieved. I had no idea why. So, I asked Jarvin to help me pull down my leggings, and simultaneously the baby came out onto the seat--on his side, not crying, in the fetal position, pale, and with no fluid.” It was about 2:07 am.

After poking the baby three times, still attached to her by the umbilical cord, Reyes said, she was in shock and began to panic.

Jarvin runs to get help and seizes the aid of a nearby security guard. The guard unaware of how to help, immediately puts on gloves and slaps the baby's bottom. Their new son begins to cry.

Four nurses rush to assist Reyes as she holds the baby to her chest, still attached. As they now look to the father to cut the cord, Jarvin was stretched out on a bench. “He was checked out,” Reyes laughed. “His nerves got the best of him.”

Because Jarvin was not nearby, Reyes decided to cut the cord herself. It was now Dec. 31st.

As if déjà vu, on January 4th, a healthy baby girl was born to Tisdale and beau, William Craig Kelly, in similar circumstances.

“I remember hearing something like that,” recalled Tisdale. “The nurses at the hospital mentioned, someone else [delivered] their baby in the car, not too long ago. It had to be her! It had to be Reyes...wow.”

At around 3:30 am, a few days after ushering in the New Year, Tisdale woke up with cramping in her back, she said. As the pain intensified, she tossed and turned for nearly two hours before deciding to get out of bed and take a warm shower.

“When I think about it, all the signs were there,” said Tisdale. “But I was focused on breathing and managing the pain.” The cramps were getting stronger.

Though unsure exactly when to head to the hospital, Tisdale says, she and Kelly began to prepare her toddler, Brooklynn, to stay with relatives.

“That’s when things kicked up a notch,” remembered Tisdale. “I wasn’t keeping track at the time, but I would say, the contractions were now coming ten to 15 mins apart.” It was about 6 am.

“His mom and my stepmom show up at the same time and I am throwing stuff in [my hospital bag and Brooklynn’s bag] intensely, bracing for contractions,” said Tisdale. “I couldn’t talk for four hours while this was happening. Craig gave me a hand fan, which was my saving grace.”

With a now packed car, Tisdale said, she was ready to head to the hospital. But with every two steps, she felt strong waves of pressure! She vomits.

Tisdale notes she was now in active labor. It was around 6:40 am.

“I used every towel in the house,” she joked. “As many videos as I have watched when I was [expecting], at the time, I was just focused on getting through the pain. It was chaos, but [luckily], I was breathing and not panicking.”

Kelly’s mom stayed behind but helped Tisdale into the back seat of the vehicle. With Kelly driving, he decided to take the back roads, as they did 19 months prior to prepare for the birth of their first child.

“We had the car seat installed,” said Tisdale. “So, I am leaning up against it with my legs stretched in front of me. I’m sliding all over the place, with another 5 minutes to go!”

At the last light, before pulling onto the hospital’s campus, Tisdale recognizes, the baby is coming.

“I didn’t want her in that position too long, so I just had to grin and bear it,” said Tisdale. “I started to feel like I had to push, so, I pulled down my pants to see if I could feel anything, and I felt her head. After a moment, I began to push, and she came out.”

Still attached by the umbilical cord, Tisdale puts the baby on her bare chest.

“I knew to do that because I [remembered I had to do] this for my first one,” said Tisdale. “Surprisingly, [I turned my head toward the dashboard clock] to look at the time. It was 8:10 am.”

Informed that the baby had arrived, Kelly was unsure if he should pull over or not, remembers Tisdale. But she urged him to “just go!” Kelly quickly pulls into the drop-off [section of the maternity ward] and runs in to get help. Several nurses rush out to greet them.

“Is everything ok?” asks Tisdale. “Just tell me everything looks normal?” The staff assures her everything is “okay”, and Kelly cuts the cord.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), approximately 80,000 American babies are born outside of hospitals each year. This is roughly just two percent of births in the United States. Of said births, about 94 percent occur in a home or birthing center, which results in nearly six percent of U.S. mothers delivering their babies in a car—an uncommon feat, nothing short of miraculous!

Though Reyes displayed her own strength that day, she noted that what Tisdale accomplished was amazing.

“As I think about her story, I don’t know how she did it,” said Reyes.

“When the doctor examined me, I only had a small tear,” said Tisdale. “This was a big deal because I had a cesarean (or C-section) with my first child, and this birth was natural.”

No different from Reyes, Tisdale expressed that delivering her daughter that day was a relief because she too desired to have her baby without surgery. “Funny, the day I delivered, was the day I was going to find out if I would need a C-section. I chose my doctor because she was super supportive of my wishes to have a natural birth.”

Thinking back, Tisdale recognized that because she was in labor for 36 hours with her first daughter, she misread the signs leading up to the birth of her second child.

“They say, ‘no two pregnancies are the same’,” said Tisdale. “Brooklynn was born in 2021 at the height of [the pandemic]. Labor with her was more difficult than with the second. And the C-section was a last-minute decision by my doctor because my ‘water broke’.”

Reyes who has two other children, both girls, noted that the birth of her son was also different from the others. Still, his birth remarkably aligned with Tisdale’s delivery, just a couple of days apart.

“That’s super unique,” responded Tisdale. “We’re both in the military—what are the odds—with babies born so close together. Maybe it was something in the stars.”

To date, both Reyes and Tisdale have healthy babies and have recovered well.

“Childbirth is by far the hardest thing I have ever done,” affirms Tisdale. “It is harder than the military!”

And so, it was.

With both mothers working full-time on base, the two concurred that their units have been supportive of their needs throughout their pregnancy, specifically in terms of reasonable maternity leave.

“But some people don’t have that experience,” continues Tisdale.

Fortunately, in recent years, several 108th Wing female leaders have made tremendous headway in assuring new moms have what is needed to work and best serve their children.

Currently, an initiative, carried out by a team from the Wing's Diversity and Inclusion Council, is identifying rooms conducive to lactation in several locations throughout the wing. This will allow our nursing mothers a comfortable and private location where they can easily pump milk during the workday.

As their delivery stories end, the only thing left to unveil is the name of each child.

"We named our daughter, Chase Nalani Kelly," said Tisdale.

"And I chose the name, Christian Alexander Reyes," said Reyes, revealing that her son's initials intentionally spelled out CAR. "This is so, he will always know the story of how he was born."