

Chance Encounters

Chief Warrant Officer Two Jeffrey L. Lightsey

Jeff Lightsey, band director at Smithson Valley High School in the Comal ISD, is currently serving as Chief Warrant Officer of the 36th Infantry Division Band in Iraq. He shares a unique perspective on teaching band students whether in Texas or in Iraq.

Music is a powerful thing. I am reminded of this statement daily in Basra, Iraq. One year ago I received the call from the 36th Infantry Division Chief of Staff. As I sat at my desk at Smithson Valley High School, COL Tracy Norris's voice was clear on the other end of the line, "The 36th Infantry Division Band will be deployed to Iraq with the division headquarters. Are you ready for this Chief?" While I do not remember my exact reply (you can imagine this), there was no doubt my unit was going overseas in some capacity, hopefully a musical one, and we had better be prepared.

For those who do not know anything about Army bands, this is the mission statement as published in Army Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures (ATTP) 1-19 U.S. Army Bands. *United States Army bands provide music throughout the entire spectrum of operations to instill in our forces the will to fight and win, foster the support of our citizens, and promote America's interests at home and abroad.* With this lofty and all encompassing statement in mind, I questioned as many of my fellow band commanders as possible who had previously deployed. Throughout this process, I felt good about

the military preparation for my soldiers, but gave little thought to civilian interaction. In the United States, the 36th performed for civilian events an estimated 65% of our drill time during the year, but I assumed that in Iraq there would be little of this. A pleasant surprise awaited me as I arrived in Iraq to find music education alive and well in the most foreign and potentially hostile of environments. The year following this alert order was an eventful one. The military tasks and training in preparation to mobilize seemed endless, but through it all music continued to happen for the 60 soldier musicians under my command. Multiple Music Performance Teams (MPTs) were formed and adjusted, small up tempo chamber groups with an emphasis on music for the young modern soldiers on the today's battlefield. Everything was driven and created for the soldiers we would be supporting on Contingency Operating Base (COB) Basra. Equipment was ordered, music bought and arranged, medical boards held; to sum up the process, we were on the fast track and pushing out the door. No thought was given by me or any of my fellow music educators turned

soldiers toward working with the local Iraq population, certainly not teaching "band" to young musicians in any capacity.

Transition forward in time to 15 December 2010, my second day in Iraq. Following a mobilization ceremony at the Frank Erwin Center on the University of Texas campus, I spent 67 days at Ft. Lewis, Washington training for the ten-month tour of duty in Basra as part of the 36th Infantry Division's Headquarters deployment to United States Division-South; needless to say, I had not taught or been around students in any capacity since my school year ended in May. Following Ft. Lewis, I flew into Camp Behring, Kuwait, the massive holding and processing base for every soldier entering Iraq. After five days of tent living and Army last minute minutia, I took the 30 minute flight into Basra on a C130, reported in, and found the band building. On military bases, the band building (no band hall) is typically defined as a building no one else wants. The building on COB Basra was built to support the 34th Infantry Division Band's specific musical mission; hence, I would be falling in on a structure vastly superior to what I had in

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Texas. The 36th Infantry Division was replacing the historic 1st Infantry Division (“Big Red One”), so my 17-member Army Band would be replacing their 14-member musical counterparts. I do not know what normal is, but I do know my seven days prior to meeting these students were quite eventful, and totally disjointed. Add to this the unknowns that Iraq itself presented, and music education was definitely not part of my “train of thought”! Enter music students from a school in Baghdad to remind me what we do as music educators is a very special thing, making connections beyond the boundaries of politics and ethnicities.

Operational Security (OPSEC) is the largest concern for military forces in Iraq. The enemy can be anyone, as there are no traditional uniforms or stereotypes. Proper security of soldier travel itineraries, report times, and personal family information is paramount. Local Iraqis and third party nationals who work on and around the base are constantly searched, vetted, and monitored. With United States soldiers scheduled to leave by December of 2011, much of the basic security for COB Basra has been contracted out to troops and professional organizations from across the world. Just to get to the band building, our musical guests passed through a gate manned by Ugandan Nationals armed with combat loaded AK47 assault rifles, where they were searched, optically tagged, and sent with escort to meet us. This was the situational environment on post as the students arrived at the band building for the first time. To let you know where I was mentally, I was the only soldier in the building still wearing his weapon (M9 pistol) during the clinic. IID had already

met some of these musicians on a previous mission to Baghdad. In an effort to be non-confrontational, their weapons were stored in a separate room. Since my flight information was confirmed only 24 hours ahead of my arrival into the country, IID had not planned for me helping or even being available. To sum it all up, I



was an interested bystander trying to adapt to my new surroundings while I waited for the rest of my unit to arrive.

The music students were scheduled to spend three days with IID, with performances and clinics by various groups within the IID Band. The students were accompanied by their primary instructor, as well as a translator. Most of the kids did not speak English, but some could and did help with translation. ALL OF THEM TRIED THOUGH, which made it interesting and fun. I hung around the first two days, busy with other stuff, but listening and watching. The greatest difference between active duty Army and National Guard Bands is the musical make up of the units; the National Guard is heavy on full time music educators, whereas the Active Army has active performers who may teach depending on workload. IID has many

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fine musicians, but none are teachers on a daily basis. When IID found out that I was a music educator, they asked me to do a session on something; essentially they had finished their program, and wanted to give me an opportunity to get to know our guests, and build future relationships. Although I was excited, this was totally unexpected. I was not nervous; there was no pressure from anyone to do anything. I hate to admit it but the phrase “minimum expectations” comes to mind. I wanted to represent my unit well, and in some ways make sure the active guys knew I knew my stuff. I am a Texas band director after all, and having heard all the jokes from non-Texans for years about spending too much time on marching band (perhaps true) and warm-ups with too little time on music, I felt like I was under the microscope. Heap onto this the subtle Active Army to National Guard stigma, I felt like I had to be ready with more than they expected. Most importantly, I wanted a good assessment of what was going on with these young people, what they were about and where they were going. Just as so many teachers and instructors have left a positive impact on me, I wanted to leave these students with a lasting impression about music by having a great shared experience.

We use this phrase all the time: “kids are the same everywhere”. I quickly found that these kids were similar to my students in Texas in a couple of ways; THEY WANTED TO LEARN, and THEY ENJOYED MUSIC!! I also cannot help but feel that they appreciated it a little more because of what they experience on a daily basis.

There is no doubt in my mind that they enjoyed the opportunity to be with teachers and fellow musicians.

They dressed appropriately, smiled when you smiled at them, and tried to communicate the best they could. They had many questions about my students and band back home.

Their equipment was awful—cheaply made instruments, most in poor condition. In Iraq there is a layer of dust and grime everywhere. Sand gets into everything, wreaking havoc on electronic equipment, vehicles, and certainly musical instruments (extra dry reeds). The Army has specially made anvil cases, which help, but these kids did not have anything appropriate to protect their equipment. While talking to their instructor, I found out the academy has no budget for instruments or music.

The students pay around \$50.00 a month U.S. currency to attend the school four days a week, learning in individual lessons and group instruction. Since the system the instructors use to teach was *Fixed Do Solfege*, I had to make some adjustments. I could not just say play a concert F (Fa) for example. The clarinetist with the group had keys missing on her instrument, but somehow managed a good sound. The young lady who played the tuba was using a small three valve Eb Tuba, which her parents had managed to get from a former Iraqi Military Bandsman from the Saddam regime. It was primarily a brass group, with three trumpets, one French horn, two trombones, a tuba, one oboe, and one clarinet. Student ages ranged from 14-20 years.

My number one goal was for the students to have a positive experience! My secondary goal was directed at their primary instructor, address tone production above all else.

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My rehearsal (the Army calls it “Training”) structure was basic:

- INTRODUCTION
- BREATHING – Based off “The Breathing Gym”
- BUZZING / LONG TONES – Joe Dixon literature
- DURATION EXERCISES – Edward Lisk/ Sound Silence
- MUSIC – Washington Post

I had a great time! I tried to let them play as much as possible, although it was easy to get bogged down. Each student played individually, as I constantly reinforced air flow and tone production. The “Breathing Gym” was interesting and fun for them; they had never done anything like it before. Mouthpiece buzzing, while they had done it, was something that had never been emphasized. The students listened well, so when the process of matching and adjusting pitch was demonstrated and explained, they adjusted quickly.

The most significant problem was the poor quality of their instruments and lack of instrument maintenance. The instrument quality really holds them back, but to their credit, there seemed to be little frustration from the students themselves; they have only one frame of reference and nothing with which to compare. The duration of sound exercises challenged them, particularly when emphasizing breathing and starting notes together constantly throughout the exercise. I talked about balance to the lows, with constant matching between individual instruments.

It was a great opportunity to hear them play individually, but an even greater opportunity to talk to them. I asked them their names, and talked to them about many different things while we worked (with interpreter of course). “Washington Post” was rehearsed with energy and enthusiasm; the IID musicians sat in and played with them so the students had someone to follow. No matter what else happened, the kids had

a positive experience and left feeling good about the time spent.

I know with 100% certainty that none of my fellow Army 36th Division Company Commanders enjoyed themselves as much as I did on that day. I would like to think the students retained and remember the experience in the same way. Perhaps they will not, but I know I will not quickly forget it. I was reminded, after months of non-musical military training, how much I enjoy teaching music. The moment changers for me throughout my musical life were (and are) the Jerry Luckhardts, Ray Cramers, Paula Criders, Randy Smiths and Anthony Mielos of our shared musical world. I hope they would think this is an extension of the impact they had on students throughout their careers, even if it was for only one short moment.

Where this will lead is uncertain. The U.S. Military is leaving Iraq, and in doing so will leave a void that will certainly be filled by something or someone. Perhaps civilian musicians, associations, and/or educational institutions can pick up some of this, and continue work already begun. There is no doubt in my mind it is a continuing unique opportunity for music and the arts to really help affect “HEARTS AND MINDS” of a new generation of young Iraqi musicians.

Chief Warrant Officer Two Jeffrey L. Lightsey serves as the Commander of the 36th Infantry Division “Lone Star” Band, Texas Army National Guard. Seventeen soldiers of the unit are currently deployed to Basra, Iraq in support of Operation New Dawn with Headquarters, 36th Infantry Division under the command of Major General Eddie Spurgeon. Chief Lightsey is a 22-year member of the Army, receiving his command in July of 2006. When not on duty, Mr. Lightsey is the Director of Bands at Smithson Valley High School in the Comal Independent School District. Mr. Lightsey is a 1991 graduate of The University of Texas at Austin, and a 1996 graduate of Baylor University. Under his leadership, the 36th ID Band has grown from 27 members to its current 61-member strength. In 2008, the band received the prestigious “COL George Howard” award for outstanding military concert bands sponsored by the John Phillip Sousa Foundation.