



Desert Horizons

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WILD BLUE COUNTRY: TOUR HIGHLIGHTS

- **Performed for over 20,000 US/Coalition troops, local civilians, and US State Dept /Embassy DVs**
- **60 Performances in 73 days!** (days are minus 16 AOR travel days and approx 6 in/out processing days)
- **AOR countries supported: 7 Total; Qatar, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Kyrgyzstan, Afghanistan, UAE and Oman**

INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

Wild Blue Country 2
in Kyrgyzstan

"Loyalty" in Iraq and Qatar "Special" 3

Building Partnership 4
Capacity & Morale Initiatives

AFCENT Band 5
INFO Page

Additional stories... 5
weblinks

AFCENT Band tours Bagram...bridges differences

by Master Sergeant Michael Voss, 455th Air Expeditionary Wing Public Affairs

4/26/2011 - **BAGRAM AIRFIELD, Afghanistan** -- It has been said that music and words together can be a very powerful tool, but can music be the link that brings an understanding between cultures.

The U.S. Air Forces Central Expeditionary Band strives to provide this understanding in every performance, but while touring Bagram Airfield the band held a special performance for Afghans at Bagram's Egyptian Field Hospital, April 20.

Traveling throughout Afghanistan, Wild Blue Country relies on the beat of a bass drum and the melody of an electric guitar to provide a forum to advance international relationships, bridging language, cultural, societal, and socio-economic differences.

In the **first performance by a U.S. military band at the hospital**, the country music group used more than lyrics to communicate messages to the Afghans. [VIDEO](#) (Wild Blue Country)

"Music brings us together, even if they don't understand our language or what we are saying," said Senior Master Sgt. Jerome Oddo, Wild Blue Country bass guitarist and singer. "They see the emotion of what we are singing about. Soon, they start clapping and having a good time. It's like being in an intense meeting and someone cracks a quick joke. It is the conduit that brings people together."

Senior Master Sgt. Jerome Oddo and Tech Sgt. Brannen bring smiles to the children at the Hospital as members of the Egyptian military look on...



Technical Sergeant Stephen Brannen allows Afghan children to strum his guitar at the Egyptian Hospital, Bagram Airfield on 20 April 2011

Operated by the Egyptian military, with security provided by Air Force security forces, the hospital which opened its door in 2003, today treats more than 7,000 Afghans per month including women and children.

By treating Afghans from Jan Qadam, the village that borders the home of the Department of Defense's busiest flightline, the already existing relationship between Afghans and military here provide just the type of environment the band thrives on to accomplish its mission.

The hour-long performance was much more than just the first time an Air Force band performed at the hospital, it showed all three cultures that music could bridge differences.

"It doesn't matter that they don't know the words," said Master Sgt. Janusz Masztalerz, Wild Country sound engineer. "Especially with country music it is about hard-working people and family."

Even with security and free health-care, often the trust between Bagram and its neighbors is tested by attacks from insurgents, but events like this provide a chance for a real understanding.

"I think culturally a band does help bridge gaps between societies because music is universally and you could tell that it was a highpoint in their day, maybe even week, said Staff Sgt. Jezreal Rogers, 455th Expeditionary Aerial Port Squadron and concert attendant. "Sounds from drums, guitars or dancing for that matter, are not foreign to anyone," said the Aurora, Ohio native.

Though the members of Wild Blue Country will likely be long gone by the time any real effects surface, the band knows they are starting a process that will grow overtime.

"We realize we are planting a seed that may take years to grow, especially since some ideas have been ingrained about certain cultures, but we are planning on relations that may come 20 to 25 years down the road," explained the 14-year Air Force veteran, Sergeant Oddo.



Tech. Sgt. Tim Stombaugh allows an Afghan child to play his drum set

At Bagram, the band may have done more than plant a seed, they may have

enhanced an already growing relationship between the Afghans and U.S. and Egyptian military.

"This is the first time we have had a musical band come to the hospital," said Egyptian Col. Tarek Eid, Egyptian Field Hospital commander. "Their performance made the children inside the hospital very happy. We hope to see more of the bands in the future."

U.S., Kyrgyzstan partnership strengthens

by Master Sergeant Karl Bradley, AFCENT Band Operations/Logistics Representative

4/12/2011 - **BISHKEK, Kyrgyzstan** - Downtown Bishkek is busy with the rush of people making their way home after a long day of work or maybe to a once in a lifetime event at the Kyrgyz State Philharmonic Theatre. On the night of April 4, the sounds of country music have migrated half-way across the world to tell stories of love, hard work and the cowboy.

The standing room only crowd was greeted by Mr. Larry Memmott, Charge de' Affaires for the U.S. Embassy to Kyrgyzstan and Colonel Dwight Sones, 376th Air Expeditionary Wing commander, Transit Center at Manas. Their kind words put the audience of over 1,400 at ease. This evening, Wild Blue Country was an outstretched hand from America to Kyrgyzstan and a chance to bond on the most basic human level through the emotional power of music.

"I think the people here (Kyrgyzstan) like in my native Poland, always think of the American cowboy as the Hollywood gun slinger who rides into town and shoots everybody who gets in his way," said Master Sgt. Janusz Masztalerz, AFCENT Band sound engineer. "Cowboys are just real people with real emotions."

This connection to the cowboy took them very naturally into other topics Kyrgyz's and American's have in common such as love, heartbreak, playing hard and enjoying friendships.

"In ten years here I've seen many groups from the U.S.," said State Philharmonic Stage Manager. "I didn't realize (until now) American's had feelings!"

This was truly a special evening for all who joined Wild Blue Country in downtown Bishkek at the State Philharmonic as was apparent by everyone's jovial mood leaving the theatre. On the way home Mr. Memmott remarked, "The last event barely had 600 people; tonight was standing room only. What a fantastic, successful evening!"

Tech Sgt Stephen Brannen & SMSgt Jerome Oddo jamming' away at the Philharmonic!



Standing Room Only! National Philharmonic, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. Largest audience for AFCENT Band ever!



"We've been extending invitations to the local Russian military for quite some time now... after the concert today, they've now invited our Airmen to participate in an upcoming sporting event... your concert truly made a difference."

*Colonel Dwight C. Sones, Commander
386th Air Expeditionary Wing*

U.S., Russian Air Forces Celebrate Cosmonaut Day

By Master Sgt. Karl Bradley & Tech. Sgt. Tim Stombaugh

4/13/2011 - **KANT, Kyrgyzstan** --The quaint village of Kant is home to a very special House of Culture. This 450 seat theatre has old-world charm with humble accommodations for concertgoers and performers alike. On this day, April 4, a foreign group of musicians are preparing for a concert to commemorate the anniversary of Russian Cosmonaut Day.

As the performance begins, Tech. Sgt. Stephen Brannen, AFCENT Band NCOIC, reviews an article detailing Yuri Gagarin's first human space voyage on April 12, 1961. "It was such an amazing feat... the Russian space program set an unprecedented record that day. We are honored to be performing here in celebration of this historic day."

The U.S. Embassy to Kyrgyzstan hosted the event and extended an invitation to the nearby Russian Air Base in Kant. To everyone's surprise, a delegation of Russian military mem-

bers showed up to enjoy the performance and sat next to U.S. Air Force members stationed at the Transit Center at Manas.

After some opening remarks, Wild Blue Country launched into a concert featuring classic and contemporary country selections, pausing occasionally to site the importance and relevance of Cosmonaut Day.

"Today was huge for improving our (U.S. and Russian) relationship," said Maj. John Elolf, 376th Air Expeditionary Wing Public Affairs.

Wild Blue Country continued to bond with the audience by telling stories through the emotional impact of their music about the cowboy, surviving hard times and cherishing family and friends.

Events such as this are often a conduit for building international relationships.

One of the attendees of the concert was a public school librarian from a village just outside Kant. She insisted on getting one of the interpreters to speak with the band after the show.

"Thank you so very much for sharing your music. It was wonderful and makes me very happy. I live a very tough life and this (music) makes me want to live longer," she said.

U.S. & Russian Air Force Members pose for a photo after the performance



AFCENT Band "Loyal" to the Mission...

by Master Sergeant Karl Bradley, AFCENT Band Ops/Logistics Representative

5/19/2011 - **Baghdad, IRAQ** -- The sun beats down on an airstrip as two Blackhawk helicopters come into view...

Live entertainment is a great troop morale enhancement tool, but there are places too risky for civilian entertainers. Come along with Wild Blue Country from the AFCENT Band into the Al Sadder neighborhood of Baghdad, one of the most dangerous spots in country. Here is their story...

Camp Loyalty Soldiers express their gratitude to Wild Blue Country



Hour 1: The band loaded at Al Assad Air Base for the flight to COB Loyalty with no assurance they would actually complete their mission due to the security profile. An RPG tore through a concrete barrier the day before and they received mortars while the band was loading the choppers at Al Asad.

Hour 2: The mission begins and the flight was uneventful. Luckily Apache gunships were flying and enabled a safe landing. No time to rest as they hot-unloaded in 3-minutes and the Blackhawks were off. The band set-up in thirty minutes.

Hour 3: The hour long performance began before a joint service audience. Almost all the uniformed personnel stationed at Loyalty turned out for their first entertainment in over three months. The Commander always requests entertainment but most decline or don't make it.

Seventy percent of COB Loyalty troops have been awarded the combat action medal due to heavy activity in this area.

They have the only casualty from direct enemy fire during Operation New Dawn.

Hour 4: The performance was a welcomed "direct hit"! After a short time talking with the troops they packed up fast and had time for quick tour. The brave men and women at Loyalty work around war-torn buildings in constant fear of attack but stay mission focused.

Hour 5: The Blackhawks swooped down while the Apache's provided cover. The band hot-loaded in 3-minutes and the choppers ascended back to base; mission complete.

All total, they were on the ground 2 hours 45 minutes and brought some much needed normalcy to isolated troops who live day to day in harm's way.

"This is why we're over here....we'd come back for those guys in a heartbeat!" - MSgt Karl Bradley, AFCENT Band Operations/Logistics Representa-



Loading the Blackhawk...

Wild Blue Country goes "Special Ops"

By Master Sgt. Karl Bradley, AFCENT Band Operations/Logistics Representative

5/17/2011 - **SOUTHWEST ASIA** -- About once a month the troops assigned to the Combined Forces Special Operations Component Command (CFSOCC) put on a BBQ like no other. It features the cooking talents of some of its members and quality time with friends and leadership.

This elite group of men and women are an independent, joint, fully functional extension of their Headquarters at McDill AFB in Tampa, Fla. Air Forces Central Band Wild Blue Country was invited to perform during the festivities and provided the finishing touch with some tasty country flavors from back home.



Sgt. David Singleton, CSFOCC J1, stayed up late the night before preparing his own brand of BBQ marinade while Chief Warrant Officer Jim Chianese, CFSOCC J8, made pizza dough to be cooked over the open flames.

As the grill was fired up and all the goodies were laid out, the band heated up with country classics and rock-n-roll to kick-off the night. The setting was perfect with great smells, a beautiful view of the sunset and cigars provided by CFSOCC Sgt. Major Vic Morrow.

"I want to say thank you to the AFCENT Band Wild Blue Country for their performance at the compound. What better way to spend the day than listening to live music, talking with friends and eating some BBQ," said Staff Sgt. Scott Ashcroft, USMC, CFSOCC Paralegal Senior Non-Commissioned Officer. "I also want to thank AFCENT for providing such a talented group of guys (service members) who are deployed to the AOR (area of responsibility), to bring us a little piece of home." The personnel assigned to this Special



Operations hub are doing great things they can't discuss, with people they can't identify, in a place they can't disclose, so they can positively affect current operations. It remains a difficult assignment but morale is high and passion for what they bring to the fight is apparent.

"It was a real privilege... an added bonus to have you (Wild Blue Country) at our team building event. **You brought both cheer and esprit de corps to our evening,**" said Col. Bradley Thompson. **"Everyone left happier; it was a real boost to our morale! We are grateful for your performance!"**

"I enjoyed the event.

The food was great

and the band was

awesome..., it

reminded me of my

current duty station

(back home)."

A1C Kenneth Keith,

CFSOCC CG Admin

Far left:

Tech Sgt Tim Stombaugh gives an impromptu drum lesson to a CFSOCC member