

News > Feature - NCO brings calm over camp, Beethoven brings in buyers

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by Staff Sgt. Stacia Zachary  
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4/30/2009 - FORWARD OPERATING BASE GARDEZ, Afghanistan -- Strings of classical music stream from the doorway of a weather-beaten building in the middle of the Afghan countryside.

Housed within these whitewashed walls is a lone store on base to restock supplies. Staff Sgt. Eric Began, Paktya Provincial Reconstruction Team, is responsible for stocking the shelves, seeing to the needs of those on FOB Gardez as well as adding a little culture to the desolate base housed within a niche of the Afghan mountainside.

"There is little to come by here but people donate supplies on their way out or the extra goodies from packages from home that get mailed in," said Sergeant Began, a Lancaster, Pa., native finishing up his 6-year enlistment. "Someone needs to be here to make sure what little we have is available. It's the small comforts of home that are stocked."

With only a few stragglers entering the Army and Air Force Exchange Service outpost, the staff sergeant has idle time on his hands. Intent on making the most out of his time, Sergeant Began has started learning the piano.

"In January, I decided that I would teach myself how to play so I ordered some beginner books and started to learn how to read music," he said. "Once I felt comfortable with the notes, I started out with easy Christmas music. At first it took almost a minute to find each key."

After a while the sergeant decided to move on to other types of music. After hearing some classical music, he decided to learn a ballad by Ludwig van Beethoven. Before long, that became too easy and he moved onto the concerto version of Fur Elise.

It is this melody that can be heard most streaming from the listing doorway attracting the attention of the FOB wayfarers.

"I like the spirit of (the music)," said Army 1st Lt. Justin Roman, 549th Military Police Company at FOB Gardez. "It takes discipline to (learn the piano) and is a very productive use of his time. It's important to make the most out of this time away from home."

A self-confirmed jack-of-all-trades, Sergeant Began is on his third deployment in support of the Global War on Terror. On all three deployments, he has been tasked as an Army asset. During his first deployment to Iraq, the sergeant provided convoy security as a driver and later as a .50 caliber gunner for anyone who needed a gun truck when leaving the confines of the base. On the second deployment, Sergeant Began was stationed in Kuwait as a line haul truck convoy driver.

Both previous deployments dealt Sergeant Began his fair share of frustration, often without an outlet to relieve the stresses of everyday life dealing with difficult missions and different personalities.

"On my last deployment, I was angry for an entire month and it took me a while to get over a lot of things," he said. "On this deployment, I was reaching that point where I was getting angry at certain situations so when this opportunity presented itself for me to do something for me, I took it. Teaching myself how to play the piano has given me a certain calm that is helping me get through this deployment."

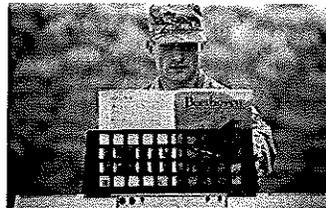
One night in the early stages of learning the basic fundamentals of playing the piano, the power went out in his building. The ivory of the piano keys were luminous in the pale green glow of the keyboard's reserve battery. This light allowed the sergeant to continue playing.

"Only the shadows of the keys were visible but there was enough lit that I continued to play," Sergeant Began said. "In that moment, alone in the dark with the rain pouring down, I was able to forget where I was at. It was so peaceful."

With only a few months left on his enlistment, Sergeant Began has already set his mind on his next adventure.

"This will be my last deployment and that's a good thing," he said. "I have learned a lot about myself and what I want (in life) from my time wearing this uniform. I'm ready to move on to college and other pursuits. Life is short and being (in Afghanistan) has showed me I need to experience everything life throws my way."

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U.S. Air Force Staff Sgt. Eric Began, a Vehicle Operator for the Paktya Provincial Reconstruction Team, poses for a portrait, April 12, 2009, Forward Operating Base Gardez. Began teaches himself how to play the keyboard as a way to pass time during his deployment to Afghanistan. (U.S. Air Force photo by Staff Sgt. Shawn Weismiller)

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