



Staff Sgts. Joseph Gonzales and James Mack and Spc. Melody Arguello of "Darn Saxy" perform for the citizens of Palmer, Alaska.

44th Army Band concert tour takes them "NORTH TO ALASKA"

Story and photos by Sgt. Joseph Vigil, 200th Public Affairs Det., NMNG

It was "North to Alaska" for the 44th Army Band of the New Mexico National Guard when they headed to Fairbanks and Anchorage to conduct two weeks annual training. They are the musical ambassadors of the New Mexico National Guard and it is hard to find another unit who receives more mission requests than the 44th. Those mission requests didn't slow down just because they were in Alaska.

Their mission called to perform their Mission Readiness Evaluation (MRE) and to backfill for the U.S. Army Alaska's 9th Army Band who was on block leave.

Mission requests began to come in before their boots hit the ground. The band members were alerted upon their arrival in Fairbanks that in two days they would be playing for President George W. Bush and First Lady Laura Bush as Air Force One stopped at Eielson Air Force Base to refuel on the way to China.

The 44th also performed for Fort Wainwright troops returning home from Iraq in another performance that came with short notice. They entertained Soldiers, family and friends with a variety of jazz, rock and marches.

A contingent of New Mexico National Guard leadership that included Col. Jack Fox, Deputy Adjutant General, Col. Juan Griego, 93rd Brigade Commander; Lt. Col. Milo Moody from the G-3 shop; State Command Sgt. Maj. Richard Bryant; and Command Sgt. Maj. Kenneth Adair, 93rd Bde command sergeant major, caught up with the 44th at Fort Wainwright. The staff visit provided them the opportunity to observe the band perform collective training, check in on MRE progress and offer their support.

The contingent was able to observe a 44th rehearsal, learn about their training and talk to the band members.

"Give me more support from the trumpets," said Chief Warrant Officer 3 Wendy Franchell, commander of the 44th Army Band as she conducted a group rehearsal. "Much better ... now make it a little shorter, a little crisper."

"It is rare you get the chance to conduct two weeks of collective training," said Griego, their Brigade commander. "Knowing a little about music myself, I know how important it is to practice as a group and in your individual MST's. Chief Franchell has worked hard to get you here so take advantage of this opportunity, train hard and take it to the next level."

Fox brought greetings and best wishes from Maj. Gen. Kenny C. Montoya. He told them about the great things their fellow New Mexico Guardsmen were accomplishing while assisting with the Ruidoso floods. Fox shared his memories of being a young second lieutenant stationed at Fort Wainwright, where he served as company commander for the 171st Infantry Bde; and provided the band with a background history of the area.

Later that evening, the contingent followed the 44th to the Alaska State Fair to watch them perform for Fair goers. The 44th entertained the crowd while they waited for the fireworks show. Both group and individual Musical Support Teams (MSTs) rocked the house with local favorites like "North to Alaska" and the Alaska state song. They played some popular New Mexico tunes and educated the crowd with tidbits of our Latino heritage and culture. The 44th broke out with perfectly choreographed patriotic songs such as "God Bless the USA" and "America the Beautiful" as fireworks began to light up the midnight sky.

Franchell and First Sgt. Dennis Adams met with Chief Warrant 5 Jim Powell, reserve component staff bands officer, and NMNG leadership the next morning to review the MRE report. Powell says the 44th has shown much improvement since he last saw them two years ago and said they met success in this portion of the MRE.

Powell, who evaluates 27 bands west of the Mississippi, has evaluated eight bands this year. He is responsible for determining the level a band can operate when entertaining, raising level of morale, esprit and their ability to motivate the troops to fight and win.

"They are young and they have a bright future," said Powell. "They have demonstrated crucial readiness to mobilize. And playing for the President of the United States is definitely a feather in their cap."

Powell says the 44th has done an excellent job of developing their MSTs.

"Every band has different MSTs that are based on their history," explained Powell. "The Latin MSTs the 44th has formed have a nice beat representative of the culture."

The four MSTs of the 44th offer four completely different sounds. The Rough Riders are an upbeat brass ensemble. The Chile Choppers feature guitar, bass guitar, drums and keyboards and play rock and cumbias such as "Mover el Bote." Darn Saxy features saxophones and the Sea Cats honor their descendants of the 200th Coast Artillery with 40's jazz and Latin music.

MSTs are a band's modular force of smaller units that can play alone, can mix and match, or fill in on the larger concert band.



Staff Sgt. Fidel Archuleta and Spc. Daniel Apodaca of "The Chile Choppers" perform for visitors in downtown Anchorage.

The more MSTs a band has, the more dispersed they become and the more requests they receive to perform, explained Powell.

"We are the last of the free bands around," said Powell. "That's another reason why we get more gigs than we can handle. But too many gigs have a tendency to steal from valuable rehearsal time. Music is a perishable skill that goes away if it is not practiced. It is evident in their performance that Chief Franchell is doing a great job of managing that delicate balance."

The 44th falls into the typical Army Band training model which consists of two consecutive years of training, followed by one year of preparing and performing the MRE, then followed by an ODT the next year.

Powell gives lots of credit to the 93rd Brigade for the support they provide the 44th. It is this support that has allowed the 44th to both improve and grow. The 93rd has helped with moving the band from point A to point B, new instrument replacement and is working to improve rehearsal facilities. Powell says that the facilities problem is not only space; bands require double-height ceilings that allow sound to travel up to protect musicians' hearing.

"We recognize the value of our band and the great visibility they provide for the New Mexico National Guard," said Griego.

"The 44th has done an excellent job of recruiting high caliber musicians. A band can't perform without musicians and their new musicians have helped raise the performance level of the other band members."

"You can feel the power the band employs when they strike that first note," said Fox. "Our band needs to play more for our Soldiers so they can feel that energy. They definitely have what it takes to motivate Soldiers."

It was on the road again for the 44th as they made the 380-mile trek south to Anchorage for their next performances. They enlightened visitors and local Alaskans alike with outdoor performances in downtown Anchorage. Listeners clapped, sang along and danced to another great performance.

The next performance on the 44th tour was a musical tribute concert they performed to kickoff Operation Derrill 2009, an event

that celebrates the courage and bravery of four wounded warriors who are conquering the limits of their injuries as they train to climb Mount McKinley next year.

The 44th again entertained the audience with a variety of jazz, rock, marches, and traditional New Mexico songs. Spc. Mario Martinez serenaded the crowd with Toby Keith's "American Soldier," and Sgt. Kelly Deeds flute solo in Storm Chasers drew great applause.

A powerful and emotional video about Operation Denali 2009 was presented at the concert intermission. The video showcased three Army Soldiers and one Marine who have either lost an arm or a leg or suffered other severe injuries on the battlefield, but yet are managing to overcome the physical and emotional trauma they have endured.

"The climb to the summit is not about us; it is about our aspirations to motivate others to go on and pursue their dreams despite their injuries," said Maj. Mark Hoffmeister, who delivered the inspiring presentation and who lost his left arm and suffered other severe injuries. "The climb symbolizes the strength of our country and the forces that defend it," said Hoffmeister. "I want to thank you for coming to hear about our journey and for supporting our warriors in need of a mission to

rediscover. And thank you to the New Mexico National Guard's 44th Army Band for helping us kick off this mission to inspire."

As the 44th took the stage for an encore, Staff Sgt. Joseph Gonzales addressed Hoffmeister and the crowd.

"You have inspired all of us," said Gonzales. "Thank you for letting us be a part of your operation."

The 44th wrapped up their Alaska tour the next day with a performance in Palmer.

"This has been an incredible experience," said Spc. Michelle Ash, who plays the clarinet. "I will never forget that we played for our Commander in Chief. At first, all that went through my mind was 'don't mess up.' But I just focused on my music and everything went well."

Michelle's husband, Sgt. Josh Ash, who plays the flute, paid his own way to Alaska to join his wife and play for the 44th. Josh's Army unit, the 62nd Army Band from Fort Bliss, Texas, was on block leave at the same time that the 44th journeyed to Alaska.

"Coming up here and playing as an Army Band is a tremendous experience for us," said Franchell. "Having the space to break up into our MSTs and rehearse simultaneously is great training for us." ■

"THEY HAVE
DEMONSTRATED CRUCIAL
READINESS TO MOBILIZE,
AND PLAYING FOR THE
PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED
STATES IS DEFINITELY A
FEATHER IN THEIR CAP."

— Chief Warrant Officer 5
Jim Powell

We Bring Our University To You

Associate • Bachelors • Masters & Certificate Programs Available



Proudly serving
the military family
world-wide.

Upper Iowa University is regionally accredited, is a core member of the Servicemembers Opportunity Colleges (SOC), and is partnered with the Army National Guard Education Support Center.

Contact Us Today!

UPPER IOWA UNIVERSITY
877-366-0581

Serving Those Who Serve

UIU has a wide variety of educational opportunities tailored to fit the dynamic lifestyle of today's military personnel and their families. Tuition discounts for ID card holders.

Two Distance Learning Options

- **Online** – Earn an entire degree online: no residency required. UIU has been awarded the number one ranking by Online Education Database (OEDb). *- Online College Rankings 2008*
- **Independent Study** – Start anytime and anywhere; work at your own pace. All you need is access to email, mail, or fax.

Flexible - You may be closer to obtaining your degree than you think. UIU accepts up to 90 credits in transfer including military ACE credit.

www.uiu.edu/military • enroll@uiu.edu

On Campus • Online • Independent Study • U.S. & International Centers