Press Release

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10th Mountain Division Band finds way to perform under pandemic constraints

Fort Drum, NY - Members of the 10th Mountain Division (LI) Band are accustomed to constantly performing.

When they are not rehearsing or training, musicians can be heard at monthly observances, command changes, concerts and ceremonies, and community outreach events for local schools and organizations.

Even when COVID-19 took all of those things away, the band did not go entirely silent.

Warrant Officer 1 Ryan Knight, 10th Mountain Division (LI) Band commander, said there were still ways they could support the community and maintain focus on the health and safety of Soldiers and their families.

Early in the pandemic, musicians formed small ensembles – while practicing physical distancing – to record songs that would be shared online. They include a jazz combo performing to celebrate Jazz Appreciation Month, an original composition titled “To the Top” and renditions of “Lean on Me” and “America the Beautiful.”

“I think this was about communicating that we are the 10th Mountain Division Band, and we’re still here, we’re still in this fight and we’re still representing the U.S. Army,” Knight said.

Staff Sgt. Thomas Reeves, operations sergeant, said they were also able to support the Jefferson-Lewis BOCES (Board of Cooperative Educational Services) school districts with a series of four online master classes, to include jazz improvisation and vocal techniques.

“Normally, with the Music in Our Schools (MIOS) program, we would go out to the schools to do something like this,” he said. “This was a new way where we could help out all these school teachers who were starting to teach from home.”

An instrument demonstration class was geared toward students entering band next semester. Spc. Melanie Heggs, who plays the clarinet, was one of the musicians participating in that class.

“We spoke about how our instruments work and played a little bit of a demonstration for the kids,” she said. “They got to write in questions about our instruments that we answered. It was a good experience being able to reach out to the students this way.”

Heggs said that they did the best they could trying to virtually connect with students, and she thought it was a success.

“I was really glad to be a part of that to, hopefully, still have an impact in the community even though our Music in Our Schools performances were cancelled.”

Sgt. 1st Class Siriwat Vongtip, platoon sergeant, said that five out of the six squads in the company were preparing MIOS performances right before North Country schools closed. That might have stopped them from performing, but it didn’t stop them from playing.

“Everyone was still able to practice at home, and some people were still coming to the band building for individual practice,” he said.

Band members were able to complete mandatory training requirements online, and section leaders devised training programs for them.

“Every single day, our leaders are contacting Soldiers living in the barracks just to find out how they are, to ask them what they are doing to stay active and engaged, and just to encourage them,” Vongtip said.

He said that they tried organizing a home-based workout-of-the-day program to help Soldiers maintain their physical fitness. Group members would share tips and suggestions.

“This was one of those ways to keep them involved and to say, ‘Hey, people are still thinking about you, and we’re going to get through this,’” he said.

Reeves said that the pandemic has tested people’s resiliency in ways most people have never experienced before. He didn’t know how the pressure of conducting band operations from home, supporting his Soldiers and caring for his two children would affect him.

“My wife is military police, and she was still reporting to work every day,” he said. “So I was a dad trying to be a school teacher, trying to be a musician, trying to be a leader all at the same time.”

Then he received a timely call from his platoon sergeant, Sgt. 1st Class Greg Lamecker.

“I didn’t know how I really felt until my platoon sergeant called me and asked, ‘How are you doing?’ After an hour on the phone with him, I realized that I was not in the happiest place,” Reeves said. “He helped me get through it and brought me out of the funk of not being with my Soldiers and watching the operations calendar disintegrate in front of me while my kids are driving me crazy.”

Knight never expected he would take command of the band during a global health crisis. While the North Country was days away from the first phase of reopening, that did little to make his job any easier.

“When you first assume command, it’s an exciting time because you have all of these projects, ideas and initiatives,” he said. “You’re entering a new organization and you start building rapport and learning all the different strengths that people bring to the table. It’s an exciting process.”

Knight got to experience that – sort of.

“With everything happening because of COVID-19, it wasn’t completely off the table, but it was blunted,” he said. “It becomes a personal challenge, like having a bowling ball attached to your foot. You can still move, but you are highly constrained.”

Knight said that with this much uncertainty, he felt it was important to remain positive and keep band members actively engaged in their jobs.

“Luckily, this band is a very resilient team, and that helps,” he said. “Army musicians are such tight-knit organizations to begin with – literally making harmony together on a daily basis – and they enjoy being together and making music together. So when you have everyone away at home for weeks and months, it can be stressful and challenging.”

As a single Soldier living in the barracks, Heggs noticed that the first sergeant would check on them every day while the stay-at-home order was in place.

“I definitely felt the support from our leadership,” she said. “Personally, I felt really safe and that people were looking out for me. I’m lucky that we can come back to the building and practice, and still be able to perform somewhat.”

Reeves said that the easement of restrictions is making it possible now for them to perform together again – not as often or for as many people as before – but it’s a start.

“Musicians are social creatures,” he said. “They live to play in front of people. We’re always going to look for opportunities where we can do that.”

In recent weeks, the band has supported the Class of 2020 commencement parade, the Ruffner Hall re-dedication ceremony and several change-of-command ceremonies. Two weeks ago, they were scheduled to perform in a Flag Day ceremony at Antwerp Primary School. It was cancelled, but the 10th Mountain Division Band still had something to contribute.

“One of our ensembles recorded three patriotic songs, which we gave to them,” he said. “They did a three-part series on Facebook about the story of the American flag using our music in their show. Again, this is something where, traditionally, we would have been there to perform, but because of COVID-19 we found another way to support them.”

Under current restrictions in Health Protection Condition-Bravo, outdoor gatherings are restricted to 25 people or less and to no more than 50-percent capacity of a facility for indoor activities.

“For live music, that becomes difficult for us to meet those requirements,” Knight said. “But we’re doing the best we can under the constraints of COVID-19, and we will continue to support the 10th Mountain Division and Fort Drum any way that we can.”

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Photo Caption:

Musicians from the 10th Mountain Division Band introduce their new country band to students at Copenhagen Central School in early March as part of the Music in Our Schools program. This was one of their last performances before the COVID-19 pandemic closed schools in the North Country.