

# DISCORD TO HARMONY

## REBUILDING THE AFGHAN NATIONAL ARMY BAND

By Jeffrey C. Larson '91, Chief Warrant Officer, U.S. Army



Kabul, the capitol city of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, has been the nexus of warfare for decades and today remains one of the most dangerous places on earth. After years of brutal warfare, a new era is slowly dawning as Afghanistan rediscovers its national identity and restores its military, including its army band program.

As the commander of the 82nd Airborne Division Band, I deployed to Afghanistan in January 2007 in support of Operation Enduring Freedom. One of our main objectives was to assist in the rebuilding of the Afghan National Army (ANA) Band.

### A HISTORY OF A BAND AND A COUNTRY

The ANA Band was created in 1933 with only 22 members. Over the years it grew in both numbers and musical quality as some of its personnel traveled to study music in India and Russia. However the band's activities were curtailed sharply in 1992 when the government was taken over by factions of Mujahideen. Colonel Khoestani, the current ANA Band commander, told me that within the Mujahideen government "the opinion was that music was the 'sound of the devil.'" Further deterioration in the military music program occurred

**Left:** A U.S. Army soldier conducts the ANA Band rehearsal

**Right:** Jeffrey Larson '91, center, with ANA Band members



in 1996 under Taliban rule. "After the Taliban captured Kabul they destroyed all the musical instruments in the army depots," Khoestani said.

In 2001 after American forces liberated Afghanistan from the Taliban the ANA chief of staff asked Colonel Khoestani to re-form the band. Khoestani rounded up 16 former band members, plucking them from their jobs as shopkeepers, engineers, and a variety of other callings. The chief of staff pleaded with them to return to serve their country as musicians and, in return, promised each man one million afghans (approximately \$20,000 U.S.) as a sign-on bonus.

## MAKING MUSIC AGAIN: POCO A POCO

About once a month a training team of 8-10 soldier-musicians from the 82nd band travels in armored humvees through the streets of Kabul on a mission to train the members of the ANA Band.

One significant impediment to progress is the fact that no one in either band speaks the language of the other. While this problem is alleviated somewhat by the presence of interpreters on each visit, there always seemed to be something lost in translation when talking about music and teaching the complex skills necessary to perform it.

Another challenge facing the 82nd band trainers is the fact that many ANA Band members cannot read music. They learn melodies solely by listening and rote repetition. A method of naming pitches or counting rhythms was only barely

comprehended by many of the musicians. In addition, many of the ANA Band musicians do not have instruments and the majority of the instruments they do have are damaged or inoperable.

Much patience and creative thinking is required to help the Afghan soldiers understand and improve. However, little by little, progress is being made. Although many of the ANA Band members seem content with maintaining the status quo, a different light can be seen in the eyes of the younger men, especially the new recruits. There is enthusiasm and an eagerness to learn and improve. If the ANA can solve the challenges of adequate resources and gaining musical expertise through foreign instruction there is hope that these young Afghan soldier-musicians can continue the growth of their military band program.

Before coming to the 82nd Airborne Division, I was assigned as bandmaster in the 2nd Infantry Division in South Korea and had similar experiences in working with some of the South Korean Army Bands. I have found that great things can happen when motivated musicians get together in spite of differences in language, culture, and individual musical ability. As the American soldier-musicians continued to interact with their Afghan counterparts, a kind of learning below the level of consciousness took place that I am sure will have a lasting positive impact on those we were trying to teach.

## PREPARATION FOR THE JOURNEY

I have always had an interest in the cultural traditions and histories of other countries. That interest combined with my musical studies naturally led me to attempt to understand how music is structured and perceived by non-Western societies. This interest was further developed during my years as a student at Lawrence University.

In my sophomore year I lived in the International House. Living with fellow students from diverse ethnic backgrounds did much to deepen my appreciation of people from cultures much different from my own.

Additionally, my study of jazz theory and performance served as a good foundation to understand the traditional music of Afghanistan, as improvisation and utilization of

uncommon modes (scales) are features of both traditional Afghan and jazz music. The concepts I explored in my *Physics of Music* and *Psychology of Music* courses provided an important depth of understanding the structure and function of music as well. It was also at Lawrence that I learned something of the classical Indian musical tradition upon which Afghan music is based.

I see my years at Lawrence as a pivotal era in my life that provided me with many rich and meaningful experiences that set the stage for all of the achievements that have followed. I am very glad to have had the opportunity to put that experience to work to help in some small way to rebuild the musical life of a country so very far away from the campus in Appleton. ■



**Left top:** Larson with members of the ANA Folk Orchestra during a performance in an Afghan village

**Left bottom:** An 82nd band soldier works through an interpreter to teach the ANA Band percussion section

**Right:** Nathan Litt '08, William O. Hochkammer '66, Lawrence University Board of Trustees Chair, President Jill Beck, O.C. Boldt, and Peter Bennett '08 following the "cement pour" event for the new Campus Center

## MUSIC IN THE MILITARY

Military music units are a small subculture — but with long-standing traditions. While the need to move formations around the battlefield with musical signals has disappeared, the missions of providing music for a variety of ceremonies, entertaining troops, and representing the services to the civilian community, carry on to this day. Today, while there are many variations in size and structure, bands are a part of the military organizations of most countries around the world.

