

## The USO's handshake squad

### Rocker, actor try to connect with troops in Afghanistan

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BAGRAM AIR FORCE BASE, Afghanistan - Christmas comes cautiously to this hostile place. A tinsel wreath appears outside an Army tent. Military buzz cuts are hidden by camouflage Santa caps. An inflatable snowman wobbles in the desert wind. Across the freezing dustscape of Afghanistan, the soldiers fighting America's war on terrorism, Operation Enduring Freedom, do just what the slogan advertises. They endure.

Entering a fourth year now, their war is rarely headline news anymore, not like Iraq with its daily battles, its suicide bombings, the kidnappings and beheadings, the flag-draped coffins sent steadily back home.

This war is more subtle than that, shifting from combat to reconstruction. Enemy rocket attacks are rare now, and the American troops rolling into remote mountain villages are more likely to be digging wells than foxholes. What the service members talk most about is not fear, but about months passing without having to fire their weapons even once. They talk about isolation, boredom, about the way loneliness can burrow so deeply into hours so empty.

Last week, though, out of the flat, white sky, a Chinook chopper appeared, swooping down on a handful of bases to deliver a quick dash of holiday cheer, courtesy of an organization famous for that: the USO. From the dust cloud, two men emerged. One was a graying punk rocker, the other an actor few readily recognized.

And with that, a strange war briefly got even stranger.

Politically, Henry Rollins and Patrick Kilpatrick occupy opposite corners. Rollins, the 43-year-old frontman for the '80s punk band Black Flag, focuses now on "spoken-word" tours peppered with rants against the Bush administration and its motives for war. Kilpatrick, a strapping 55-year-old who specializes in playing onscreen villains, defends as righteous both the president and the invasions he ordered.

But the two entertainers share common emotional ground, believing that the troops deserve unconditional respect and gratitude. Their determination to express that, in person, put them on the same handbill when the USO organized a five-day, seven-base holiday tour to Southwestern Asia. This would be just meet-and-greet, handshakes and autographs, chitchat — but no show. A chance to connect, no matter how fragile, or

forced, or fleeting.

### **Faces from the outside**

On this whirlwind trip, the people, the places, the problems hurtle by, an unmixed demo tape of war, pieces that shouldn't fit together but somehow do. Soldiers preparing for a month-long mission in the bitter mountains leave behind a mess hall decorated with paper snowflakes they cut out by hand. A reservist major put in charge of his small post would normally be managing a Lowe's in Knoxville. The pirate radio station broadcasts Led Zeppelin, not propaganda.

A VIP tent at Bagram Air Force Base serves as home on this tour, with Chinook helicopters ferrying the entourage to four smaller outposts. One afternoon, a Chinook with gunship escort sweeps through the stony canyons to a remote firebase near the Pakistani border. Rollins and Kilpatrick missed lunch at the last stop because the autograph line was so long and chatty. Now USO tour manager Tracy Thede is alarmed to discover that mealtime is over at this stop and all that's left are field rations of jambalaya and Good Humor bars. Thede eventually scores some microwave pizzas and herds fans into line while the celebs hastily eat. Rollins has barely had time to uncap his Sharpie when he hears an urgent voice somewhere near his elbow.

"You're in the outside world ..." A squirrely Marine has executed a stealth weave-and-cut maneuver to the front of the autograph line. Rollins turns to him politely.

"I heard Dimebag Darrell got killed. That true?" the Marine blurts out.

"Yes, he got shot," Rollins replies, recounting how heavy-metal guitarist Darrell Abbott was gunned down recently during a bizarre melee in Ohio as his band Damageplan played. The Marine looks ready to cry.

"That's so depressing," he says.

"Really depressing," Rollins agrees. This is his fourth USO gig in a year, and he has come to realize that just showing his recognizable face to a generation of fans now in uniform brings reassurance: "You make them kind of think, 'Okay, the world is still there.'" He tries to resume signing autographs and posing for pictures, but the Marine hovers. He begins to ramble about his old Black Flag and Pantera CDs. Dimebag played for Pantera, too. Somehow when the Marine moved overseas, his prized CD collection got cracked. Now the discs are gone and Dimebag Darrell is dead.

"Give me an address and I'll fix that for you," Rollins promises. He'll even call Pantera to solicit replacement albums. Whatever he can do.

What to do out here is something Kilpatrick struggles to process. The actor renowned as the unkillable Sandman in "Death Warrant" is famous for the line, "Welcome to hell," but this is his first actual visit. While signing autographs, he hugs the few female soldiers

around and plants kisses on blushing cheeks. He stays up until 5 a.m. drinking forbidden beers with a group of military police. He slips beef jerky to guard dogs who wag their tails at the sight of his hulking frame and easy smile.

But the superficial antics are the cover story for a much deeper passion, a cinematic patriotism that makes him confess that "I'd be lying if I didn't admit there weren't some element of proving to myself that I am a person who will move toward the sound of guns if the cause is liberty." His father earned a Silver Star on Okinawa. And though he was already past 50, Kilpatrick himself tried in vain to enlist in the Marines after 9/11, telling the recruiter that he did his own stunts, that he was sure he could handle it. He lost firefighter pals from his old rugby league in the World Trade Center. Even as months and then years passed by, he couldn't shake the urge to do something, to contribute somehow. He shot skeet with paralyzed veterans in Hollywood. Okay, but not enough. He kept calling the Department of Defense and the USO, until finally he got this tour.

Famed for its Bob Hope holiday extravaganzas on aircraft carriers and American bases in Vietnam, the USO sent 66 celebrity tours to 25 countries last year, drawing from a roster of famous volunteers including soap opera stars, "Sopranos" cast members, Jessica Simpson and heavy-metal band Twisted Sister. Many of the visits are low-key "handshake tours" such as this one.

And during the holidays, it's not uncommon for multiple tours to touch down in the same place. While Henry Rollins and Patrick Kilpatrick are meeting soldiers at a tiny post in Sharan one afternoon, Robin Williams and John Elway are back at Bagram, traveling with the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff on his private jet.

"Robin Williams? Damn, I would have liked to have seen him. Bastard," says Pfc. Forest Cauthorn, a 19-year-old waiting at Sharan's card-table mess hall to greet Rollins and Kilpatrick. The infantryman from Richmond has been here nine months, and the boredom makes the three months he has left loom like three years.

"It's great if you like riding round in a damn Humvee all day," he says. He got married the week before he left. "The only time we get to shoot is when we go to the range."

The letters kids send him from classes that adopted him off anysoldier.com provide welcome levity. "Thank you for protecting our country," he quotes. "I like ice cream. What's your favorite animal? I like giraffes." He writes back: "I like penguins."

Five rockets were fired at Sharan the night before, Cauthorn and his buddies report, and a few landed 20 yards from their barracks. "It's not much of a war."

Another soldier has cornered Rollins's road manager, Mike Curtis, and opens the one-way conversation by announcing that he took three contraband Tylenol PM from home the night before and was still feeling it, and one time he got these hives on a mission and so he took some Benadryl even though he wasn't supposed to and he kept falling asleep on

the mission, and the other guys had to wake him up and because he's kind of a little guy, he's the one they send into caves to look for bad guys, and one time it was all dark and he felt the bad guy race right past him, whoosh, and he got off a shot and then they went in after him and radioed back out and said we got your body, and it was a hedgehog.

Curtis nods. What can he say?

On the military flight to the forward operating post at Khost, the goodwill tour is wedged in tight by pallets of mail. Rollins squeezes beside the front gunner to snap digital pictures of the barren mountains. He takes mental notes to tweak his monologue for an upcoming European tour. There's a riff here, he is sure. Something about the way the housing and even the people are indistinguishable from the land, how everything here just seems to be dust reconstituted.

"Imagine trying to sell this to a tourist," he jokes with a soldier after the chopper lands. "There's lots of dirt and ... dirt."

Both the entertainers and the once-a-week mail delivery arrive on the front steps of the forward operating base in Khost. The visitors head inside while soldiers wander up to root through the care packages, under the intense gaze of an old Afghan woman and her two small grandchildren.

The woman works for the post, frisking female patients as they arrive for the daily three-hour medical clinic for local villagers. Poisonous snakes, parasites and hot cooking oil pose the greatest dangers. Two children bitten by cobras were brought in last month. Neither made it.

Outside, a soldier lets out a triumphant cry of "Bimbos!" — a brand of cookies popular in his native Puerto Rico. "*Quieres Bimbos?*" he asks, and doles them out to eager buddies.

Meanwhile, Spec. Lee Gilliard, a 30-year-old reservist from Coral Springs, Fla., discovers Cheetos, candy and the carton of soy milk he requested from anysoldier.com. Gilliard sees the two Afghan children watching and gives away a bag of Snickers and a box of candy canes, instantly regretting the latter. "Man, I should've saved those candy canes for our tree!" Gilliard worked at the Wal-Mart snack bar back home, and the store manager regularly sends care packages. Last time, it was an artificial tree with lights.

Inside, Kilpatrick has an arm around one of the two women assigned to the post. "She's armed, and she's cute. That's an enamorable combination," he announces.

Three days in Afghanistan go by in a sleep-deprived blur, strange encounters lingering like a Tylenol hangover.

## 'The greatest privilege'

Their last night in Bagram, the celebs are invited to a steak and lobster dinner (with plastic utensils) by the Morale, Welfare and Recreation unit hosting them. Morale is a constant concern in Afghanistan, and each base, no matter how small, has its big-screen TV and movies, often a theater-style popcorn machine, and events, events, events to take the soldiers' minds off the loneliness. There are contests to throw a pie in a colonel's face. There are karaoke nights and bingo games and latte bars and massages for \$15 an hour. Food is so plentiful that soldiers' wives complain about how paunchy their husbands get, fighting this war. The troops often ask for toys and school supplies and clothing for the Afghans instead of goodies from home. One base puts up an "angel tree," decorated with envelopes for money to buy items for local schoolchildren. Their requests are written on the outside of each envelope. Nadya wants a winter coat. Ludmila asks for shoes. Galya needs \$100 to buy a gravestone.

When Chuck Younglove, the morale chief at Bagram, thanks Rollins and Kilpatrick at the surf 'n' turf banquet, telling them how much a moment's time and a few words of support mean to these soldiers, Kilpatrick is embarrassed. He gets up to speak.

"The secret thing is, these people don't get it," he tells his hosts. "This is the greatest privilege I'll ever have."

A sergeant major who befriended Rollins on his last visit presents each member of the small USO entourage with an old Soviet helmet left from the Russians' ill-fated 1978 invasion. Afghanistan is a vast junkyard of abandoned Soviet weapons, explosives and stripped military planes. Last time they were here, Rollins and his road manager crawled around the wreckage they encountered in search of scraps with Cyrillic writing to keep as souvenirs. Sgt. Maj. Timothy Green remembered their interest.

Now Green has brought the helmets to the send-off dinner, and he makes macabre jokes about them being soaked with blood as he hands them out, suggesting that "they're a little wet, so just wipe 'em off with your napkin."

Green's timing has always been off. Sixteen years in the Rangers, and he keeps getting orders only when the action is over and the peacekeeping missions have begun. He thought Afghanistan was just his latest missed opportunity, but it turned out to be his epiphany.

"I thought my entire purpose in life was to kill things," he will readily explain. And then here, a different possibility suddenly hit him, "like the blinding flash," and he came to believe that only goodness could truly eradicate evil. He is proud of the humanitarian missions the American military carries out here, building schools and clinics, bringing medical care to isolated villages, working with provincial governments to create infrastructures to bring water and electricity to multitudes of impoverished Afghans.

Green befriended the dozen or so ragamuffins who hang out at Bagram's front gate. "You

gotta see what kids do here," he says, "6 years old and working on generators." Green launched the "Good Boys Club" and put the front-gate kids on the payroll, \$10 a week to pick up trash. He got them guest ID badges and brings them on base for lunch each Friday. In return, he ordered them to stop cutting school, keep themselves clean and stay out of trouble. His wife and daughter sent warm clothes and toiletries. Green's deployment will end in a few months. His boys are worried. "Who will take care of us when you leave?" they ask Green. He has no answer. He is worried, too.

The next morning, the VIP guests are gone, strapped in the dark belly of a cargo plane for a five-hour flight to a U.S. Air Force base in a Middle Eastern country that — through the State Department and the base public affairs office — requests anonymity. The U.S. dispatches spy planes from this place, and there's no need to rub it in the noses of disapproving neighbors. After a few hours here, they will race along the highway, past the camel racetrack, past the Dunkin' Donuts, on their way to the airport for a 3 a.m. flight home.

Before they go, Kilpatrick takes the outdoor stage to offer greetings to this last group of men and women waiting for snapshots and autographs. The question he poses is carried by the cold desert wind into a starless sky, resonating as if it has been asked by thousands of men instead of one.

"How many people out there actually know who I am?"

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