

Worlds in Collision: Music and the Trauma of War

Friday 28 June 2013, The Mansion House

TRANSCRIPT

The AGC Band's most recent experiences working for soldiers and civilians in Afghanistan – Major Guy Booth

GUY BOOTH: Good morning, thank you very much indeed. I feel rather humble, I have to say, to be here. I was looking at the list of speakers over the couple of days and thought, I don't quite see my position here actually. There are all sorts of very learned people, and I'm definitely here from a practical perspective. I suppose the one thing I do have, I would suggest, over most people is that I've gone out as a serving soldier and as a musician and actually undertaken the kind of music and support to troops that hopefully is something that is going to be discussed further over the next two days. So yes, I am Major Guy Booth and I'm the director of music of the Band of the Adjutant General's Corps. We are based down in Winchester. We are quite a unique team [shows photo], no prizes for where this was taken. You will see that they are all wearing rifles on their shoulders because by definition we are in the Army, therefore we are all soldiers but I would argue to the highest general in the Army that we were all musicians long before we became soldiers. We are quite unique in the Army because we are the first full-time contemporary or popular band in the Armed Forces, and certainly in the Army. We do rock, pop, jazz, funk, soul, all of that sort of stuff, day in, day out. We are also rather fortunate that we don't march, which is very unique for the Army. To say my musicians are happy about that would be an understatement! They love that fact.

But what I am here to talk about is what we did in Afghanistan, how we got to Afghanistan, the processes of sorting ourselves out for a tour to Afghanistan. And what struck me about this two-day experience was for me a rhetorical question: what does the application of music to the trauma of war really mean? I think the point is that there are bags of answers to that. Some which will be in tune, some, I suspect, might not be in tune, but you know what, I don't know if there's a wrong answer, because I think music, in all forms, is going to make a difference in some way. What we want to do is make sure that music makes the difference in the right ways, positive ways, rather than possibly the negative ways, making them think too much of home and therefore actually we are undoing all the good work we hope to do. So hopefully, by a little bit more live music later on, some testimony, some quotes, I will be able to put across to you what we undertook and the effect that we had on the troops in Afghanistan.

So every good organisation has to have a mission, and the Corps of Army Music, who are our umbrella corps for military music in the Army, have a mission and out of that came the mission that we required. It's quite simple really and it was sponsored by the Joint Headquarters and the Army. We went over for an eight-week tour during the Christmas and New Year periods, to undertake welfare and troop morale support, on operations through the provision of music. This comes out of a greater piece of the

jigsaw which is the moral component of fighting power. So in other words, this is one of the pieces of the jigsaw that enables the Army, wherever it goes, or the services wherever they go, to perform to the highest level of performance possibility. We went out there with a couple of small groups and a jazz ensemble and a brass group as well. We were going to be covering pretty much every area within Afghanistan, so Kabul, Kandahar, Lashkar Gah, which covered the whole of the Helmand Province area, which everyone hears about, because that is where the British are primarily based and where it is the most dangerous, and also Bastion. Everybody hears about Camp Bastion. It is vast, its perimeter fence is the size of the city of Reading, just to give you an idea of how big it is. We were going to go over there for roughly 60 days of performance time, and in that time, 18 musicians, the people you saw behind you, did over 100 gigs, so a lot of work. We were covering every single location plus restaurants, dining halls, for the civilian and the military population.

So, the plan of action. Number one: it's key, is it not, to know your audience. The British military musicians were fantastic in the 19th and early 20th century. Why? Because we were the people who were playing the relevant up-to-date music in every town across the UK, because at the end of the 19th and early 20th century, we had in excess of 200 Army bands around the UK. So we provided all the music that the general public couldn't afford to go and see in the big theatres and the music halls. Gradually over time though, in a way we got left behind as military musicians. We had a stock wind band that played arrangements of Beethoven and Mozart; we played all of these sorts of works and we played the shows and so on, but we continued to just play all of that sort of stuff. Then Glenn Miller came along in the Second World War. He was massive because he came out with his new up-to-date music, and he took that to the troops. He was very relevant as far as troop morale support goes in the Second World War. Then the British Army kind of lost its way in the musical sense as to how we could best support our troops with relevant music.

So we needed to know our audience, we needed to know the locations; what could we take to the locations? We needed to know things like the kinetic influence, i.e. how serious was the fighting, because believe you me, it was serious, and it is still serious. We also needed to know the overall dynamic within the unit. What I mean by that is the sort of local issues; have there been any recent deaths or serious injuries, because we're not going to go piling in and say "Hey! Come on, this is us!" when two days ago somebody was shot in the back playing football, which is exactly what happened. We needed to know and to believe, which we wholeheartedly did, that music in its varying forms affects people. And we had to have music that we could go in with and affect these people in the right way.

We need to understand the limitations also. Geographically I'm talking about. Transportation: we couldn't take a whole band of over 30 people in a marching capability and go to a patrol base of 40 soldiers and think we'll get there on a Merlin helicopter, it's just not going to happen, so we needed to understand that. We need to consider the facilities and climactic conditions. We got there in early November to start our first short tour and it was 80-odd degrees and I was sunbathing in Camp Bastion, fantastic. Don't picture it, it's not a pretty sight. We went back latterly in December and it was really, really cold and quite rainy at one stage, and then it just went bitterly cold so we had to be conscious of our musicians actually being able to still play, with their guitars and so on. And then we had to prepare the bands, and

prepare ourselves to achieve the outcome. What was the outcome we wanted to achieve? Well, we know what it was, it was the mission, which was to provide the troop morale support.

Choosing the charts, this is key. My mantra always from day one was: whatever they listen to on their iPods is what we have to be playing. There is no point in taking a brass quintet and playing Gilbert & Sullivan, as much as I like it, to a bunch of soldiers who have had no support or no entertainment and it's Christmas Eve or Christmas Day. It just doesn't work. It has been tried, proven, doesn't work. So we went over there playing Bruno Mars, J-Lo, Daft Punk, Jessie J and then we went a little bit older, because we have a whole mixture, to Bryan Adams, Tracy Chapman, Maroon 5, and Evanescence; a complete mixture of music that the guys and girls were listening to, because why else should they get out of their warm sleeping bags to listen to us if it's not going to be good music?

You have to plan for the unexpected. It's a war zone, the unexpected happens. For example, electrical failure. We started on Christmas Eve in one patrol base; there were 150 Estonians there and 40 Brits, we did our first number and they went "brilliant", and then the power went. Right, keyboard player, you can go and get a non-alcoholic beer, and the rest of us did an hour-and-a-half completely unplugged, two vocals, one guitar, one cajón player. Boy it was hard. Plan for the unexpected, we did, we knew we could do it.

Going back to the whole question about what is the dynamic within a unit. We had, as I mentioned earlier, a chap who in November was shot in the back playing football and killed. We went two days later to visit that location and I had a guitar and a vocalist and a cajón. The chap that met us off the helicopter had carried his best friend in a body bag on to the helicopter and after that carried the chap that had shot him, still alive at the time, on to the helicopter. He was greeting me and I was thinking, this is just unbelievable. What should we do? He said "we need you". So we set up in the cafe, the three of us, and just started jamming. Quietly, folks started coming along. We did about an hour-and-a-half and I think around 30 people came in, had a brew, read the paper. As they were leaving every one of them said, "thank you, you have made a difference, you have taken me out of my reality". That is the power of music without a doubt.

Then you have to prepare mentally. It is tough really; from our perspective we didn't have guys who had been out there. We had to rely on the Brigadier who came to see us, our Brigade Commander. He came to talk to us about the realities. Our training was going to give us that certainly. Pre-deployment training gave us some really stark realities, which was very useful. The Padre and welfare people helped. We needed to have that support going out. We had that kind of aspect. You never quite know how you are going to react to a certain environment when you go out there. Will I be able to function and do what I'm supposed to do or will I suddenly fail? So, preparation was key.

Then finally, we had to undertake the gigs. Flexibility was key to everything we did. We had many flight delays due to weather conditions. We had to play anywhere in all sorts of different kinds of locations. As a quick example of that, the flight-line in Camp Bastion is incredibly busy. There was one RAF corporal who was a bit moody.

They had a tough job, they were at it on 12-14 hour shifts, sleeping for 6 hours in a tent beside the flight-line and coming back on again. It was a really tough job. I said to two of the guys, go and get my guitar, we are going in to sing with them quickly, before we flew out five minutes later. We went and did two numbers. We did a Jingle Bells pastiche, I won't tell you the words, you wouldn't want to hear them! One of my guys who you will hear later singing, he put the words together, it was hilarious, there were stacks of swear words which was brilliant for the troops! Then, as a complete contrast, we did a little harmony carol for them, and from that moment on they couldn't do enough for any of my musicians that came through that flight-line. We had given them five minutes of our time and cheered them up and they were happy and chatting about it. So, undertake the gigs where ever and do it.

A few locations for you. [Shows photos.] What we have here are a few locations from our first few days. And what's interesting for me is the top left one to start with. Here you have the soldiers' way of remembering their people. The reality is that life goes on. It has to and they have to be able to cope with it. And I think that's where the music from our perspective comes into effect. The other photographs are taken in Camp Bastion, outside the Heroes location. We had in excess of 200 people that came along to the couple of nights we did there. I had one Scottish Guardsman who came up to me, a young lad, and I won't try the Scottish accent because I will offend people. He said to me that he came down just to have a brew. He listened to the song – "great Sir" says he. So he stayed and listened to another and another, then his mates came to find him because they didn't know where he was. They then stayed for the whole night. These young guys were just enjoying the music, enjoying the moment and forgetting about where they were.

So we went to over 100 locations over a 60-day period. The first part certainly covered the Remembrance as well. We took trumpeters out and they went to various locations. It is very emotional. I have been in the Army for 28 years and I have done an awful lot of Remembrance services, and when you have a roll of honour read out at a Remembrance service of everyone who died that year it is pretty emotional. We provided music for them. Initially you think it is not relevant, but you know what, it is relevant, because they go away talking about the music, about the effect it has had.

Here are a few more performance locations for you. [Shows photos.] This was very much the Christmas and New Year period. Over this period I had two what we call FOBs – forward operating base groups. They were acoustic groups, one with four players and one with five. We went out on helicopters and we covered 20 bases between the two groups in ten days. I wished we could have had helicopter miles because I would have got hundreds of the things by now. Look at the top left photo, that was in Patrol Base 4. It was such a small room but the guys put some decorations up, they were packed in there. The only people that wouldn't have been in there would have been out on guard. At the top right you have got Kabul, they were fortunate, they had proper walls in Camp Souter. That was for the New Year piece as well. The bottom right, that was in Patrol Base 2, you can see the Mobots going, we said strike a pose at the end of the night. It was packed out. They built a stage for us, and an extension to the house for us, that was how important it was for them. We turned up and, again, I can't repeat verbatim what the lads said, but one of them said "why do we need a brass band here?" I thought, interesting. The guitar came out, the cajón came out and we started with "I need a dollar, dollar, dollar is what I need."

"Brilliant lads" they said, and that was it, they were piling in, they were singing, we had an open mic, they loved it, we had girls up and all sorts of stuff happening. It just takes them out of their environment for that moment in time.

The final one you can see with a few Christmas animals, that was the FOB group 2, you will see those guys here today. I don't know how the guys get these bits of stuff, but they do. They are out there for six months but they manage to get the most wacky outfits I can tell you that for nothing. Whilst that was going on we had a brass group in Camp Bastion, and caroling throughout the place. But it was needed. And we had a jazz combo who went out to Kandahar as well and Camp Bastion and various cookhouses, restaurants and stuff like that.

I think it would be really worthwhile for you to meet some of the guys properly. Hopefully they will come on down and do a couple of numbers for you. Here they come, give them a round of applause. I will introduce them so you can actually get to know who they are. On the cajón we have WO1 Will Casson-Smith. Our two guitarists are Corp Craig Phillips and Lance Corp Faye Duckenfield. Our two vocalists are Lance Corp Michelle Hull and Musician Willis Neat, and they are going to do a couple of numbers for you.

[The band performs *Price Tag* and *Domino* by Jessie J.]

Well there you go, thank you very much indeed. It is all about entertainment isn't it! It has even made a difference in here as well, that is brilliant. That's it, that's my science bit for you done and dusted!

I'm now going to give you a little bit of the feedback. It is important, is it not, in anything that you do that you hear it back from the horse's mouth that it is effective? It is all great me saying how fantastic it is and how fantastic they are, but we need to hear it back. Recapping, we have to be an effective addition, from the Army's perspective to the fighting force. We have to be a piece of a jigsaw that fits in and adds something effectively for the Army to get the understanding that we make a difference. We have to be relevant, absolutely. Know what they are listening to on their iPods, know your audience. We had to have plenty of banter. We had to, because there was no alcohol. Boy, a bunch of soldiers with stacks of alcohol, easy audience! Bunch of soldiers, principally blokes, with no alcohol, tough audience! So, I will give you a couple of quotes:

"The band were superb. At short notice they conducted a rehearsal with our pipers and played a joint set and were able to accompany all of the carols in our service."

"Their humour and skilful entertainment were exactly what the BAG needed in Camp Tombstone and we would welcome them back anytime."

BAG stands for Brigade Advisory Group; Tombstone is the training camp within Camp Bastion, it sits right next door to the Afghan Army training. For the guys who were there, it is a very, very stressful environment to be in. You will all be aware that the majority of deaths are green-on-blue, they are working with them day-in-day-out. These guys, the 1 Scots were very for it. We finished our session with them, we did our Christmas service and a little concert and we went away thinking boy, that was

hard going. The very next day these comments were sent in by their Adjutant. And we felt like, wow it did work, even if it wasn't seemingly to us a fantastic response.

I have another couple for you to sort of round things off. From my perspective as a musician I would definitely say that music can have a positive effect, most definitely. Yes it can have a negative effect, it can have an effect physically, it can have a mental effect. But without a doubt it can have the effect you want it to have if you know what you need to go in and achieve to get that effect. A couple of quotes here from one of our PBs:

“They have been outstanding; they are really troop’s morale support. Every single member in PB 2 thoroughly enjoyed the night.”

“The whole organisation through to the performance was exceptional. They catered to our needs, and put on a show that was something different for the lads, and that they thoroughly enjoyed.”

These are from the guys who did the Mobot one, if you remember that photograph. The line I love there is "they catered to our needs". Know your audience! From our perspective, it is job done, fantastic. I will just show you this photograph: yes, that's me, you can see the back of me. Who is the other bloke? Oh yes, sorry, Daniel Craig! Listen, I had to show you because it's not often Daniel Craig gets to meet the director of music of the Adjutant General's Corps, let's be honest about this. I was in Camp Bastion when he was over doing his film for us and we played his theme music, the Bandmaster arranged it with 24 hours' notice. We did a big band version as he came in, quite surreal, I'll be honest with you. And finally in summary I'll leave you with a quote from the commanding officer of 1 Scots:

“I am writing to express my gratitude for the ‘electric’ performances...they entertained us with tremendous music delivered with skilful humour. Performing for us so near to Christmas provided a genuine uplift to the soldiers and officers in my Headquarters and forward locations.”

Positive experience for the band, yes. Humbling at times, yes. Stressful, definitely. Tiring, definitely. Hard work, definitely. Fulfilling, most definitely. Most definitely. Thank you very much.

NIGEL OSBORNE: Thank you, Guy, that was fantastic, and the musicians were lovely. As you say, that's the science. Any questions?

IAN RITCHIE: A very quick question, Guy. Fantastic, and what wonderful work with colleagues and enabling people to do their jobs better and raising morale. How much planning do you have for the future once the soldiers have returned, to be out there and helping the civilians rebuild their lives as well?

GUY BOOTH: Yes, it is a very good question. We are involved quite a lot, as you can imagine, in seeing where Army musicians can play a role in countries. You talked about Bosnia and the Green Jackets. I went to Bosnia in 2001/2002. In Iraq, we have had bands there. Afghanistan is tough because it is still a really dangerous place. In Helmand Province, you fly everywhere, if you have to go by road, you do. But

certainly I think we are looking to always be able to go back and support, as we certainly did within Bosnia, but as you can imagine although we wear green and have rifles, they have to weigh up the practicalities of when is it actually safe enough to go in. Northern Ireland was a good example, we did a lot in Northern Ireland within the communities, bringing the Catholic and Protestant communities together within the schools and towns and actually that's the model that we would like to be able to take forward for future.

FLOOR: I think you have probably answered my question already by what you said but did you find always that the music was trans-cultural, that whoever your audience was would take it on okay?

GUY BOOTH: Yes, well certainly, when we played in the cookhouses and the restaurants, we had more of the locals there, and we had civilian workers from other countries that were employed. And definitely it does break those barriers. I think you don't need to be able to speak their language, certainly in my experience as a military musician, you don't need to speak their language, and vice versa, for you to have a connection. And we had the Afghani musicians playing one night in the cookhouse, we went and played another night, we went to theirs, they came to ours, and we all had a mutual understanding and enjoyment of what was being done. Certainly.

FLOOR: Good morning, sir. I just wanted to point something out that perhaps as musicians you've probably forgotten. I'm actually an acute emergency nurse, frontline, but you're not only musicians first and soldiers second, but you have a third role, you also support medical professionals, and I think that's something that as civilians we don't know about. So I'd like to thank you as a musician and as a medical nurse for all the support that you give us on the frontline and in disaster zones as well.

GUY BOOTH: Thank you.

FLOOR: I was just coming back to your presentation earlier and wondered, based on the children you did music with, if there was any research going on and is it a particular mission of yours to get more professionals involved in doing some psychological research and neuroscience as well, based on the experiences you have had?

NIGEL OSBORNE: Yes, it is. I mean, I think that our work was very much practice-led, and it needs support now, particularly because we have quite a sophisticated dialogue with the medical services in particular. And I wish that dialogue to continue at the right level. Yes, we do want to encourage work in this area. One of the problems is to do it non-invasively for children. I don't want in any way to invade the lives of the children I work with, with measuring things in ways that are invasive of them. That's the critical thing. I'm developing some technologies that might help me do that, and might help us do more on the hoof research. The other thing that we're doing also and hoping to develop with the help of the Army actually, with soldier volunteers, with trauma, where we can measure and we can look at the effects of what we're doing, so we hope to develop that area more. So, we're in a position of being way ahead in practice of our theory and I would very much want the science to work with us, it would be tremendous.

FLOOR: Hello, this is for you, Nigel. You mentioned singing and the use of breath control. I'm a soprano and I live in North Yorkshire and I'm about to start work with the Help for Heroes rehabilitation centre in Catterick and I wondered if there was any specific research that has been done on the physiological effects of "proper full body singing", because the intention is to combine singing as a back-up to the physio that the guys are going through there.

NIGEL OSBORNE: Yes, there is some literature and I can get it to you. Not as much as there should be, but there is some. Please do that. Singing is a fantastic thing. Also for many people, it's not patronising, it's a very human dignified thing to do and a great thing to do so please push on with that. By the way, I have some links with US military working in this area and an awful lot of singing and theatre and song writing is going on, very, very successful stuff and I think we ought to pursue this very much so I'll send some stuff and warm encouragement.

FLOOR: I spent quite a lot of time in Bosnia, Kosovo and Afghanistan and it's always come from us, musicians, pushing to involve ourselves in the communities. I've worked in the Pavarotti Centre myself but it took an awful lot of time and effort to get there, and there just seems to be very little engagement from the NGOs to actually want to have military musicians. If we had that, and the sort of pull from NGOs then I am sure a lot more could happen but they need to engage with the military authorities, we can't do it at our level so much. Is there anything afoot to actually make that happen in the future?

NIGEL OSBORNE: We really have to get talking about this. When we were lucky enough to have the Green Jackets actually visiting the Pavarotti Centre, we were able to plug them straight into a massive schools programme of creative work with children. They did a fantastic job, so we had a context and that worked very well, and what we need to be doing is working towards creating those contexts where you guys can go in and immediately hit the ground running with the children in good situations, well prepared, so you can use your skills to get it moving, absolutely. There is a need for a co-ordination of this, because it's a huge potential, and the effect of it in terms of public relations is huge, of course. If you get children going home from school smiling from a day working with some musicians, you then have won a lot of hearts at the same time. So yes, it needs the organisational structure. We have seen this - Ian will be witness to this - we have seen this work, we have had a great relationship, we need to look at how we can construct this in the situations that the Army would wish to offer this facility, so it's a big discussion to be had in practical terms.

GUY BOOTH: David is a colleague of mine and we both have the same view, that we should be involved very heavily with all of this sort of stuff and it is tough from the musicians' perspective because if there is not a lot of evidence from a military perspective, then it's hard for us to actually make inroads into that, so I think certainly there's a way it has to come, for our involvement in it.

NIGEL OSBORNE: I would be hugely optimistic about the success of that if the right structures were in place. Thank you very much.