

Ducking bullets for troops

Band goes abroad with armed forces

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In Bosnia, the band wore bulletproof vests on stage.

In Afghanistan, their plane flew sideways to avoid a hail of bullets while landing.

While in Qatar in January, they slept in Gen. Tommy Franks' room at Central Command while he was away.

Chosen by the Pentagon to perform for U.S. troops overseas, the Dina Preston Band has been on tours that band members say they will never forget. From Bahrain to Bosnia and Macedonia to Mozambique, the group has traveled almost everywhere imaginable, says band director and guitarist Don Ortiz.

But it was the group's last tour, which spanned the Middle East that the musicians say was "a real eye-opener."

"This trip was by far the most challenging and memorable," said lead singer and Goodyear resident Dina Preston-Ortiz of the three-week trip that began Dec. 28. Preston-Ortiz founded the group more than 20 years ago, but started the USO circuit during Desert Storm, shortly after marrying guitarist Don Ortiz in 1992. The country, pop, blues and rock band also includes bassist Robert Keith of Glendale and percussionist Thomas Lynch of Phoenix.

The couple vividly recalls one event from their last trip while trying to land in Kabul, Afghanistan.

"They say we're going to fly over the theater, and then all the lights go out," Ortiz said. "It's pitch black and they let you know you're flying into the hot zone so there will be no lights on the ground either. You're just waiting for the tires to touch down because you don't see anything."

"It got awfully quiet on that plane," Preston-Ortiz recalled. "Then when we got out they took a defensive position with rifles."

Once, the band flew into Singapore without any passports.

On another trip, the musicians were placed on the wrong return flight resulting in an unexpected three-day vacation in Japan.

Some may view the band's accommodations - sleeping in tents and eating whatever food is available in camp --as an obstacle, but not Ortiz.

While Ortiz admits, "there are no five-star hotels out there," he says, "they take really good care of us."

Preston-Ortiz says she feels blessed to have had the experiences the tours have provided, a sentiment shared by the rest of the band.

"It's incredibly powerful to be a part of history," she says.

But the biggest challenge for the band may be entertaining troops.

"We're there to fulfill a mission, which is to keep people happy for an hour and ten minutes or however long we have," Ortiz says. "You have to try to find humor out there because that's what keeps you going."

To that end, the group relishes bringing male commanding officers up on stage for an unforgettable



Emmanuel Lozano/The Arizona Republic

The Dina Preston Band (from left), Robert Keith, Don Ortiz, Dina Preston-Ortiz and Thomas Lynch, entertains U.S. troops.

performance that starts with one simple question: "Do you like Shania Twain?" When he says "yes," the band accompanies him while forcing him to belt out the words to *Man I Feel Like a Woman*, much to the delight of the hollering crowd. Evenings end with a rousing rendition of *Sweet Home Alabama*.

"I can't tell you what a big difference these performances make in the soldiers' lives," Preston-Ortiz says. "We had soldiers who were crying. Some of these kids are 18 or 19 years old and when you play a song, maybe they remember it from prom and it is special to them, it touches them."

As one pilot stationed in Bahrain wrote in an e-mail to the band: "The show was fantastic and the camp really appreciated it. I think everyone had a blast. I know I did, even though I had to check out early to go fly. We are continuing to work hard out here flying every day. Please keep us in your prayers."

"People often ask us why we do this," says Preston-Ortiz, who is also a business professor at Paradise Valley Community College. "Our families think we're crazy."

"People ask me when I am going to make it. I have made it. I'm making money at what I love doing."

"It's great knowing you're helping," Ortiz says, "but it's sad knowing some of these guys aren't coming back."

The band was scheduled to tour the Mediterranean this summer, but Ortiz thinks plans could change.

"I have a feeling we'll be in Baghdad very soon," he says. "They let us know where to go or where they need us and we're there."

To learn more about the band or see photos of their experiences abroad, visit <http://www.dinapreston.com/>

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