It’s the Most Wonderful Time of the Year

When approaching the winter holiday season, many music educators are thinking “Of course, it’s the most wonderful time of the year, I get two weeks off!” Instead I offer a few other reasons that make this season special to musicians but also to our men and women in uniform who I had the privilege to serve alongside for nearly four decades.

Holiday concerts by The United States Army Field Band and The United States Army Band “Pershing’s Own” were big productions. That meant I would start developing the show over a year in advance. When others were groaning at hearing holiday music non-stop, I loved it because anytime something would catch my ear it would go on the “Let’s Do That Next Year” list. In February I would start to sort through the titles and in March, emerge with what I hoped would be a killer show. Librarians then secured the permissions and the arranging staff got to work. In September we would record all solo accompaniments. Any time you feature a soloist (of any age and ability) you can save tons of rehearsal time by giving them an accompaniment track to work with. Scripts would be written, stage plots planned, lighting designed, props built, and all the other things that go into a big production. If we all did our jobs right, the three or four rehearsals after Thanksgiving would be all that we’d need. So why was this so “special?” First, holiday music is terrific! Second, it was a project that every member of the team contributed to. What if you challenged your school group to help develop your winter concert starting in the Spring and gave them time to come up with accompanying videos, props, and other things? If you have a high school marching band, how long do you work on developing your show and all of the props and costumes? Why not put the same thought into delivering something special for your holiday audiences?

Setting aside the inside baseball of what we as directors do for a holiday-themed concert, much more important is what that season means. Thanksgiving, Hanukah, Ramadan, Christmas, Kwanza, and the New Year all share a common theme of the importance of loved ones. Each of us has some special holiday memories tucked away. Many of mine are centered on my time in uniform.

In December 1989 there was a plane crash in Latin America where eight service members were killed. Their remains were being flown in to Dover Air Force Base, arriving on Christmas Eve and an honor guard and members of “Pershing’s Own” were sent to perform the ceremony when the flag-draped caskets were unloaded. The arrival was around 1:00 A.M. and the air temperature had dipped well below zero and the howling 30 MPH wind put the wind chill close to -50 degrees. We marched into position as the ramp came down and performed (drum roll only because of the temperature) as the caskets came out with eight grieving families as witnesses. When the ceremony was over, some of the honor guard members had to be carried off the flight line because at a certain temperature your brain is incapable of sending messages to your limbs. But no one “fell out” and no one complained. At about 2:30 A.M. some wonderful ladies welcomed us back inside with Christmas cookies and hot cocoa, but it was far from a festive occasion.

The following year, I found myself on the very same tarmac on Christmas Eve (and for the entire week following) as casualties from Operation Desert Storm came in. Thankfully, what all had feared would be a flood was a trickle. Regardless of the numbers, witnessing the families’ grief was always just as moving. Members of “Pershing’s Own” perform thousands of funerals each year in Arlington National Cemetery. Many of those are for those who served years ago, and the funeral becomes a celebration of their life and service. When the family includes young widows and children, the mood is much, much different.

In December 2002, young Americans were once more in harm’s way in

Iraq and Afghanistan and we took a group of singers and instrumentalists to perform holiday music throughout Iraq. As these things often go, the equipment did not arrive with the people. I informed the instrumentalists that we were now all singers and after a quick rehearsal we headed out to medical aid stations, mess halls, and anywhere Soldiers needed cheering. We visited one battalion that had lost nine KIAs the night before. They were hurt, withdrawn, and angry and refused to look up or acknowledge our caroling. On the way out, one young Soldier came up with tears in his eyes and whispered, “thank you.” That’s all we needed. Next stop was a MASH unit full of Iraqi soldiers and civilians. The U.S. wounded, once stabilized, usually went to Germany. For the Iraqis, this was the best care they could hope for. I talked to an interpreter and explained that all we had was Christmas music and I was worried it would offend the Iraqi Muslims and he assured me that they would love it. Watching the smiles of these severely wounded allies who were fighting alongside us was something I won’t forget. As we were leaving we noticed a curtained off area and asked what it was. It was a separate section for the Iraqi women who were wounded. In addition to their wounds and the language barrier, they were also isolated. Our female Soldiers went behind the curtain and along with their beautiful singing, we could hear sobbing and laughing.

So, this time of year is much more than a time to watch football games and overeat. It’s a time when those of us who are blessed to be musicians can revel in wonderful music and share that joy with everyone.