Iowa Nice: Soldiers Carry a Piece of Home to Poland

BOLESŁAWIEC, Poland — More than 4,000 miles from Iowa, two 1st Infantry Division soldiers are finding familiar pieces of home in an unlikely place. Whether through a smile, a conversation with a neighbor or a shared song, Warrant Officer 1 Bridget Olenek and Capt. Sam Deyak have carried a distinctly Midwestern approach to their deployment in Poland: “Iowa Nice.”

For Olenek, bandmaster and commander of the 1st Infantry Division Band, Iowa Nice is something people can feel almost immediately. She moved to Sioux City, Iowa, around 2003, beginning ninth grade there before graduating from Sioux City East High School. She later attended Iowa State University in Ames, where her path as a professional musician began to take shape.

Although Olenek was born in Wisconsin, she said Iowa became home during an important period of her life. Her first job at 14 was detasseling corn, giving her an early taste of agriculture that remains closely tied to the state. What she remembers most, however, is the way people treated one another.

“Everyone’s just happy to see you,” Olenek said. She remembers friendly interactions at grocery stores, parks and even the coffee shop she visited before high school. “It was just a great place to grow up.”

Deyak, a G-33 operations officer with the 1st Infantry Division, grew up in Iowa City, Iowa, about 250 miles east of Sioux City. He graduated from Iowa City West High School in 2017 and later attended college in Minnesota. For him, living in a larger city

that still felt small offered the best of both worlds: plenty to do and a close-knit community where people knew one another.

That sense of community followed both soldiers into the Army. Deyak said his father served in the Army, and seeing the experiences that came with military service inspired him to pursue his own. Today, his work in the G-33 includes tracking operations across the division and assisting with planning events. Even in a large organization, he said an Iowa lesson continues to shape how he works with others.

“Getting to know your neighbor,” Deyak said. “When you are working in an organization of this size, it just helps you to get to know your coworkers and the people working for you or the people you work for. Just getting to know them on a personal level is important.”

Olenek’s path into the Army began while she was at Iowa State, when friends joined the Iowa National Guard Band. She continued pursuing music, earned a master’s degree in music performance, and spent years teaching before deciding to serve. In 2019, at age 31, she auditioned for the Ohio National Guard Band and later attended basic training. Her years as an educator eventually translated into leading Army musicians.

Now in Poland, Olenek said the band’s mission allows its soldiers to serve as a sound and a face for the Army while connecting with people who may have little personal experience with U.S. service members. She often approaches people with a big smile and a friendly greeting, sometimes adding a “Dzień dobry.” She said that genuine friendliness can soften cultural differences and help create positive interactions with the local residents, cultural organizations, and city officials.

Music has made those connections even stronger. Olenek recalled rehearsing with local musicians for a performance in a downtown square. At first, a language barrier made communication difficult. Once the musicians began playing, she watched shoulders relax, laughter started and people began communicating through the music.

“Music is universal,” Olenek said. “You don’t need to speak the same language to understand how it makes you feel.”

Deyak has noticed a similar welcome while interacting with people in Poland. He said the local residents have been courteous and helpful, and he believes the deployment offers soldiers an opportunity not only to train with allies, but also to experience another culture. One lesson he hopes to take home is the value of learning another language after seeing how often people in Europe communicate in more than one.

Deyak summed up Iowa Nice in two words: being courteous. To him, it means being a good neighbor and lending a hand, even to someone you do not know well. Asked how he would explain Iowa Nice to someone in Poland in one sentence, he offered an even simpler answer: “Being a good neighbor.”

That idea has also taken on greater meaning for Olenek during her first deployment, first division assignment and first command. Being away from her husband, her cats and the comforts of home have taught her to pay closer attention to how deployment affects people. She said leaders must remember that everyone around them is also dealing with stress and missing something from home.

“We must also be kind to the people around us because they’re also dealing with this,” Olenek said, describing it as “maintaining that Iowa Nice, even when you don’t always feel like it.”

Despite serving far from Iowa, both soldiers still find reminders of home. Olenek said meeting other Iowans in Europe brings back an immediate sense of familiarity. Deyak misses Iowa corn and Big Ten football, particularly fall Saturdays in Iowa City spent around Hawkeye football.

Their common ground, however, ends at the state’s biggest college rivalry. Olenek, an Iowa State graduate, closed her interview with “Go Cyclones.” Deyak needed even fewer words to answer back: “Go Hawks.”

Different teams, different Army jobs and different paths to service, but in Poland, both continue to carry the same Iowa lesson: be genuine, get to know the people around you and be a good neighbor.