

15th Engineer Battalion builds homes for animals

Story and photo by
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SCHWEINFURT, Germany — The Pfaendhausen Training Area here plays occasional host to Soldiers from both this garrison and visiting units who utilize the unique facilities and terrain. But there is one group of residents that finds the environment in Schweinfurt particularly appealing: the amphibians that make their home in the pristine woodlands and bodies of water within the training area.

Lothar Rueckert, the garrison's environmental specialist, says that contrary to what many would think the military training in the 6,200 acre zone — nicknamed Area Mike — actually benefits the wildlife there.

"Old tank tracks get filled in with water," said Rueckert. "Then the frogs, toads and newts can make a home." Area Mike, of which almost 90 percent is forested, is spotted with deep ruts carved out by the military vehicles that have used the dirt roads over the decades. The ruts have now become elongated shallow ponds and lush habitats in which the amphibians can lay eggs.



A coupled pair of common frogs watches over their spawning eggs in a pond in USAG Schweinfurt's Pfaendhausen Training Area. The animals, currently on Germany's watch list for vulnerable species, hatch in ponds created by the 15th Engineer Battalion before moving into the training area's woodlands.

In 2009, the 15th Engineer Battalion improved upon these "accidental habitats" by creating a series of deeper bodies of water with the intent to compensate for habitat lost through road-building in Pfaendhausen. Kathrin Poptcheva, an environ-

mental specialist who monitors the wildlife in Area Mike, said that the animals went through an adjustment period with these ponds.

"Toads and frogs come back to spawn in the same pond where they were born," said Poptcheva. "But we

moved some of these original ponds when we built roads." In many cases, the 15th Engineer's creations were deeper and better-protected than the original ponds. Poptcheva said the animals quickly grew to prefer the newly constructed habitats.

"The newts, frogs and toads realized that the compensation pond was the best habitat," she said. "The deeper water is better for the hot summer days when some of the shallower ponds dry out." And because the small ponds are new and unconnected to bigger lakes by streams, they remain free of fish, which is a natural predator of the small amphibians.

And the training was more than just an act of charity for the battalion. These dig exercises mirror combat drills in which Soldiers burrow trenches for tanks to drive down into and fire from.

The common frog is currently listed on the German "Red List" of vulnerable species. The frog is not endangered but faces the risk of extinction. The yellow-bellied toad, which spawns by the hundreds in Area Mike later in the year according to Rueckert, is classified as endangered in the state of Bavaria.

In Germany, frogs are threatened

by road-building, loss of aquatic habitat through over-development and by getting trapped in concrete buildings. These problems are almost nonexistent in the wild, untamed forests of Pfaendhausen.

Poptcheva and Rueckert started a methodical survey of the area in mid-March, searching the ponds in Area Mike under threatening gray skies and buffeted by a chill wind. The toads and newts do not spawn until the weather warms, but the common frog had already started to lay eggs in several of the ponds.

Only a few of the ponds contained the orb-like clusters of frog eggs, but Poptcheva was not daunted, maintaining confidence that the new habitats are proving successful in bolstering Pfaendhausen's animal population.

"There could be more frogs here, there could be more toads," she said. "But that's OK. There could also be none of them."



One for the environment



Photo by John Reese

GARMISCH-PARTENKIRCHEN — Diane Devens, director, Installation Management Command Europe Region, signs documents as members of the German Forest Service circulate and stamp copies of the Oeffentliche Traegerschaft, an environmental agreement between the U.S. Army, the Federal Republic of Germany, and the free state of Bavaria. Bavarian State Minister Dr. Markus Soeder signed for the state and Dr. Juergen Gebh, spokesman for German Federal Real Estate, represented the nation. This high level document advances cooperation by the Army to protect the environment on installations in Bavaria. High level representatives of the Garmisch and Grafenwoehr garrisons as well as local media were also present. After the March 30 signing ceremony in the Patton Ballroom of the Edelweiss Lodge and Resort, Devens met with garrison manager Karin Santos and the Garmisch staff officers for an impromptu Q&A session on Artillery Kaserne.

Students learn the power of a penny

By Mark Iacampo
USAG Hohenfels Public Affairs

HOHENFELS, Germany — For the past month, students of Hohenfels Elementary School have been searching under couch cushions and scouring car ashtrays for coins to help bring educational opportunities to underprivileged children in Central Asia through their Pennies for Peace campaign.

Pennies for Peace is a program of the Central Asia Institute (CAI) which promotes and provides education and literacy programs in regions where terrorist organizations recruit uneducated, illiterate children.

"It's kind of sad that we have a school and kids in Pakistan and Afghanistan don't have one, so we're trying to help these people out," said Timothy Ward, student council president.

In pairs or small groups, student council members spoke with the various grade levels, giving a presentation on the merits of the program and explaining that though a penny can't buy much at the Hohenfels PX, in Afghanistan it can buy a pencil, and maybe start a student on the path to a new life.

"We all grew up knowing we would go to school, and we would have the opportunity to go to college and get a job, and these kids grew up saying 'maybe I won't,'" said Virginia Warren, student council publicity manager.

"Here at Hohenfels, you can't really use pennies, because they aren't readily available," Warren added. "So we're doing coins."



Photo by Tracy Stockdale

Virginia Warren (left) and Timothy Ward explain how pennies can provide educational opportunities to children in Afghanistan and Pakistan at a presentation for the Hohenfels Elementary Schools Pennies for Peace campaign.

Individual classrooms each have decorated donation jars that, according to Michaela Lefebvre, student council treasurer, "just make you want to put money in them!" The coins will be combined by grade level on April 15.

"We're calculating the donations by weight," said Tracy Stockdale, sixth-grade teacher and student council advisor. "It would be too hard to separate all the euro and American money and figure out what grade levels it came from."

"After we weigh it, we'll count it, and send out a check," said Warren.

The grade level that has collected the heaviest amount will be treated to

a party by the student council.

In addition to helping children in other countries learn, the Hohenfels Elementary students are getting an education on the culture of the nations they are aiding.

"There's a curriculum that goes with the program," Stockdale said, "so now a lot of the teachers are teaching about Afghanistan and Pakistan."

"The children really like it because they're helping the same countries that their parents are deploying to, and it's something we can do here at school to help the same kids that our parents are helping," said Stockdale.

Kontakt Club in Hohenfels celebrates 40 years of friendship

By Mark Iacampo
USAG Hohenfels Public Affairs

HOHENFELS, Germany — Celebrating 40 years of bridging the gap between cultures, the Hohenfels' Kontakt Club heads into 2011 with a host of activities designed to bring Germans and Americans together in a fun and festive atmosphere.

Founded in 1969 by the U.S. Army Europe and the German Federal Ministry of Youth, Family, Women and Health, The Kontakt program gives U.S. military members, their families and civilians the opportunity to experience the rich history, traditions and customs of our local national hosts.

German/American Volksfest At this year's German/American Volksfest held at Hohenfels' Festplatz from April 27-May 1, the

Club plans to display photographs, articles and other memorabilia that chronicle the 40 years of friendship between our Soldiers and the host nation. "It's all about having fun," said Andy Kirschenbauer, German club president.

It's also about breaking down barriers, getting rid of prejudice, and showing that despite cultural differences, we have much in common, Kirschenbauer said. The club hosts various holiday parties where the differences and customs of the two cultures can be experienced firsthand.

"We also have a Thanksgiving holiday," Kirschenbauer said, referencing the "Erntedankfest," which is primarily a rural and religious celebration. "But we like to celebrate the American holiday, too, with the turkey and everything."

"We like to show the community

what's around in the area besides the mall," said Petra Neumeier, a German member of the Kontakt Club. She said the club organizes about one trip a month to unique attractions in the area.

"We get to do a lot of fun things with the club we probably wouldn't do otherwise," said American member Priscilla Fleischer, who initially joined the Kontakt Club to make German friends.

Upcoming trips

This year's trips include a two-day adventure at the Kallenberg Knights Tournament, where steel-clad warriors will joust for honor and glory, and a visit to Moeldareuth, or "Little Berlin," a town in northern Bavaria that was split in two by the Berlin wall.

"In 2010, we had total participa-

tion of around 3,000 people," said Kirschenbauer. "When people are new to Germany, and maybe afraid to drive or go out, come with us! We'll show you the world or Bavaria at least!"

The club boasts over 100 paying members, but participation doesn't require membership or dues.

Transportation is provided by the garrison, so trip costs are relegated to the actual cost of an activity. If a museum has a five euro entrance fee, that's the total trip cost, said Kirschenbauer.

This summer, the club plans to host a birthday barbecue bash and invite the entire Hohenfels community for burgers and steaks. The club's activities are announced in the Hohenfels Happenings as well as their Facebook page and website, www.kontaktclub-hohenfels.org.



Photo by Brigitte Kirschenbauer

Kontakt Club members Andy Kirschenbauer and Alyssa McBride enjoy the Velburg Fasching parade at a recent club outing.