

## **Their mission: Deliver laughs in the face of danger** *The Boston Globe*

By David Rattigan, Globe Correspondent | April 27, 2006

As mortar shells landed all around them on a military base in Iraq, a sergeant major talking with comedians Jim McCue and Joey Carroll was impressed that the two civilians weren't scrambling for cover.

Instead, McCue delivered a punch line.

"Obviously," he said, "they've seen our act before."

The truth is that both were too exhausted to run, and they know to follow the lead of military people in that situation. For this gig, explosions and gunfire are just part of the drill.

Johnny Pizzi of Saugus, the regular host at the Giggles Comedy Club on Route 1 for 17 years, has been on national TV ("The John Laroquette Show") and played Las Vegas. That's heady stuff, but nothing compared to his trip this month to Bosnia and Kosovo. The package included sleeping on cots, eating when you're told, changing plans on short notice, and taking rides in helicopters while men with machine guns keep watch.

He couldn't have been more excited.

"It's great to be able to do something in a small way to help take the troops' minds off of why they're there," said Pizzi. "This is the ultimate in show business, to be able to do something for them while they're over there watching our backs."

With more American servicemen deployed, there's a great need for entertainment overseas, said Dwayne Ulloa, president of California-based AKA Productions, who has been sending entertainers to military bases for more than 10 years. He estimated that he books 70 tours overseas per year to more than 20 countries, providing an eclectic mix of entertainment that includes bands, comics, and gospel choirs. The Pentagon pays for the morale-boosting tours.

"Comedy is the surest way to lift morale," Ulloa said, with laughter an important resource for soldiers dealing with the life-and-death stresses of military life. "It can change their perspective."

Pizzi, McCue, and Carroll are among the handful of Greater Boston comics in the AKA mix for overseas duty every year, asking to go to the most dangerous places.

McCue and Carroll have been performing at military bases since 1999. For the past four years, they've traveled together. Last month, they went to Iraq for the second year in a row. This fall, they're going to

Afghanistan.

"To me, it's an honor and a privilege to go over," said Carroll, 44, of Winthrop, who has appeared on the Comedy Central cable TV network and performs across the United States. "I owe my life to these men and women, and the ones that came before them. They fight so that I can live my life."

Stateside, McCue also performs across the country and is the founder of the Boston International Comedy & Movie Festival, scheduled this year from Sept. 10 to 16. He also has organized a fund-raising comedy show for [www.anysoldier.com](http://www.anysoldier.com), to benefit soldiers in need, on May 18 at Dick Doherty's Comedy Vault in Boston.

He and Carroll have had their airplane shot at and been shelled with mortars and rockets.

"For me, it's the most important thing I do," said McCue, 44, who lives in Plaistow, N.H. "Doing comedy is a selfish thing. You get instant gratification from the audience, and a guy pays you at the end of the night. Doing comedy for the troops gives it a whole new level of importance, especially in the times we live in, when they're away from home, risking their lives for us."

The two have performed in 10 countries, including Bosnia and Kosovo during the crisis in the Balkans, Kuwait and Iraq, and in Japan, Germany, and South Korea.

At times, they've been driven around in SUVs. At others, they've arrived as part of a convoy, or traveled in military helicopters while outfitted with helmets and bulletproof vests.

"You're in the air and everybody's on their toes," Carroll said. "This is real -- not dress up."

On their last trip, shows were canceled because the troops launched Operation Swarmer, a joint US-Iraqi offensive in northern Iraq. "We couldn't get helicopter rides," said McCue, who noted that the entertainers have to be flexible on these trips because "obviously we're not the highest priority the military has right now."

They have played to groups of 50, and a packed 1,500-seat theater on a former Iraqi military base. They've played in several of the palaces formerly occupied by the Hussein family in Iraq.

"We've had 800 people in a tent, and we've performed in airplane hangars, outdoors on the front porch of a dining hall with people in folding chairs, and in dining facilities," Carroll said. On the last trip, they had two shows in Kuwait and nine in Iraq, plus a bunch of "meet-and-greets" -- short, hopefully funny and morale-boosting, conversations with small groups or individual soldiers.

The comedians have met soldiers from Michigan, Ohio, Texas, and Maine. They've met servicemen and women "from Boston" and found out that "Boston" is a loose interpretation for anywhere in New England. This year, they came across soldiers with connections to Haverhill, Salem, North Andover, Quincy, Mattapan, and Dedham.

"This year we met a guy from MIT," said Carroll, a Cambridge native. "We immediately compared

barrooms, where he'd thrown his darts."

The meet-and-greets can be especially gratifying, McCue said.

"They're starved for new conversation, especially with civilians outside their realm of influence," McCue said. "We just came from home, so we still have that home smell."

Some relationships have continued stateside. McCue met a soldier in the Balkans who was later stationed at Fort Drum in upstate New York. He brought 39 of his fellow soldiers to one of McCue's shows.

One year, Carroll met a soldier in Bosnia who had lived within a mile of his home at the time, in Medford. Months later, the soldier attended one of Carroll's shows at the Kowloon in Saugus.

"He told me, 'You had no idea how much that meant,' " Carroll said. The soldier said he had taken a CD by Carroll with him on a deployment to Iraq, and that his unit had talked about his show for months. "That was pretty cool," Carroll said.

Ulloa, the tour organizer, said he was impressed by Pizzi, both with his act and his willingness to go anywhere.

"You need to be able to roll with the punches, and to understand your mission," Ulloa said. "This is not a trip for divas. I'll get guys who come home and say, 'Dwayne, the conditions were horrible. When can I go again?' "

For the length of the trip, the comedian is given the rank of acting colonel, a courtesy that allows sleeping in nicer quarters, if there are any. Even with the rank, he might wind up in a tent, on the floor of a conference room, or a cot in the motor pool.

"It's a different atmosphere -- so surreal," Carroll said. "You're living a military life for a short period of time. Can you imagine comedians trying to keep a military schedule?"

Pizzi, who works full time as a letter carrier, was disappointed that the Postal Service wouldn't grant him an administrative leave. But rather than miss the trip, he used vacation days.

"It's my vacation in Kosovo," he said.

Freelance writer David Rattigan is also a Boston-based comedian.

## **At ease**

What cracks 'em up during comedy shows for US personnel serving at military bases overseas? Here's a sampling . . .

"Your recruiters told you that you were going to be taking college courses with the University of Maryland. You guys asked, 'What campus, Baltimore?'

'No, further east.' "

--Joey Carroll

"One soldier was showing me his tank and told me it had a jet turbine engine. You know some redneck came up with that idea. It's only a matter of time before a tank shows up on the NASCAR circuit."

--Jim McCue

"Six ex-generals have come forward and asked to fire Donald Rumsfeld. I guess it could be worse for Rumsfeld. He could have been invited to go hunting with Dick Cheney."

--Jim McCue

"It takes me a couple of days to get used to being back home. I wake up in the middle of the night to go to the bathroom and I put on shorts, a T-shirt and a pair of flip flops, and find myself in my backyard looking for a porta-potty."

--Joey Carroll

"I was reading in Stars & Stripes about a soldier whose wife gave birth to quintuplets. The Army, being the good people they are, said, 'Your wife just gave birth to quintuplets, so you don't have to go overseas,' and him being the brave soldier said, 'No -- I *want* to go overseas.' "

--Jim McCue

COMPILED BY DAVID RATTIGAN ■