Senior Master Sgt. David H. Lipp

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Top left, the intricate elements of Sgt. 1st Class Michelle Morgenroth's carvings come through in this detailed photo of a 4.5-by-16 -inch piece of hard pine from Chile that she carved for her husband, Jim, while deployed to Iraq. Much of the inspiration came from "my very good friend Marsha Peterson," Michelle said. "She sent me cards almost every week that had the whimsical animal designs that I used in a lot of my carvings for Soldiers and families over there." The piece also holds a fun memory for Jim and Michelle, who fish frequently. On one trip, the motor stopped and Jim began rowing back to shore. Michelle continued fishing. Agitated, Jim asked what she was doing. "You're going at the perfect trolling speed," Michelle grinned in reply. Their dog at the time, Nikki, was along for the ride, as well.

Carving a Niche

By Sgt. Amy Wieser Willson
Joint Force Headquarters

With Dremel in hand, Sgt. 1st Class Michelle Morgenroth uses her artistic talents to express gratitude, friendship and love. She guides the small rotary tool across blocks of hickory, butternut, quartersawn oak or cherry, turning nature's beauty into human-touched art. After hours of carving intricate details, eagles, fish, deer, flags, words and more emerge from the timber.

It's a skill that developed from Morgenroth's desire to recognize her fellow Soldiers.

"I started out doing retirement plaques for Soldiers who have 20 years or more in the Guard because I saw a need for it at the time," she said. "Our state has come a long way now with all they do (for retirees) … but that wasn't the case 15 years ago."

Her design inspiration comes from old recruiting materials with an eagle and flag. She personalizes each plaque with a nameplate and pins with Soldiers' unit crests and rank at retirement.

"It really meant a lot to me to receive a plaque from Michelle. You receive a lot of things from the state when you retire but knowing the pride and the time that Michelle puts into her work really makes it special. You know that Michelle's plaques come straight from the heart," said Jack Willson Jr., of West Fargo, who received one of Morgenroth's plaques when he retired from the Guard last year.

Morgenroth refined her skills when she deployed to Iraq with the 142nd Engineer Combat Battalion in 2002-03, and found the absolute attention she needed for carving such details distracted her from other work.

"That's why it was very good — I guess, therapeutic — for me in Iraq because you didn't have time to think about missions or anything else. I had to focus," she said of carving.

Morgenroth took along a piece of burled walnut and spent nearly 50 hours creating a cribbage board with a ruffed grouse on a log for her dad. She did about 20 plaques while deployed for the commands with which she served — one plaque is now displayed in a case in Hohenfels, Germany — and in response to Soldiers' requests.

"A lot of them wanted me to do a plaque for their parents or to send home to their spouse. It kept me busy," Morgenroth said. "I wanted them to be involved in the design process, so it gave them something to look forward to."

As she prepares to deploy to Kosovo with Company A of the 231st Brigade Support Battalion's Multinational Task Force, Morgenroth already has plans to again share her talents with others — this time in the form of classes. She'll bring a footlocker full of tools and wood, as well as materials for other craft projects. Morgenroth recently made a loom to craft a pair of Mukluks, and she regularly makes knives, carving the handles and fashioning a leather sheath for each.

Just as her woodcarving hobby started, her focus remains on Soldiers. Some might even say that Morgenroth's art is Soldiering, and the Dremel is simply a tool she uses to support that, whether it's through plaques of recognition or improving the passage of time during a Kosovo deployment.