One step at a time, Uganda to Afghanistan

By U.S. Army Spc. Luke S. Austin
33rd Infantry Brigade Company Team

U.S. Army photo by Spc. Luke S. Austin, 33rd Infantry Brigade Combat Team

A SNOWY DESERT DAY?: **Sgt. Paul Ogwal of Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 33rd Infantry Brigade Combat Team Combined Joint Task Force Phoenix VIII, leads a squad of Afghan National Police officers and noncommissioned officers during movement training at Police District Six headquarters in Kabul, Afghanistan.**

CAMP PHOENIX, Afghanistan – Afghanistan is not the first place Sgt. Paul O. Ogwal has seen people living in such difficult conditions. He remembers his own childhood, living in a similar fashion.

His journey to becoming a citizen of the United States and a noncommissioned officer in the Illinois Army National Guard spanned many years and an entire ocean. Ogwal was born in Uganda, Africa. As his country waged civil war, his family was moved to America as political refugees.

"I grew up in Uganda at a time when there were a lot of violent acts," said Ogwal of Champaign. "I remember lots of Soldiers everywhere."

Although he lived in Uganda until he was 6 years old, Ogwal points out he gained a perspective on life that has helped him succeed.

"I remember everyone being black when I grew up," he said. "I've seen black people working in every position in society… Because of this, I've never thought there was anything I couldn't accomplish."

Ogwal has proven to himself that anything is possible as long as you stay motivated, he said.

After having moved from state to state for several years his family settled in Illinois in 1991. Ogwal eventually became a student at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale. (SIUC). He changed his major more than once, looking for the right fit, and completed the coursework for the Black-American Studies minor. With different sets of learned skills from SIUC under his belt, Ogwal will graduate with a bachelor's degree in Liberal Arts, he said.

Looking back on his time at SIUC, Ogwal recalled one particular example of his success.

"Last year at college, my friend and I decided to run for student government. We had never run before and my running mate had his doubts," said Ogwal. "But I knew we could succeed."

Ogwal explains that to reach your goals, you need to aim high.

"If you set your goals high, you will never fail because you will accomplish more than you thought possible. It's like in basketball – you don't aim at the basket, you aim higher so you can make the basket," he said.

When he and his running mate ran for student government against all odds, said Ogwal, he told himself, "I'm going to succeed." With that mindset, they won class president and vice president because they stayed committed and motivated, says Ogwal.

But school wasn't enough, he said. In 2003 he began searching for something more. After researching the different possibilities the Armed Forces had to offer, Ogwal decided the Illinois Army National Guard was the right fit for him.

As a Soldier in the Illinois Army National Guard, Ogwal earned his status as a U.S. citizen. Along with his citizenship, he gained values and ethics from the Army he applied to his perspective on life. The Illinois Army National Guard has taught him a lot about commitment and leadership, he said.

"It's important to honor your commitments in life, especially to yourself," said Ogwal.

Ogwal took his views and used them to make a positive influence in others lives. He accepted a job at Jefferson Middle School in Champaign, as a teacher's assistant in special education. He now works with children who have social disorders, he said.

"When I received the phone call about the job, Ryan Tusek, the vice principal at the school said, 'We need you here.'" Ogwal said. "That drove the point home to me and I took the job, knowing that I could have a positive effect on the children.

"Working with kids you can see how you influence their perspective," he said.

Working with troubled youth has helped give Ogwal the patience and selflessness needed to be successful in his deployed work, noted Staff Sgt. Anthony Flam, a co-worker of Ogwal's in Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 33rd Infantry Brigade Combat Team (IBCT).

Ogwal is deployed to Camp Phoenix in Kabul, Afghanistan, as the Assistant Operations noncommissioned officer for Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 33rd IBCT. In this position Ogwal can see how the skills he uses to lead and mentor in his job in Champaign go hand-in-hand with leading Soldiers in the Guard.

"Upon arriving in country… Sgt. Ogwal has been a great asset to his unit, and to anyone that asks for his help and assistance," Flam said. "If there was one trait I would like to see him infect in everybody with, it's his selflessness."

Ogwal has a girlfriend and son at home supporting him, but when his chance to take 15 days of leave from his current work in Afghanistan comes, he plans to revisit his home country Uganda and volunteer his time to humanitarian services, said Flam.

"Ogwal is always there to help," Flam said. "Whether he is asked or if it of his own accord."

A night out, a life saved by Illinois Soldier

■ Cormier credits combat lifesaver training to saving a life

Story by Mike Chrisman
Illinois National Guard Public Affairs Office

SPRINGFIELD – A routine night out to the movies turned into an evening that an Illinois Soldier will never forget.

Instincts took over when Master Sgt. Leon "Chip" Cormier walked out of a Springfield movie theatre Dec.19 and saw a woman struggling to catch her breath.

"She was gone. She was turning blue," Cormier said.

The 24-year veteran of the Illinois Army National Guard has been deployed twice and spent 14 years as a Combat Life Saver (CLS).

He said he didn't get rattled and immediately began performing CPR.

"I have been around the block a time or two. I knew what I had to do and didn't even really think about it," Cormier said.

Cormier and a security guard from the movie theater, who was an off-duty Illinois State Trooper, performed CPR until paramedics arrived.

The Pawnee resident thought the 58-year-old woman had died that night. Much to his surprise, he picked up the local newspaper Jan. 10 and read a letter to the editor written by the Springfield woman thanking, the two unknown men who had saved her life.

"That's why I didn't see her name in the obituaries," Cormier said. "She was still alive. It was one of the greatest feelings in the world."

In the brief letter, Beverly Sherer told the men they have her heartfelt gratitude and appreciation. She said she had won the "Christmas life lottery" that night.

"I certainly would not have survived, especially without brain damage, without the rapid, effective actions of these two 'angels unaware,'" the letter said in part.

Cormier returned home in May 2007 after deploying to Iraq with the Springfield-based 3637th Maintenance Company.

He recently transferred to the 232nd Combat Services Support Battalion based in Springfield. Cormier, who was part of the first Illinois Army National Guard CLS class in 1994, was recertified as a Combat Lifesaver Feb. 1.

The Army Combat Lifesaver course is a class taught to Soldiers in the Illinois Army National Guard to provide medical treatment to a wounded Soldier.

While every squad in a unit is required to have a CLS, a majority of Illinois Soldiers receive the yearly training so they can save the life of a comrade.

The CLS initiates medical treatment at the scene of the accident and maintains medical treatment until the Soldier is evacuated to a healthcare facility.

Cormier said he cannot say enough about the CLS training he had received from the Illinois National Guard.

"I have given IVs to over 15 Soldiers and civilians since 1994. I have also done my share of wrapping sprains, butterfly stitching and other minor injuries over the years," Cormier said. "I try to carry my CLS aid bag with me whenever practical because, as the events of Dec. 19 show, you never know when you will be called upon to act decisively to help someone in need."

Master Sgt. Leon "Chip" Cormier