a momentary release from gravity

how one Soldier uses his skateboard to relieve stress

By Pfc. J. Princeville Lawrence
MND-S

COB BASRA – While on deployment, some Soldiers spend their free time watching movies, reading books or working out at the gym.

Sgt. Gregory Opoien, an information assurance safety officer with the 34th Red Bull Infantry Division, spends his time kick-flipping, grinding and popping on a black and red skateboard, Opoien's third since his deployment began 17 months ago.

Opoien, a Bloomington, Minn., native, is what can be called a skateboard fiend. His two first two boards were wrecked, one in Joint Airbase Balad, where Opoien was with the 34th Combat Aviation Brigade, and one in Contingency Operating Base Basra, where Opoien was transferred after he extended his tour. In addition to his Army issue t-shirt and shorts, he wears other, non-issued gear when he skates: flat and floppy shoes, with no arch support, wholly inappropriate for running, but suited for gripping the flat surface of a board, and a black glove that extends beyond his wrist to protect his hand during grinds.

He skates in parking lots he fills with his toys: a box with a pipe, a short metal rail and a wooden ramp. Here, he can often be seen skating with Staff Sgt. Ben Nikkel, his buddy who used to skate with Opoien before drills back in Minnesota. Opoien and Nikkel skate several times a week after work, and Nikkel, battalion signal and communications manager with the 34th Inf. Div., describes the best part of his deployment as "when your best friend's your roommate and he likes to skate and you're able to skate."

"It's pretty fun, skating with friends," Opoien says, but today, he is alone, just a Soldier with a skateboard in a concrete playground.

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Photo by Pfc. J. Princeville Lawrence

Sgt. Gregory Opoien, a Bloomington, Minn., native and an information assurance officer with the 34th Red Bull Infantry Division, ollies, or jumps off of a ramp, in a parking lot Oct. 13 in Contingency Operating Base Basra.

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Opoien opens by grinding, or sliding, down the metal rail and the box. Every time he moves his feet, his board follows, as if linked to his body by a rubber band.

For his next trick, Opoien decides on an ollie, a basic trick that involves springing the muscles in your leg to jump off the ground. Combined with a ramp, an ollie is often used to gain extra height in the air.

Sizing up his ramp, Opoien backs up until he feels he has enough space to gather speed, and then he goes. As he ascends the ramp, you can hear the sound of his wheels change in pitch, the way a long zipper or a struck match does: low and rolling at the bottom as he gathers speed, and then sharper at the top as he pops his legs and goes airborne.

Airtime is the time for tricks, for contorting the body in a type of aerial juggling. Opoien says airtime is often a period of hyper concentration, where time fades away and instinct takes over.

"As soon as you pop your board, it seems like time slows," Opoien said. "Realistically, you have half a second, but when you're up there, it seems like two, three seconds."

In the air, he pulls his legs up to complete the ollie, but within a split second, all is lost. The link is severed and Opoien knows it. He bails, escaping injury, while his board falls to the earth in a hollow wooden clatter. He's lucky this time, but Opoien recalls other times when, in air, he found himself in bigger trouble.

'll probably be 40, skating, teaching my little kids how to skate. *- Sgt. Gregory Opoien*

"Terror," Opoien recalls. "There's nothing you can do about it. If you can feel it in the air, you know it's going to hurt."

After retrieving his board, Opoien stops and gathers himself, his hands on his knees, his mouth open and winded. "Those jumps really take it out of you," he says, but his enthusiasm is undaunted, and he remains eager.

"It's my thing," said Opoien. "It's what I do. I love when you try a trick a hundred times and you miss it. And then you stick it that one time and it makes it all worth it. Fall on your back, fall on your knees, it doesn't matter, you just get right back up. You feel the pain. You just want to stick that trick."

Opoien said this desire for betterment, for perfection, for the fulfillment of the sport is what drives him and other skaters.

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Photo by Pfc. J. Princeville Lawrence

Sgt. Gregory Opoien can often be seen skating with Staff Sgt. Ben Nikkel, an acquaintance who used to skate with Opoien with before drills back in Minnesota. Opoien and Nikkel skate several times a week after work and Nikkel, battalion signal and communications manager with the 34th Red Bull Infantry Division, describes the best part of his deployment as "when your best friend's your roommate and he likes to skate and you're able to skate."

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"You skate to your ability, but you always want to break that next line," Opoien said. "You always want to hit that bigger trick, try that longer grind, bigger kick-flip."

"It's, you know, most people won't understand it," Opoien said. "They don't get it. If they can't stand on a skateboard they don't understand how anybody else can. But, it's something. It's one of those intangibles. You want to hang on to it as long as you can. I'll probably be 40, skating, teaching my little kids how to skate."

"It's something you love. It's… anything you can bring here, to bring you out of this place," Opoien says. "You live all day, you see the crappy stuff come across on the news and stuff. You hear about people going out on convoys and not coming back and stuff. This allows me to escape, allows us to do something fun, you know?"

Opoien takes his board and ascends the ramp once more. He kicks his legs at the last second and then there it is: a momentary escape from gravity; from Iraq; from anything or anyone not contained in this one single flying moment. His knees pulled toward his chest, his arms outstretched and out, he appears at the apex like Icarus, headed for the sun. Then gravity reclaims him, but he keeps it together, and as he lands you can hear the click and roll of all four wheels on pavement as Sgt. Opoien glides away.

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Photo by Pfc. J. Princeville Lawrence

An image of skateboarding Sgt. Gregory Opoien, an information assurance officer with the 34th Red Bull Infantry Division, can be seen in the reflection of a military vehicle in a parking lot in Contingency Operating Base Basra Oct. 13.

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