



Nurturing the Mind on the Battlefield

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Three Soldiers at U.S. Army Garrison Ansbach library enjoy the opportunity to listen to a Playaway.

Soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan are getting the chance to nurture their minds rather than languish in boredom by listening to audio recordings of books on their new Playaway, thanks to a grant of \$4.6 million in early 2008 from the DoD to members of all Services in OIF/OEF (Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom).



Three Soldiers at U.S. Army Garrison Ansbach library enjoy the opportunity to listen to a Playaway.

This amount boosts the current Army supplemental funding of \$1.3 million used by Army Library Programs to supply Playaways to deployed Soldiers from January through September 2008.

“The Playaways are self-contained audiobooks with a set of ear buds and extra batteries, and packaged in small eco-friendly boxes,” said Steve Brown, Acquisitions Librarian for Family and Morale, Welfare and Recreation Library Programs.

This combined effort by DoD and the Army provides more than 500 boxes of Playaways per month to Army, Navy, Air Force, Coast Guard, National Guard service members stationed in Iraq and Afghanistan.



A Soldier listens to the “Count of Monte Cristo” on a Playaway.

This imaginative and cooperative effort between government and the private sector to provide reading to deployed troops goes back to World War II.

In “Books in Action: The Armed Services Editions,” edited by John Y. Cole, executive director for the Center for the Book at the Library of Congress, the idea of producing low-cost books that could fit into fatigue pockets was developed in 1942 by Ray L. Trautman, a young Army officer who headed the Library Section. (See Sidebar)

A Soldier listens to the “Count of Monte Cristo” on a Playaway. The same cooperation and imagination has gone into the Playaways.

The U.S. Army Library Program purchased its first Playaway in April of 2007, using NAF funding under GWOT (Global War on Terrorism). This program was expanded to include over 125 deployed units worldwide, each receiving a monthly delivery of Playaways for recreational and educational use. Within the

first year of the program, the U.S. Navy and Air Force also introduced similar programs.

Thanks to the direction of a Lean Six Sigma Project, the DoD invited librarians from all the services to tell them what products would be good to buy in order to save money on a large scale. They wanted to demonstrate that the military can save money by buying for all the services.

“Up to this point, we had been saving 20% on purchases for the Army. When Playaways were purchased for the Joint Services through this program, 25% was saved,” Brown said.



A Soldier learns the Arabic language while listening on a Playaway.

In April of 2008, the DoD consolidated these programs into a single IDIQ (Indefinite Delivery/Indefinite Quantity) contract. This contract expires in April 2009, but has four one-year renewal options. To date, \$2.2 million has been spent against this contract. Individual branches of the U.S. Armed Forces, including the U.S. Army, continue to make additional purchases outside of the IDIQ contract for other military programs.

For example, besides supplying Playaways to warriors downrange, FMWRC has funded the purchase of Playaway units to be distributed to families of service men and women through Army One Source.

Soldiers living in persistent conflict are grateful.

“I’m a librarian in my other life,” wrote Virginia Sanchez in Afghanistan this past summer, “so I have used Playaways...before. They are awesome!”

In a letter dated 2 July 2008, Sanchez described what life is like in Iraq.

“The stress of living in a combat zone impacts people, differently. Some can’t sleep, many can’t concentrate, but while the readers flock to the library to read paperback books when they can, it’s been great having an option for those who aren’t natural readers, or who have trouble concentrating.”

At many bases in CONUS, library staff has given their time and effort to make sure the Soldiers get a book or Playaway for the trip overseas.

“The staff at Fort Campbell, no matter what time of the morning or night, goes out to the planes to hand out paperback books, and more recently Playaways, to Soldiers – something they’ve been doing since early 2003 when the 101st Airborne were the first to leave for Kuwait and Iraq,” said Brown.

The tapes come 24 to a box, and so far, 24 new titles are offered each month, “almost as fast as they’re being published,” said Brown. Soldiers can learn the “10 Secrets for Success and Inner Peace,” hear James Earl Jones resounding voice illustrate “The Bible – New Testament,” or take a trip to Afghanistan’s final monarchy days in the “The Kite Runner,” among hundreds of other tapes.

A Soldier learns the Arabic language while listening on a Playaway.

“We are a small 65-Soldier outpost and just received a box of 24 Playaway tapes...a huge hit, here,” said 1st Sgt. Devin Gallagher, 82nd Airborne. “It’s tough to keep these guys occupied in their spare time because of our restrictions, but the Playaway really helps them cope with the day-to-day monotony out here.”

The portability of the Playaways makes them ideal for Soldiers already carrying a full combat load. The players are frequently passed from Soldier to Soldier.

An Army medic in Iraq described how excited Soldiers are about the tapes.

“I was filling up the ambulance when a convoy entered the base. I was happy to hand them some of the Playaways which I was carrying around, and they immediately got busy looking at the books like children looking at colorful candy. Too bad I didn’t have a camera. It would have made you proud of the work you and your partners are doing. We need you,” he said in a letter to FMWRC (Family and Morale, Welfare and Recreation Command).

During World War II, Soldiers benefitted from imaginative partnerships between the government and private sector by getting the chance to read and enrich the mind. Sixty years later, this same cooperation and imagination have given us the Playaway.

“I ran into one unexpected issue with the Playaways,” said Master Sgt. Keith Brown, 10th Mountain Division. They were gone as soon as I opened the boxes and put the word out. Instead of the 75 Soldiers I estimated would enjoy the audiobooks, the entire HQ building became interested, so we need enough for 600 personnel. I know that’s a lot, but would you be able to increase our amount to at least 12 boxes?”