

Bonds that endure

USAREUR honors Kontakt's ongoing efforts to nurture German-American friendship

Story and photos by Karl Weisel
104th Area Support Group Public Affairs
Office

At a time when German-American relations may sometimes appear strained at the highest levels of government, members of a group of volunteers have dedicated themselves to encouraging friendship and cultural understanding at the grassroots level.

U.S. Army Europe and German civilian leaders met with representatives of more than 20 Kontakt clubs in Berlin May 25 to acknowledge this four-decade long effort and to celebrate outstanding achievement in making a very real difference in mutual awareness and understanding.

"There is no question about our close ties," said Lt. Gen. William E. Ward, USAREUR's deputy commander, during the awards ceremony and reception. "As a nation Germany has been an exceptionally hospitable host.

"Without Kontakt, Americans wouldn't have as good an understanding of Germans and their culture," he said, adding that Ger-

mans, too, benefit from this window into each other's cultures. "Kontakt members serve as real role models for tolerance and acceptance. ... You open the doors to your homes, businesses and lifestyles, and truly touch our hearts. ... Through Kontakt we bridge our social and cultural differences."

USAREUR's deputy commander acknowledged the years of strong German-American ties encompassing the Berlin Airlift in 1948, steadfastness at the Fulda Gap during the Cold War, the Balkan peacekeeping mission and German support of U.S. military families during American deployments to Afghanistan and Iraq.

"Since the closing days of World War II, Germans and Americans have lived here together. ... In 1989, together we watched the fall of the Berlin Wall. ... German and American Soldiers have trained together for years."

Quoting former Fulda Mayor Alois Rhiel, Ward added, "Despite our political differences, we stand together."

Berlin was selected as the site for Kontakt's annual workshop and awards ceremony (it

was postponed for a year at the start of Operation Iraqi Freedom), because despite the absence of a U.S. military presence in the German capital for the past decade, the Berlin Kontakt Club has continued to thrive. Berlin received Kontakt's Outstanding Civilian Service Award in Fulda in November 2002 after that city played host for receiving similar recognition the year before for ongoing efforts to maintain close German-American ties following the drawdown of forces there.

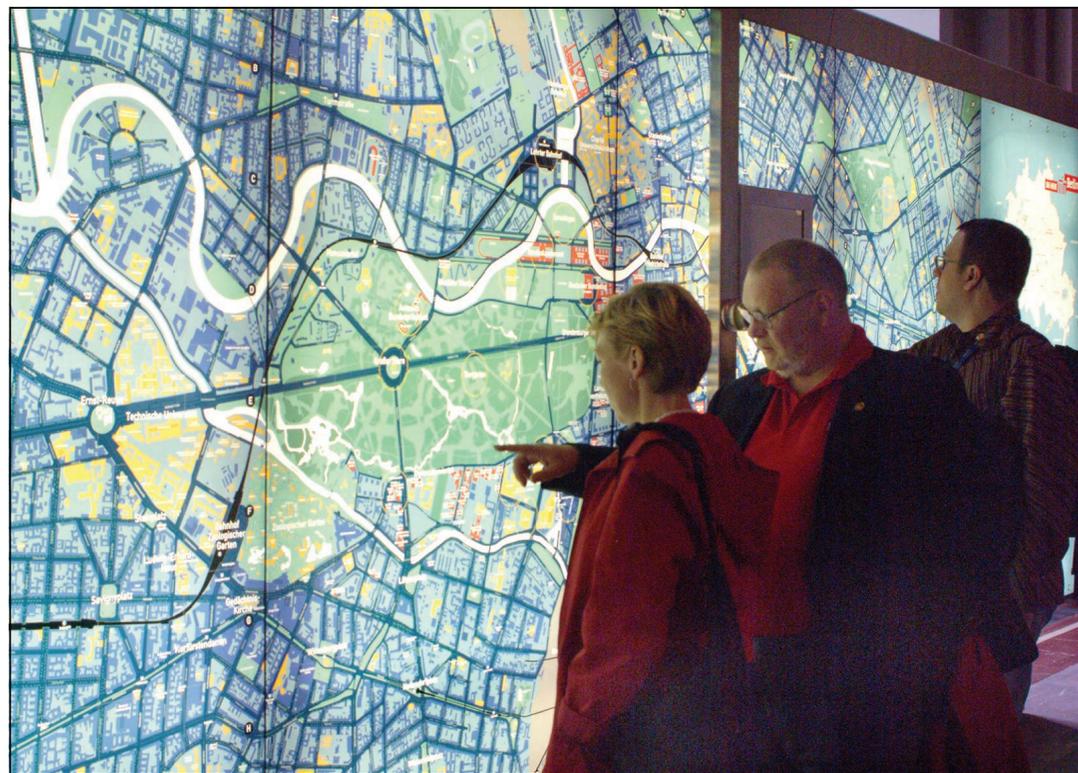
"The United States remains the country that brought us freedom and democracy," said Mayor Herbert Weber, mayor of the Steglitz and Zehlendorf sections of Berlin — the part of Berlin where members of the Berlin military community were stationed during the Cold War years. "You helped build a state where human dignity is the standard by which all else is valued.

Berlin Blockade

"We, especially in Berlin, had the opportunity to experience how in the postwar years the American occupiers became our friends, how you helped us rebuild our devastated land, showed us the way to democracy and led us back to the community of nations," said Weber, speaking on behalf of Berlin's Lord Mayor Klaus Wowereit and the Berlin Senate. "A few days ago, on May 12, we commemorated the end of the Berlin Blockade 55 years ago and our thoughts were and still remain with those Americans who helped West Berliners survive by establishing the legendary Berlin Airlift. That was an exemplary act of friendship we will never forget.

"The Kontakt groups throughout Germany remain a stable and dependable guarantee of a close friendship between Germans and Americans — bridge-builders in the best sense of the word," he added.

Rather than remaining a stagnant program, Kontakt has continued to evolve with the times. With the current makeup of the U.S. military — many more married Soldiers with families than when the program began in the



USAREUR officials and Kontakt members examine a map of Berlin during a tour of the "Rotes Rathaus," Berlin's city hall. The seat of government for the city was installed in the former East Berlin landmark after the two halves were reunited. Tour guide Jobst von Kirchbach, public relations officer for the city of Berlin, said, "I was born in West Berlin and never would have dreamt that one day I would be working in the eastern side of the city."

early 1960s, greater opportunities for younger Germans to improve their English-language skills and learn about the United States through other means, Kontakt has changed to meet different needs, said leaders of the Bundes Verband für Internationales Kontakt Gruppen, the umbrella organization that supports Kontakt clubs.

"In some communities where there are Army installations with more Soldiers deployed, the Kontakt groups may concentrate more on families, and in particular on kids," said Ingrid Roux, second chairperson of the B.I.K.

In other communities, such as Fulda, where the Army has long ceased to have a presence, Kontakt is surprisingly stronger than ever with hundreds of members, she said.

Founded originally as an alternative to the incidents of friction between young American Soldiers and Germans in the 1960s, the focus was on building relationships, increasing awareness about one another's cultural backgrounds and improving language skills. "Nowadays most of the younger people come and go, while the older people stay involved in Kontakt," said Jimmie Thomas, American president of B.I.K., who has been involved with Kontakt since first joining the club in 1973.

Greater family focus

While the focus hasn't changed dramatically, Kontakt's nuanced agenda has expanded to include many more family oriented events, support of Soldiers and families while units deploy, corporate sponsorship and greater interaction between the various clubs.

When Christel Kliesch, German president of B.I.K., took over as Kontakt coordinator of the Amberg Kontakt Club in 1981, she said, among the many activities enjoyed by German and American members was support of Soldiers on border duty and partnership shooting events leading to prestigious marksmanship badges. "Amberg was a small post and we had a very active club. During inprocessing we would tell Soldiers about the club.

"We took care of Soldiers on border duty.

We used to bring them Christmas cookies and cheer. We'd take a bus out with German members and sing Christmas songs," said Kliesch.

Helping Soldiers earn the Schützenschnur marksmanship badge was a popular effort of the club, she said.

Kliesch said she joined the Vilseck Kontakt Club when the Amberg military community closed in 1992.

"Now with the troops being deployed in many areas, those clubs are doing more to support Soldiers and their families," she said. "More families are getting involved with Kontakt. It helps make the newcomer families feel more at ease in Germany."

Jennifer Luley, vice president of the Giessen Kontakt Club, was honored this year with an individual achievement award for outstanding support, which included helping organize a Christmas package program for single Soldiers in Iraq.

"I went to different companies, got contacts and email addresses," said Luley, whose husband was deployed with the 527th Military Police Company from March 2003 through February 2004. "We sent the packages and

asked company sergeants to pass them out. We got letters and thank-yous — they were really gracious."

Luley, who has been with the club for a couple of years since arriving in Giessen, recommended it as a great orientation to Germany. "It's an excellent organization. If people need support or a second family, Kontakt's a good way to get to know their community and meet new people."

"The Kontakt club was like a family for me," said Giessen Kontakt's Mike Nolan who first got to know about the organization as a young Soldier stationed in Darmstadt. "The club always got me away from the barracks and I got to see the German culture. When I came back to Germany in 1989 I expected to find that sense of family again in Kontakt."

Helping newcomers become oriented to their new home in Germany is a vital part of the Kontakt experience for Elizabeth Jones, vice

president of the Grafenwöhr Kontakt Club. "A lot of people come over to Germany and don't know how to read their bills, how to get a telephone and so forth. They get so frustrated," Jones said. "When we get them into Kontakt they see that not only do we help them, but they have a lot of fun too."

Interaction with other community organizations such as the Better Opportunities for Single Soldiers program, the library and bowling alley are all ways Grafenwöhr's club stays fresh and remains an important part of the community, Jones said. "We have about 200 members, military and civilians."

"It keeps me young," said 74-year-old Walter Brunner, a member of the Grafenwöhr Kontakt Club for the past 11 years. "I like the American friendships and the contacts we've maintained. We've had many friends home and we keep in touch through email."

Brunner said he first discovered the club when attending a German-American Fest in Grafenwöhr on July 4 where Kontakt members sold coffee and cake. He's been an active member ever since. "I do it with love and joy," he said.

New family of friends

For Wiesbaden Kontakt's Wilhemine Aufmkolk, a German member from Gross-Gerau, joining the club has meant finding a new family of friends and helping injured Soldiers at the Landstuhl Army Hospital. "My husband and I were very impressed and welcomed as family," she said, upon joining the club last year. "It's a good opportunity to make friends. I think the Americans did a lot for us and we should give something back.

"You get to meet a variety of nationalities in the club and strike up friendships for life. ... When people make personal contacts they discover that they aren't so different and share many similarities," said Aufmkolk.

Working with the club, the Wiesbaden Kontakt secretary has been instrumental in collecting backpacks, items of clothing and Easter goodies that they have distributed to recovering Soldiers at the Landstuhl hospital. "Many of them arrive without any clothes to travel home in or a backpack, so that's why we decided to help the Soldiers Angel Foundation," she said.

A love of the United States and many visits to the country were the drawing cards for Karl-Heinz Vogeler's long-time association with the Berlin Kontakt Club. A member since 1982, the Berlin club president said his group has dwindled from a membership of 300 in its heyday to a stable group of about 30 members today. "We hope that when the U.S. Embassy is finished (the new embassy is set to begin construction soon), we'll have

more opportunities to attract new members," said Vogeler. "The interest is not as great as when the Americans were stationed here."

Despite fewer members in the club and only three Americans, Vogeler said, the group continues to enjoy a wealth of activities. "We've had other Kontakt groups come to Berlin and we've given them tours. We can take them to places that they might not normally see during a regular city tour.

"When the Wall came down, three days later we had a former DDR (East German) citizen join the club. We were glad to introduce the Americans to their 'former enemy,'" he said.

"Ronald Reagan is also an honorary member of Berlin Kontakt," said Vogeler. The former president was welcomed into the club during a visit to the city in 1980.

"You have to adapt to a different environment or you die as a club," said Gerhard Berganer, president of the Erlangen Kontakt Club. "There are some former military in Erlangen, but most of our members are now students. It's a young club."

Joining forces with clubs in Illesheim and Bad Windsbach has meant expanding opportunities for Erlangen club members, Berganer said.

Meanwhile in Darmstadt, thanks to the efforts of 28-year member Eva Maldonado and other dedicated volunteers, the club continues to feature a multifarious mix of recreational, cultural and host nation support activities. Besides regular canoe trips to the Black Forest, bowling get-togethers and more, Darmstadt Kontakt heads to the Black Forest town of Bonndorf every Halloween to share the holiday with local German youngsters. "There's something about bringing young kids and Soldiers together that puts a smile on everybody's face," said Maldonado. "The first time we went to the elementary school, the students had never seen Halloween." Now it has become a tradition with other Kontakt groups expressing an interest in taking part.

"One can't give up. If one thing doesn't work out, you've got to try something else," said Kliesch, the German B.I.K. president. "I think we have to keep it alive as an organization at the grassroots level especially where you can involve young people who come to this country to give them a chance to get to know the country. ... There's an awful lot of history here, and America is still a young country. ... It's important for Kontakt to be visible and to verify that Germans are people just like you.

Federal recognition

"What we're doing in B.I.K. is looking at expanding our approach. There will always be Americans in Germany," said Kliesch. "We want to get federal recognition. Right now we have an application with the state of Hessen. ... If we can get recognition at the federal level as the German-American organization for all of Germany I think it will attract more Americans."

"The U.S. Army Europe is truly appreciative of countries ... that share our common values," said USAREUR's deputy commander, stressing that he would do everything possible to ensure continued access for host nation members to U.S. military installations to participate in Kontakt events.

For more information about Kontakt clubs in your area call your local Public Affairs Office or visit the B.I.K. home page at www.biknet.de.



Evelyn Zierer, president of Wiesbaden Kontakt, participates in a session during the 20th annual USAREUR Kontakt Training Conference and Awards Ceremony in Berlin.

U.S. Army Europe Kontakt award winners

Group awards

High Achievement in Community Action — Kontakt Vilseck

High Achievement in Group and District Development — Kontakt Grafenwöhr

High Achievement in Education — Kontakt Wiesbaden

High Achievement in Public Relations and Marketing — Kontakt Fulda

High Achievement in Publications — Kontakt Wiesbaden

High Achievement in Internet Presence — Kontakt Fulda

High Achievement in Funds and Fundraising — Kontakt Darmstadt

High Achievement in Special Events and Programs — Kontakt Berlin

The following Kontakt members were recognized for outstanding, support and dedication:

Individual awards

Kontakt Berlin — Peter Seyfried, Petra Gill-Butterling, Hans-Günter Lambrecht, Karl-Heinz Vogeler, Harald Schmadtke, Irmgard Hiege;

Kontakt Heidelberg — Ulf and Charlotte Johansen

Kontakt Hohenfels — Karin Renner, Patty Boraas, Hollis Smith, Norbert Wittl, Heidi Stadlmeier, Amanda Voegerl;

Kontakt Karlsruhe — Steven and Christa Miller;

Kontakt Giessen — Jennifer Luley;

Kontakt Darmstadt — Eva Maldonado, Christoph Romahn, William Sturgis,

Annelore Spengler, Mark Edgeington;

Kontakt Illesheim — Christina Burek;

Kontakt Wiesbaden — Alexandra Schultes, Ingo Rhiel, Sassan Assefi;

Kontakt Fulda — Markus Hackel;

Kontakt Vilseck — Tanja Mertmann;

Kontakt Grafenwöhr — Wolfgang Glowania, Anni and Walter Brunner, Birgit Voit, Elizabeth Jones, Andria Sterkl.

The following non-Kontakt members were honored for outstanding support:

Non-member awards

Kerstin Jäger, Peter Kauschke, Uschi Schlecht, Harro Fischer, Gerd Von Brandenstein, Petra and Peter Jakob and Sandro Schmitt.

"Kontakt members serve as real role models for tolerance and acceptance. ... You open the doors to your homes, businesses and lifestyles, and truly touch our hearts."