



PHOTOS BY GARY COSBY JR./AP

**Right: U.S. Army staff sergeant Geoffrey Allison sits in his home workshop on Redstone Arsenal in Huntsville, Ala. and explains how he makes the instruments he likes to refer to as fiddles. Allison made several of the instruments during a 13 month tour in Iraq.**

**Above: Three finger planes lie on a workbench next to the unfinished neck of a violin in Staff Sergeant Geoffrey Allison's home. Allison builds his violins by hand using the same techniques as the old masters.**



# Fiddle me this, fiddle me that

## An Army Staff Sgt. has developed a passion for violinmaking

**Like anyone who goes to war**, Staff Sgt. Geoffrey Allison worried about making it home alive. But the Army medic also found a sense of urgency in Iraq that drove him to work harder and faster than ever before.

As bombs exploded and the ground shook around him, Allison carved and shaped violins. He couldn't block out the violence or the death around him (his job was tending to the sick and the wounded), but it gave him a newfound focus.

"It became more serious," says Allison, a talkative

man with glasses and a crew cut. "I thought, 'Hey, I'm in combat. These could be the last fiddles I ever make in my life. I'm going to make them really count this time.' That was my attitude — take it to a different level of seriousness."

Allison, 40, is a self-taught luthier in the tradition of Stradivari and the other 17th and 18th century Italian craftsmen who set the standard for violinmaking.

Now stationed at the Redstone Arsenal outside Huntsville and nearing retirement, he's begun turning his passion into profession.

He's already sold some of his violins, and with his military pension he plans to support himself as a violinmaker when he retires from the Army next spring.

In the meantime, he's converted his kitchen into a workshop where he spends at least five or six hours a night. It's an inviting space that smells of spruce and maple. A half-dozen violins and violas dangle from wires above his workbench. An assortment of hand tools — planes, gouges, chisels, knives, rasps — are neatly organized.

He works from photos and blueprints of 17th and 18th century masterpieces. The son of a concert violinist, he comes across as a meticulous man who loses himself talking about the merits of a particular wood or tool.

"See here," he says clutching a large piece of wood, "I've got this wood and piles of it back here. It's cello wood. This board alone costs \$700. I'm just dying to make cellos. It's probably the most beautiful instrument, maybe even surpassing the violin. When you hear a cello play, you know that's a cello. It's got a rich, deep sound."

He does most everything by hand and with the same materials the masters used 400 years ago. He believes every violin has a soul — not an original thought, he allows, but one that guides his work nonetheless.

Fred Carpenter, a touring violin player and owner of The Violin Shop in Nashville, Tenn., where Allison sells some of his instruments, says the soldier's craftsmanship is remarkable.

"Most people who don't have some kind of profes-

sional luthier guidance don't end up with anything near the success he's had," Carpenter says.

"You can tell he loves what he does in the way his instruments end up. Some makers have an absolute form they follow to the letter, to the T. I think Geoffrey likes to get outside the box a little. Not so far that he doesn't comply with standard measurements to qualify as a legitimate instrument, but he's not afraid to try something."

He didn't think of trying to build a violin until after he'd joined the Army to get money for college. While taking a music class he saw a program called "The Great Violin Mystery."

"I said, 'That's it. I'm going back into the Army and buy these tools wherever they are in the world and hopefully get back to Europe and become a violin maker.'"

The Army sent him to South Korea instead of Europe, but his path was set and he didn't stray. When he was deployed to Sinjar, Iraq, near the Syrian border in January 2006, he figured he wouldn't have much time for his hobby and toted only enough wood to make a couple of violins.

But he had more downtime than he'd expected and within a few months had to order another batch of wood from a U.S. supplier.

He shifted to Ramadi where the violence was more intense, and when he finished his 13-month tour in February, he had six nearly completed instruments.

"I didn't need any modern conveniences. I didn't need any electricity at all. There was just barely enough light coming through the sandbags of our bunker-type dwelling in Sinjar where I could see."

After leaving Iraq, Allison mustered the nerve to call on Roger Hargrave, a world-renowned violin maker in Germany. Hargrave was skeptical at first but intrigued by Allison's story and agreed to see his work. Since their meeting, the master has publicly praised Allison's violins and encouraged him to continue.

Back in Alabama, Allison is doing just that. He says his craft isn't so much about talent as it is about patience, and he has plenty of that.

"Once I finish a violin, I pretty much lose all interest in it. There's nothing more to do. It's done. It's getting there that's so much fun."



**U.S. Army staff sergeant Geoffrey Allison uses a finger plane to shape a contour in the face piece of one of the violins he has in progress**