

CANADIAN PEACEKEEPERS IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Craig Silverman

"We need action not only to end the fighting, but to make the peace," said then Secretary of State for External Affairs Lester B. Pearson in 1956, as he first committed Canada to an active role in peacekeeping, a concept he so famously originated. Soon after, a multinational force under the auspices of the United Nations moved in to end the Suez Canal crisis of that year.

Pearson would earn a Nobel Peace Prize for his vision of peacekeeping soldiers, and Canada would become a world leader in peacekeeping, having sent an estimated 125,000 personnel to take part in UN missions to date. Canada has committed more of our troops to peacekeeping than any other nation in the world. An estimated 107 soldiers have died while servicing the interests of peace and stability. Today, Canadian soldiers are serving in peacekeeping missions in Sierra Leone, the Golan Heights, Cyprus, Haiti, Afghanistan, the Arabian Gulf and many other places around the world.

Pacekeeping has become inextricably linked to our national identity and role in the world. As the debate over funding and the role of the Canadian Forces rages in this country, our troops continue to head overseas to serve in countries torn apart by conflict or in disputed territories that rely upon peacekeepers to maintain order.

To put a human face to these missions, *The NewCanadian Magazine* spoke with three Canadian peacekeepers about their experiences. Here, in their own words, are their stories.

Leading Seaman Randy Simmons, Naval Combat Information Officer, 24 years old

I first became involved with the military at 12 years of age in the Air Cadets because I wanted to be a fighter pilot. If it weren't for the Air Cadets, I wouldn't be alive today. I was a kid who kept getting into trouble, who needed some direction, and the military offered it. It kept me out of trouble, taught me leadership skills, to be on time, be positive, and it reaffirmed my love for Canada and my community. At times, I put more effort into cadets than into school.

When I first applied for the military, it was for the reserves. I had been involved with the military since I was 12 and I knew

the game. So, when I was 20 years old, and had the choice to either go to university or join the military, I joined.

In the Air Cadets, we were always on the water and around ships. I've always been in love with water. One of my great-uncles was a fisherman in the Caribbean and used to take me on the water a lot, so that's where it comes from.

After basic training, I was flown to B.C. and got my first exposure to navy life. I learned the ins and outs of my job as a Naval Combat Information Operator. In that role, I operate the radar we have on board to keep an eye on the air surface and subsurface of the ship. When we are on watch, there are six of us doing this job. I had many trades to choose from, but this was the only one that interested me. It sounded really important, especially on a warship.

I was posted to HMCS *Toronto* on October 11, 2000, and the next day we sailed for St. John's, Newfoundland. Then I was posted

to HMCS *Devangar* in July 2001 in Norway as part of a NATO fleet. I was working with other nations' navies, like the British, Spanish and Norwegians. It was exciting. I spent two months with them in non-stop exercises. From the minute you were on watch for the remaining five hours straight, there would be something happening.

In August 2001, I came back my ship. I was on leave in Toronto when September 11 happened. I was waiting for a phone



call to report to the nearest base or unit. As soon as I got back to my ship in Halifax, we got the full scale of the situation and what would happen next. We were ship number four to sail out of Halifax after September 11 in support of the war on terrorism.

Right now, I am in the Arabian Sea. We are on patrol working with Americans and other nations. I am a member of the naval boarding party. Our job is to inspect any vessels of interest that might be smuggling drugs, weapons or terrorist members. We have inspected 105 so far this time around. Depending on the type of vessel, it can take from 30 minutes to three hours. What we have found mostly has been drugs, but we are also gathering information and intelligence.

I feel I am making a difference and gaining tons of life experience. I've seen places I didn't know existed before I joined. Being over here in this region has been one of best experiences of my life because I've learned a lot about different cultures—and that's one thing I appreciate. So far we have been to Malta, Sicily, and the United Arab Emirates twice.

Our shifts are five hours on and five hours off. Some days you don't get enough sleep. But you need to know your job, do your job, do it well and watch out for each other. We are all here for a purpose.

I'm not sure if this will be a career or not. There are other things I'd like to do in life, but I'm having a blast so far, with very few regrets. My current contract is up in January 2006, so I will decide sometime between now and then.

Captain Pascale Cloutier, Air Force Pilot, 35 years old

Flying is a lot of fun, period. When I was flying as a teenager I was like, "Okay I don't have money and my dad will never buy me the planes I want. So it's either you pay for yourself or join the military." So I joined the reserves and spent three years in that. Then I transferred into the regular services in December 1996.

To be a pilot, you need to be in perfect physical condition. They measure you to see if you are too small or too tall, in perfect health, and then you go through testing and a simulator. I was accepted at a recruiting centre, and then went for a more advanced medical and a written test.



The military is like a big machine or a big company, if you will. Every mission is so different. In commercial aviation you have to make money. In the military, the mission is the most important thing. It's a different perspective. The amount of people needed to do the same job is more in the military, but when you deploy you understand why so many people are needed.

In the reserves, we were more involved in the transportation of

people to different bases and supporting the RCMP in hunting for drugs. In the regular services, I was transferred to Bagotville, Quebec, to fly search and rescue missions. I always wanted to fly those. It is one of the most interesting jobs I've ever done.

You go rescue someone who just crashed or lost his kayak in a river, or somebody who got burned while hunting. I spent three years in Bagotville and a year-and-a-half in Goose Bay, Labrador.

In December 2001, I was sent to Bosnia-Herzegovina as part of the NATO Stabilization Force. When you are there, you feel how big NATO is. It's huge. There's so much equipment, and the number of countries there... it's much more involved than I ever realized. You read it on paper, but it was much bigger than I thought.

The security was really high compared to what we were used to in Canada. I'm in the military and am used to guns—but not used to having one on me every day.

The country was stable at the time when I was there. In a certain sense, I was really lucky. It is never fun to be shot at.

It was hard to get out of the military camp and meet people. I went to a school once and got to sit down with people and talk to them. It was really kind of tough because you don't know them—it is a very tough political situation and we are in uniform. They went through a lot of stuff and we are still military to them, even though we are there to help.

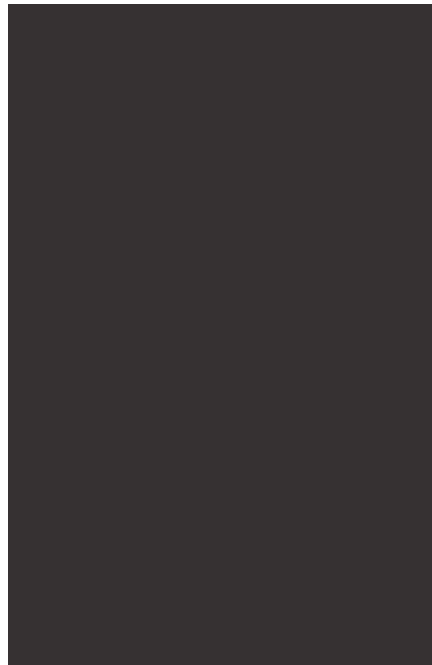
Some of the soldiers made furniture for the kids in the school, some were sending clothes and others built a bed for newborn baby. Those are some of the little things we tried to do. But since I was flying so much, it was hard to do those things.

I think I never realized until I went there how much Canada is involved in peacekeeping missions. Now I realize. Before I went, I was in my little world and I never looked around. It was an eye-opener.

I think peacekeeping is a truly Canadian thing—it is not just the military. We can't look at peacekeeping only as a military effort.

Major Ron MacEachern, Army Infantry, 40 years old

I just came back from Kabul in February. We were sent there to provide peace and security so the interim government could function and do its job. Most of what we were doing was relationship building and sharing information so that both we and the



civilian forces knew what each other was doing.

We also do things that help the peace process. You can go hunt down the bad guys, and that does a certain amount of good. But it's not everything you need to do in order to return the country to a peaceful and secure environment.

In Afghanistan, they are very proud people and have families to feed and take care of. If someone comes up to them and says, "I'll pay you



US\$1,000 if you shoot a rocket into the centre of the city three times over the next year," they will take it in order to live.

We needed to enable them to make informed choices; we needed to make sure people's basic needs were met. So our priorities were education and health. We provided water and made sure the children had access to education and health care so they could get back on the road and do good. Afghani people, like any who have gone through 23 years of war, have had enough and want nothing more than to return to where their country was.

Those of us with NATO were actually well received by the people. It's a question of people getting to know each other. They have to see us and realize we are professionals who are there for them, and not as a force of occupation. We have to be like a brother who knows when to help out, and also like a very good guest who knows when it is time to leave.

Kabul was my third peacekeeping mission. I was first sent to Croatia, which was then known as Yugoslavia, in April 1992. That was the first time the UN had gone in, and the war had not happened yet. Sarajevo was still a functioning, viable city. In the summer, we went in to open up the airport so UN aid flights could come in. Our battalion was in the north, in Daruvar, and we were selected because we were the best-equipped battalion in the country. It was a multinational force and we were the only Canadians.

This mission was the first of its kind because there was no peace to keep. There wasn't a line with one side on one end and another on the other. There wasn't a will for peace. In classical peacekeeping, you have two very easily identifiable people who want peace and request the UN to come in. Here you didn't have that—you were wading into the middle of a civil conflict.

We had 900 people and a very large number of vehicles. The Serbs were in control of the airport, and there was an agreement that they would withdraw. So, a small number of UN officials went to accept the handover of the airport. Basically, 10 to 15 staff officers took over the airport and were waiting for us to secure it, which is why we had to get there in a hurry.

I was responsible for the reconnaissance for the group and was travelling in the lead vehicle. On the way there, we were stopped by a warlord who said we could not pass. He was very, very drunk at the time, so we turned around a significant number of vehicles, went back 10 or 20 km and slept on the road. When I say we slept on the road, I mean that literally: We couldn't go off the road for fear of mines.

In the morning, I spoke with the locals. They knew we were coming and were to be let through. We went to a barrier and talked with local Serb soldiers for 45 minutes in a friendly exchange. That's when the warlord from the night before appeared again. He was more sober, but no less angry. Our battalion commander talked with him for 45 minutes—and then, at that point, it became an armed standoff. He was pointing weapons at us and we were pointing weapons at him, with only about 10 feet between us. We eventually secured our passage. That was Canada Day 1992.

From then on, it was pretty good. Shots were fired at us at a fairly regular occurrence, but you only tend to remember the ones that are really close.

At the airport, I woke up the first morning and was told to go help a Belgian guy. I walked over and he said he was the Commandant of the airport and I would be his second-in-command. I didn't know anything about airports.

In August, three different battalions from France, Egypt and the Ukraine replaced the Canadians. I stayed on to work with them and then did a separate mission in the same country. I was there for 13 months, which is almost impossible to do now.

The UN had not really seen peacekeeping of that type before and it wasn't prepared. But, more and more, that's the type of thing we are seeing now. It is the kind of thing where you can really make a difference to help the peace along. At the end of the day, I want to be able to say I helped someone out, to say we have made a difference. That's definitely something we did on last three peacekeeping missions I was on. If it weren't for us, the world would be worse off.