

Local family remembers son's deployment to Afghanistan

By Chris Drost

The mission

When Canada sent troops to Afghanistan between 2001 and 2014, it was the largest military deployment for Canada since the Second World War. So now, on Remembrance Day, our thoughts turn to those who participated in the effort, and those families who waited patiently at home.

The Afghanistan operation was part of the NATO International Security Assistance Force that sprang into effect following the Sept. 11, 2001 attack by terrorists in the United States. The goal was to help build Afghanistan into a viable country with better governance, a stable and safe place, rather than a haven for terrorists. More than 40,000 Canadians served between 2001 and 2014.

During the time that Canadian troops spent in Afghanistan they assisted in improving diplomacy, human rights and development. During those years, 158 Canadians died, plus a further 22 in non-combat roles.

In 2021, after 20 years, the Islamic Republic was overthrown and the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan was re-established under the Taliban.

The family remembers

For local family, Cameron and Sharon McKenzie of Cardiff, the period during which their son Pete was deployed to Afghanistan, was a difficult one.

"We expected it," is what Pete's father, Cameron, had to say when asked what his reaction was when his son told him he was being deployed to Afghanistan. Pete had been in the military for about a year and a half at the time. He was deployed in October 2008 and returned home in late July 2009. He served in a support role as a communications specialist in the Canadian Forces Joint Signals Regiment in Kandahar.

When the time came for Pete to deploy, his father remembers first going to Kingston where his son lived, to see him off onto a bus that travelled to Trenton for his flight. "After the bus left, we went to Trenton and sat at the end of the runway until his flight took off," explains Cameron, with obvious emotion.

"Even though Pete was a signals operator, working with radio and computer stuff, there was no where to be safe as there were random attacks on an ongoing basis. Everyone stationed there, even in support roles, had to be armed at all times," says Cameron.

"It was a war in our living rooms. During the Second World War troops had to rely on letters to communicate with family. We were able to talk with Pete about once a month, and he spoke to his wife and children every couple of weeks," Cameron adds. Soldiers were assigned a slot when they could phone home.

At Christmas 2008, Pete was home for a visit but was expected to return overseas on Christmas Day. According to Cameron, it happened that there was a major snowstorm in Toronto and the airport was shut down. "There were 40,000 disappointed travellers in Toronto and one very happy one in Kingston, whose flight to Toronto was cancelled. Pete got to stay for an extra day."

When Pete was serving in Kandahar, Cameron and family made the decision not to tell Pete's grandmother that he had been sent to Afghanistan. "She was living in a home and was such a worrier, we talked as a family and decided it would be best not to tell her." Even after Pete returned home, he did not tell his grandmother. Then, one day, a minister who used to visit his grandmother about once each month, noticed a photo in her room of Pete in uniform with his Afghanistan medal. "At that point we had to fess up, but in

the end, she agreed that it would not have been good for her to know," says Cameron.

"If a Canadian soldier was injured or worse, there would be a communications lockdown. This meant that no one could call and let someone else know about the incident until the military had an opportunity to inform the family first," explains Cameron.

With Tim Hortons opening a location in Kandahar, the Canadian troops had a little bit of Canadian culture with them. Pete especially enjoyed this as he had worked previously as a baker at the Tim Hortons in Bancroft. It was apparently popular with Canadian and troops from other countries.

"I don't think anyone would look back and say the mission wasn't valid but, unfortunately, the radicals are back in and it is the way it was before. We don't want to think we went for nothing. The other thing is that soldiers do as they are told. That is their job," says Cameron.

"I used to worry about him [Pete] travelling back and forth. He was just a rural boy. When he was young and out partying, I would tell him to just call your dad and I will come and get you. You couldn't do that when he was overseas."

"We are very proud of our soldier son. My grandson, [Pete's son], just started Army Cadets this fall in Haliburton. Cadets, the best youth program in Canada," says Cameron.

From Pete's perspective

Pete has an inside take on his deployment to Afghanistan. "People remember Afghanistan and tell me what a shame it went for nought," says Pete.

"When you do something for awhile it changes your values. Some things don't bother me that would bother others," he explains.

Pete also served in Kuwait as part of a supporting role against ISIS. "My unit was loaned to the Royal Canadian Airforce," says Pete.

On returning home from Kuwait, Pete made the decision in 2016 to leave the military. He was officially released on Nov. 7 of that year.

"It has been difficult getting back to civilian life to different degrees," says Pete. He is still residing in Cardiff but works for a company that does aviation upgrades in Peterborough. Fortunately, he returned with no lasting mental or physical issues.

"My dad got me into reading about the Second World War. I see that one of the books he gave me was signed by the last person in the North African conflict who died earlier this year.

