

Younger soldiers sometimes struggle with weighty "veteran" mantle



The image of Trooper Karine Blais struck deep in to the Canadian consciousness when she was killed by a roadside bomb in Afghanistan in 2009, aged just 21.

For many, it brought home the horrors of war and underscored the sacrifices a new generation were prepared to make for their country.

But this image was all too real for Lt. Timothy McGrath. In fact, the sight of Trooper Blais as he helped prepare for her repatriation from Afghanistan is something that sticks with him as vividly today as in 2009.

McGrath, a former member of the Queen's York Rangers, served in Afghanistan for seven months between 2008 and 2009, holding a number of positions, including within mortuary affairs.

"I had a tour with some interesting experiences," he says with typical understatement, before elaborating that these experiences ranged from observing feats of bravery which garnered the Star of Valour to, tragically, the deaths of 24 Canadian soldiers during his rotation.

Yet, McGrath is of the generation that bristles at the idea of being a veteran. "A prevailing feeling," he says, "of those men and women who served with him."

A fourth-generation service person, when McGrath hears the word "veteran" he says he naturally thinks of those men and women, many of whom are now in their tenth decade of life, who dedicated themselves to King and Country.

A "thank you" heard when he happens to be doing a coffee run wearing a uniform or any other sign of his service makes him bristle, and the reality of being a veteran in this day, and something with which he

continues to grapple.

“It was just a job,” he says, noting he still holds with great pride his oath of service to the Queen.

It's a “job” that started in his youth, serving with an Air Cadets corps in Richmond Hill. He joined the military right out of high school, serving first with the Queen's York Rangers and subsequently with the Military Police.

He served proudly as an officer for a number of years before certain medical conditions ended his career, resulting in a medical release.

“I miss it,” he says. “I miss it every day of my life. There were obviously some huge downs but, in the end, it is something I will never forget.”

His experience with Trooper Blais and other comrades who fell during his tour are equally indelible, and remain so as he continues to work through the realities of returning to civilian life “a struggle shared with so many other Afghan veterans.

“I am not sure if I ever really returned to normal life,” he says. “I came back in 2009, I was commissioned as an officer in 2010, and I think between some of the experiences in Afghanistan and the pressures of work, I was diagnosed with PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder), and I developed a drinking problem for about two years. For the first six months or so after I came back, there wasn't really an adjustment. It wasn't until about a year back when I started to realize things were different.

“The adjustment was hard for me. It has taken me about 10 years and, to this day, there are still things that bother me, sensitivities that get to me, like loud noises. I'm not big on public events, I kind of like to be in the back corner and know where all my exits are. I think it is an adjustment that never ends because those experiences never leave you. I think as Canadians we take a lot for granted.”

Part of that adjustment is getting into the mindset of being a veteran. It is a struggle he has discussed with friends who also served, he says, and they share the feeling.

“I still see my grandfather as a veteran myself,” he says. “I see myself as a soldier, but not a veteran yet. The Second World War was so different. Hundreds of thousands, millions of people died. In Afghanistan, while tragic, 158 soldiers died. That happened in an hour in World War Two.”

Perhaps underpinning this perception is the story of his grandfather, Jack Hayes, who got the measles just before he was supposed to go

into combat with his Regiment. He was the only Regiment member left behind as they marched off ? and he was ultimately the only member of his regiment to survive the conflict.

?I will never relate to something like that,? says his grandson. ?No soldier, even in Afghanistan, that can really understand that really mass damage.?

But McGrath is nevertheless willing to step up and help others understand.

As an active member of the Aurora branch of the Royal Canadian Legion, he holds a position dedicated to assisting veterans ? many of whom saw combat in the same theatre as he did, and are still equally reluctant to adopt the label.

Nevertheless, he says this acceptance of the term and the weighty mantle that comes with it might get easier over time.

?I think it is typical of a soldier,? he says. ?There is a stigma around PTSD and we don't talk about it a lot of the time, so I almost don't want to think about it. You talk about veterans groups like the Legion, who are fighting for the vets, so I'll let them fight and I have always stayed in my little corner without paying too much attention to that, but I can say the challenge going forward is, I think, current Afghan vets recognizing themselves as vets. The combat operations ended in 2014, so there were guys who were 18 or 20 years old who are in their late 20s now. They are still in the mindset that, 'I'm not a veteran either,' and they need to recognize themselves as vets.

?We need to think about [our military's] next phase. Are we going back to a peacekeeping phase? What's the military of the next generation going to look like? Could soldiers be served better? Absolutely, and I think a lot of it has to be with soldiers not truly recognizing the service they have done yet ? and that is going to come with time.?

By Brock Weir