

## Soldiers find comfort in a shared experience



By Brock Weir

It's a letter nobody should have to write, let alone receive, but Lt. Col. Dave Grebstod vividly remembers setting pen to paper. It was a letter to his mother, written on the strictest instructions it was only to be opened in the event of his death.

Having enlisted in the Canadian Armed Forces in 1996, the gunner was serving in Afghanistan in a support role with Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry in 2002 when he learned that his company was tasked to conduct a clearance operation of a mountain range just south of Kabul.

An American brigade was already operating in the area and they took several casualties, losing two Chinook helicopters and suffering the capture and execution of an American Army Ranger.

'The intelligence reports we received prior to the operation were disquieting to say the least,' said Grebstod, the keynote speaker at the Royal Canadian Legion's annual Remembrance Dinner on Saturday night.

Two companies' worth of Taliban were believed to be on the mountain and the group was told numerous casualties were to be expected during their air mobile insurgence.

'The battalion intelligence officer even went to so far as to predict the first helicopters would achieve surprise while the second helicopter would likely receive heavy fire once the enemy knew where the landing zone was,' he said. 'I am sure you can imagine my concern when I learned I was to be on the second helicopter.'

After a couple of days of briefings and drills at Bagram Air Force Base near Kabul, it was time to conduct the operation.

'The night before we left was tense, to be sure, and at the time I was single and vividly recall writing a letter to my mother to be opened in the event of my death,' he said. 'I didn't get much sleep that night and when I walked onto the airfield the next morning I was moving on pure adrenaline. The scene that unfolded was surreal. The soldiers were applying a camouflage paint without being told to do so, chaplains were offering blessings and communion to anyone who desired it. I was gobsmacked by how many underwent that right, far more than I have ever seen at a church.'

'As we started to load up the helicopters, the scene will remain forever etched in my mind: two soldiers, obviously close friends, walked up to each other, shook each other's hands, and said, 'I'll see you on the LZ.' (Landing Zone) The one and a half hour flight was both terminally long and surprisingly short, if you understand what I mean. As we neared the LZ and the engineer gave us the signal indicating that we were one minute from landing, I felt my heart pound through my chest. Finally, the helicopter touched down and we surged off the ramp of the chinook into fire positions just as we had practiced.'

'I searched around vainly in the swirling dust to find the targets'. Only to see a curtain of sand blocking my view. A minute later, the helicopter lifted off and we were ensconced in an eerie silence. No one was shooting at us. It was just quiet.'

In this case, thankfully the intelligence received was wrong and just before the Canadian Forces arrived, the Taliban 'absconded through the valley' to nearby Pakistan, leaving only a 'tiny' Taliban outpost which offered 'extremely little resistance.'

'Fast forward five months or so to the officer's mess [in Manitoba] on a Friday night,' said Grebstod, now Commanding Officer of

the Administrative Branch of the Canadian Armed Forces out of Base Borden. As was usually the case, many of us arrived after work to enjoy a few cold pops and some camaraderie. I don't know why, but for some reason discussion around the operation came up and when I related my story about writing the letter to my mother, for some inexplicable reason I burst into tears.

In retrospect, even though there was never any direct threat to my life and safety, months of tension and worry nonetheless culminated in a very emotional outburst on the prairie in Western Manitoba.

But why? Grebstod chalks it up to a feeling safe surrounded by his brothers and sisters in arms who have a shared experience, have sworn to do their duty for Queen and Country, and put their lives on the line to save each other.

Where do you find someone who won't chuckle when you jump at loud noises and who won't judge you because the sight of a cardboard box on the 401 makes you nervous? Where do you go when you no longer have a mess? If we could turn in our fears, our regrets and our nightmares and our injuries along with our kits, I am sure we would. The truth is we can't, which is why places like the Royal Canadian Legion still have a valuable role to play in supporting our Canadian Armed Forces.