

Afghan vets saluted on National Day of Honour



By Brock Weir

Stepping up to the podium on Friday afternoon, Sergeant Jason Kloos of the Queen's York Rangers did so in front of his wife, his baby, and a host of dignitaries from the police force and two levels of government to share his story.

Countless veterans from across Canada had their well-earned moments in the spotlight Canada marked the National Day of Honour, a day of tribute to members of the Canadian Armed Forces who served in Afghanistan.

Ceremonies of tribute and thanksgiving were held in venues large and small, including a small gathering at the Aurora Cenotaph. Attended by Mayor Geoffrey Dawe and members of the Ontario Command of the Royal Canadian Legion, it was a small affair; Afghan veteran Joe Macdonald, who happened to see the ceremony unfolding from the street, stopped to get a closer look, adding further poignancy to the proceedings.



Sgt. Kloos spoke at York Region's commemorations in Georgina.

Many members of Aurora's Queen's York Rangers made the trip to Georgina where York Region's main commemorations took place.

It was here, at a ceremony hosted in Sutton by the York Regional Police, attended by Newmarket-Aurora MP Lois Brown, MP Peter Van Loan, Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, and Mayors Virginia Hackson and Rob Grossi, that Kloos shared his story.

Kloos began training for Afghanistan in 2009 before deploying to the front in April 2010 as a Civilian Military Cooperation Technician. In this role, it was his job to "stabilize" areas where troops served, including the building of schools, the digging of wells and the construction of clinics. It also fell to him to meet with locals to tackle issues stemming from living in a war zone.

"After making the grade, it was time to say goodbye to my friends and family and board a plane to Kandahar Air Field," he said. "It was one of the hardest things I have ever had to do in my life. I was filled with excitement, worry, and a little fear of my own future. [My duties] gave me the ability to help a local population and gave me a sense of fulfilment and purpose. Thanks to this, I was able to focus on the positive aspects of my tour, even on my worst days."

After serving for nine months, he was able to come home that December just in time for Christmas. Greeted at Pearson International Airport by his fiancé, members of his Regiment, and by York Regional Police Inspector Gary Miner, he said he unexpectedly found he was being escorted back home by members of the YRP.

"You don't realise how much support you actually have until you come back to your childhood home and the streets are lined with officers and firefighters giving you the salute and standing at attention," said Kloos. "I am man enough to say it brought a tear to my eye at the time. I was home, but a part of me was still in Afghanistan."

"A few days later while making Christmas cookies with my mother, I realised why I didn't feel whole. I had left friends behind. Friends that wouldn't come home. Great soldiers like Larry Rudd and Alan Stewart to name a few. When I stand here today and see all of you here, I know their names and their memories will live on and be honoured. Some soldiers don't come home whole but on this day of Honour, you have shown me that these individuals will have the support they need to become whole again."

Following a moment of silence and the playing of the Last Post, a wreath was laid at a commemorative stone on behalf of Afghan veterans by Queen's York Rangers members Mason Baines and John Paul Nanowski.

Speaking at the ceremony, Van Loan highlighted the ceremonies taking place across the country, with many veterans travelling to Ottawa with their families to take part in parades before the Governor General and Prime Minister.

"This really is a day of honour, because it is not one of sadness and remembrance, but one of paying tribute to a successful mission," said Van Loan. "This service of Canadians contributing to that is just one part of a long-standing tradition going through many wars, including the 66,566 who gave their lives in World War One, and the number in excess of 40,000 who gave their lives in World War Two, and the pattern you will see within that conflicts, the Korea Conflict and many others is that of Canadians going across oceans, far, far away, not in an effort to simply defend their own shores but rather to make the world a safer place for all of humanity. That is one of Canada's proudest and greatest contributions."

Tributes were also paid by York Regional Police Chief Eric Jolliffe, who named each member of the YRP who participated in the Afghan conflict.

"As Canadians we must remember that the freedom we enjoy today, the freedom to practice our religion and culture, to speak our native language, whether it may be to be free with our opinions even when unpopular is not a gift from heaven," he said. "[Today] gives us a chance to say the struggles you have endured, the sacrifices you have made and the terrible losses you and your families have suffered were not in vein and they will not be forgotten."

Speaking after the ceremony, an emotional Ms. Brown expressed similar sentiments.

"So often we take for granted the freedom that we enjoy here in Canada and all that has allowed us to experience," she said. "When you realise that these young men have put their lives on the line to preserve freedom for us here in North America and to give freedom to other cultures, it is a deeply moving event."