

Remembrance Day reminds us of a debt that is owed

By Barry Lillie

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Remembrance Day has always been a reminder of the “what ifs” in my life. As a young boy, I learned that my grandfather had been saved from certain death during the First World War by a notepad, pen and coin that had blunted the piece of shrapnel that struck him in the chest.

He survived to father my dad, his only child.

My father served mostly in England during the Second World War, and on his return to Canada in 1943 served as a trainer at Camp Borden. His safe return allowed for my arrival a year later.

My father and grandfather were lifelong gifts that kept on giving decades after their passing and their legacy remains an essential part of our family’s journey.

Too many families from my generation have had those gifts of love and support cut short because the what-ifs went the wrong way, and that blunted shrapnel instead struck a fatal blow and a son or husband never made it home.

This past week the Taliban reminded Canadians of the ultimate sacrifice made by 158 Canadian soldiers in Afghanistan with the tragic death of Master Cpl. Byron Greff from a suicide attack. The so-called “safe” Canadian mission had suffered our first casualty.

Master Cpl. Greff had recently become a father again.

Preventing long interruption or permanent loss of parenting has been a passion of mine for the last 20 years when I had to deal with that possibility following a separation. The thread connecting my father, Master Cpl. Greff and every other military family — past, present and future — is the impact that service to their country has on their family life.

The impact ranges from months and years of interrupted or absent parenting, to the constant risk or actual loss of a partner or parent and to the permanent physical or emotional damage from service on different fronts — outcomes that in the past were poorly cared for and, even today, are not always understood or supported with the

necessary resources. Intimate relationships are not always sustainable with a lifestyle that makes unique demands on all family members.

Recently, I was invited to a Family Resource Centre For Military Families. The executive director knew of our mission to ensure that every child should continue to have both parents involved in their life following a family separation.

The centre provides imaginative, core programming at every military base across the country. In our conversations I was overwhelmed by one specific reality of military life, namely, that deployment is a certainty whether it is to an Afghanistan or Libya; or in preparation for such an event or crisis.

Deployment means long periods of separation from intimate partners and children. It means that families have to live with the risks that come with deployment and a family life that may be turned upside down inside in moment of time. The Family Resource Centre's staff was dedicated to providing for every contingency for their families.

As I listened it was clear that military life presented challenges that were often too difficult for many intimate relationships. Family breakdown was more complex for these families because deployment may result in long periods of absence from day-to-day parenting. A family breakup may lead to the non-military parent leaving a base, and if this is the primary care parent they will likely move some distance from the base to a place that offers additional family support, and on and on the complications mount.

Those who serve in our military are fathers and mothers.

At the centre they understand military families and their serious problems, and believe the choice of serving Canada should not be a parenting disqualifier. They acknowledge that the rate of depression from the loss of family and parenting is staggering. It is understood that the combination of military life and separation is potentially a tragic combination for service members and their children.

The thread that connects all the fathers and mothers who served our nation, from the world wars through to Afghanistan, from my dad to Master Cpl. Greff, was that their service was not just about preserving our families' futures, but it also was about securing the futures of families they never met from troubled locations around the globe.

Surely today there is a way to preserve and ensure that these military moms and dads will remain a loving parent in their children's lives.

"I remember on this day when you were born, I cried. I was so happy to have been given a baby. Put your hand to your chest and you will feel me there. Every beat of your heart is my loving you," one separated parent, a Canadian soldier, said to their child.

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