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David Lea, Oakville Beaver : Nov 10, 2011 - 5:11 PM :  : [Report a Typo or Correction](#)

In a league of her own in the navy

Don't be afraid to try new things because you never know where they will take you.

Adhering to this simple philosophy saw Oakville native Leanne Crowe fall into a career that would span nearly 30 years, see her become the first female Canadian Forces clearance diver and perform lifesaving actions in Afghanistan.

Crowe, a commander with the Royal Canadian Navy, was recognized for her long list of accomplishments during a Canadian Forces women's appreciation event in Stellarton, Nova Scotia Oct. 30.

The event, presided over by Defence Minister Peter MacKay, paid tribute to a female Canadian Forces member from each of the three services: Royal Canadian Navy, Royal Canadian Air Force and Canadian Army.

"I'm really happy about this," said Crowe.

"I'm not the type of person who toots my own horn too much and I try to keep it low key when it comes to this stuff, but obviously I am very proud and honoured to be recognized."

Crowe moved to Oakville when she was in Grade 3 and attended Falgarwood Public School and White Oaks Secondary School. It was in her final year of high school that she started down the path that would take her to the navy.

"What happened was the government used to run what they called a Summer Youth Employment Program where you could join the reserves for eight weeks in the summertime. It was basically a summer job," said Crowe.

"A couple of fellows from my high school went down and joined the naval reserve unit in Toronto for this program. They did eight weeks of marching around and sailing and getting paid for it. So, when they came back in Grade 13, they never stopped talking about how much fun it was."

Crowe decided to check out the program the following summer.

She never looked back, loving the experience intensely and thirsting for more. Crowe would spend five years in the reserves while she attended McMaster University.

Following that, she joined the regular forces deciding to make the navy her focus.



In a league of her own in the navy. HONOURED: Leanne Crowe, who grew up in Oakville, was recently honoured after nearly 30 years in the Royal Canadian Navy. She was the first female Canadian Forces clearance diver and is an Afghanistan veteran. Despite her career taking her far afield, Crowe still considers Oakville her hometown. Crowe received her award from Defence Minister Peter MacKay. *Courtesy of the Canadian Armed Forces*

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"A lot of people join the reserves right out of high school. It works out really well for people going to university who are trying to figure out what they are going to do. So there tends to be a higher percentage of females in the reserves than in the regular force," said Crowe.

"When I went regular I didn't realize that I was sort of one of the first groups of women to go to sea. Even so, I was never treated poorly."

In the late 1980s and early '90s, Crowe said only a few Royal Canadian Navy vessels were outfitted with accommodations for women, meaning there were only a couple of vessels on each coast aboard which women were permitted to serve.

Crowe said this changed with the government's purchase of the Halifax-class frigates, as they were capable of being 'mixed-gender ships.'

In 1993, Crowe became the Canadian Forces' first female clearance diver, a trade that deals with sea mine and other kinds of explosives disposal, ship repair, and the reconnaissance of piers and other docking places, to ensure they are free of mines and other hazards before ships move in.

Crowe said she developed a passion for water from her time as a competitive swimmer with the Oakville Aquatic Club and took the navy diving course thinking it would be fun.

The course turned out to be an intense one, but Crowe loved it and persevered.

Crowe said she had mixed emotions about the attention she then received for being the Canadian Forces' only female clearance diver.

"There was a lot of media interest at the time on these sorts of accomplishments and I shied away from a lot of that because, you know, you are young and you are on a course with a bunch of guys and it's a very close-knit group and you don't want it to look like you are being given special treatment or special attention," she said.

"As I got older and wiser, I realized I had a responsibility to mentor young women because, over the years, you meet young women who wanted to do something and weren't allowed or just never thought they could do things. Even some women in the forces sort of think, 'Oh, I didn't know I could command an operational unit.' You hear that in this century, which is kind of scary, so I changed my attitude as I got a bit older and decided to be more open about my 'firsts'."

Crowe would go on to serve as a deck, combat, and operations officer on various navy ships and serve as a commanding officer of the navy's experimental diving unit based in Toronto. She was eventually selected to command the navy's East Coast diving unit.

She next became a mine warfare tactics officer with the Maritime Warfare Centre in Halifax and it was during this period that Crowe was deployed to Afghanistan.

With Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) causing the vast majority of Canadian deaths during the Afghan conflict, countering this threat had become a major priority.

Crowe, whose navy work had given her considerable experience with explosives, was part of a team working to deal with the problem.

Much of the work being carried out, she said, revolved around determining who was building the IEDs, what groups they were connected to and where the money, being used to make their bombs, was coming from.

Once it was determined who these people were and where they were, operations would be carried out to stop them.

Some of her work focused on stopping bomb-makers from obtaining the necessary materials.

"We helped the Minister of the Interior draft a decree that banned ammonium nitrate. Ammonium nitrate is used in fertilizers, but if the nitrate level is high enough, you can use it as an explosive," said Crowe.

"Most of Afghanistan's fertilizer comes from Pakistan, so we also did a lot of work with the embassy staff and diplomats so they could put diplomatic pressure on Pakistan to reduce the amount of nitrate in the fertilizers they make so that, even if it gets across the border, you can't make bombs with it."

In an effort to reduce smuggling, Crowe said measures were taken to ensure border police received test kits, which could detect ammonium nitrate. Training was also given to the border police so they knew how to safely dispose of ammonium nitrate if it was seized.

As the new measures, which have proven unpopular with some Afghan farmers, have only recently been implemented, it is unclear whether they have been successful in curbing IED attacks.

Crowe helped create a training course to educate people on detecting and avoiding IEDs in urban areas.

With so many amazing experiences now behind her, Crowe offers the following advice, not only to young women, but to anyone who wants to have a life filled with many rich adventures.

"If you are provided with an opportunity to do something, you should check it out and not be shy about trying something new or taking a bit of a risk or a chance," she said.

"The possibilities are endless in life... (particularly) in this country. No one (should feel constrained) by worrying they can't do it because they are not the right gender or they are not smart enough. Just go for it."

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