

# Naval officer at work in the far corners of Afghanistan

## Hello Canada:

The other day I was out at one of our FOBs (Forward Operating Bases) sitting and eating my first hot meal in a couple of days with my Royal 22nd Regiment "Vandoo" Sergeant Major who speaks only French. He was having a big belly laugh with some of the young privates from his Regiment back in Valcartier. Most were close friends of his son, who at the time was in the Role 3 Hospital in Kandahar Airfield (KAF) recovering from injuries suffered in combat a few days earlier.

Imagine that, I thought. Two French Vandoos, a Sergeant Major and a Private, father and son both working in Afghanistan. Although, the son was currently 70 kilometres away resting in the most specialized hospital of its kind in the whole theatre of operation. A hospital designed for only one thing: to save a life when often seconds not minutes count.

I sat in silence eating my warm spaghetti, and drinking delicious ice cold goat's milk that went bad a few weeks ago, but it was the most wonderful thing I had drank, it seemed, in a long time. All I heard was this boisterous French-Canadian banter between these boys, and one of the most well respected Senior NCOs (Non Commissioned Officer), my right hand man, my Sergeant Major.

I looked at these kids and ate

my spaghetti and thought, "My God this is the infantry." These are the guys, the heroes, General Hillier talks about. These are the very guys who go out every day in their LAV III's armored vehicles and get shot at. These are the guys who we ask every day to "Dismount" (which means get out of the vehicle that is protecting them) and search for devices and weapons – improvised explosive devices – that kill, maim and burn the human body in a way most doctors can't describe.

As I fought back the lump in my throat, I listened to these kids from Chicoutimi and Sept-Isles talk and laugh and joke about life. They weren't talking about separating from Canada; they weren't talking about politics or even the Montreal Canadians power play. They were talking about what a great guy the Sergeant Major's son was. They were talking about how great it was that he would re-join his troop in a couple days. They were laughing about how a chunk of metal travelling at over 5,000 metres per second hit their buddy's wristwatch, injuring his arm and ruining a perfectly good timepiece.

My gratitude towards them and my humility to share their table was almost overwhelming.

I have my own war stories from those days out there, but I don't really want to tell them. It's funny because I always thought when



Lt(N) Clay Cochrane surveys the countryside while on duty in Afghanistan. Lt(N) Cochrane is an Explosive Ordnance Disposal Troop Commander deployed from Fleet Diving Unit (Pacific).

the moment came I would want to gob off like a Chatty Cathy Doll. That I would want to tell about the sounds and the smells and the fear and the rocket attacks and diving to the ground at the last second, and all that macho talk.

Go watch Forrest Gump when he's in Vietnam with his buddies. That's exactly what's going on over here, minus the beer and drugs. Lieutenant Dan and Bubba and Forrest, all those guys are here, except their names are Lieutenant Goslin and Pierre and Simon.

After that spaghetti supper I spent the rest of the week visiting my troops at the front line. I need to do that from time to time, and I'll be doing it again soon.

What really got to me wasn't what happened out there during that week. It was when an American Blackhawk landed in the FOB to fly my Sergeant Major and me out, taking us away from extreme danger to the safety of a big, cozy airbase many miles away.

It was that moment when his son climbed out of the very helicopter

we were about to climb into.

I saw the son go up to his dad, give him a hug, pass him a box of Colt Cigars bought while convalescing in KAF, cigars his dad had been bumming off his Senior NCO buddies all week. It was that look a father gives a son, a son with a small bandage on his left arm and no wristwatch.

**GOD BLESS,  
LT(N) CLAY COCHRANE  
OPSO C-1ED  
EOD TROOP COMMANDER  
TASK FORCE AFGHANISTAN**