

I Was A Soldier Once

I liked the idea that as the commercial said; we did more by 0700 than most people did all day. I loved as range safety officer getting shots down range by 0800. I loved the brutality of route marches because they set us apart from my civilian friends, as most of them could never have hacked the pace. I liked standing in an United Nations observation post just before dawn in a far away land, realizing that I and other soldiers in my unit were doing something very special by representing Canada and the Canadian people, undergoing physical and mental strains that many could not or would not face to keep our country safe and ready. I loved climbing up cargo nets in full battle order and repelling down cliffs. I loved running the assault course. I liked the early morning runs and the late night polishing before a parade.

I liked the smell of the quartermaster stores, an odd mixture of gun oil, canvas preservative, leather, hemp rope and cigarette smoke. I liked the racks of rifles and sub machine guns and I loved the gun sheds and tank hangers where the vehicles and weapons of war gleamed dully and exuded strength and capability and the power to “get er done” if need be. I loved the name of the equipment when I started off, Sherman, Fabric National, Sten and Bren because they spoke to me of the proud days when our Fathers used them successfully in WW2. Our #36 Grenada was the same as our grandfathers used in WW1 for God’s sake! I also loved when the 105 mm and the M 109 gave way to them M 777 and the guns could shoot

accurately over 30 kilometres. I loved it when the old lady “the duce and a half” was finally replaced by the modern MLVW. The Centurion tank gave way to the Leopard and within weeks our tankers showed NATO they were the best.

I liked our soldiers, from all parts of the land, from cities of upper Canada, small towns of Nova Scotia and Newfoundland. They came from the mountains and from the prairies from all walks of life. I trusted and depended on them as they trusted and depended on me for professional competence, for comradeship, for strength and courage. In a word we were “soldiers”, then, and forever. I liked the surge in my heart when word was passed that a unit was deploying, and I loved the infectious thrill of riding homeward in convoy waving at the cars we passed and at pedestrians who I was sure looked at us with envy as we rolled through their villages on our way back to Base. I loved waving from the back of a truck at the kids in cars that would trail us for a while before finally passing.

The work was hard and dangerous; the going rough at times; and the parting from family painful, but the companionship of robust army laughter, the “all for one and one for all” philosophy of the military was ever present. I once enjoyed the best 2 hours sleep in my life laying on the ground at a rest halt while doing a patrol. The weather was overcast but warm and a slight drizzle did not deter my snoring, which could be heard 4 men down the line. Another 4 or 5 hours would have been nice, but there was work to be done.

I liked the fierce and dangerous activity of the Infantry Rifle Coy as we began an advance to contact. I liked doing the recce for a harbour where I had to hide up to 40 pieces of wheeled and tracked equipment from the enemy. I hated having to run ahead of our vehicles in complete darkness and trying to be quiet as the drivers and co-drivers tried to back vehicles and trailers into a black hole as quickly as possible so others in line could pass and find me and also be properly positioned and put away. One could hear cursing and unmeant bitching as crews stumbled in the dark to erect cam nets and digging in for protection from an enemy attack, we cut and poked branches holding up the nets to break the vehicle outline so as not to be recognised. The lucky ones had a relatively small vehicle, others, a two and a half or a 5 ton to cover that even in day light would take an hour or more. At night it was dangerous, demanding and extremely hard work. In the rain or freezing snow this necessary chore was brutal.

Watching my fellow soldiers as they took down the cam nets, loaded fuel, ammunition and rations for yet another long day. Feeling truly exhausted and knowing it was going to get a lot worse before it got better, actually added value to the experience. We were soldiers and this is what it was like.

I loved the name and the history of my Regiments;

“The Black Watch (Royal Highland Regiment) of Canada”

“The Royal Canadian Regiment”

“The Royal Canadian Electrical Mechanical Engineers”

“The Royal Canadian Engineers”.

I loved the parades, the colours on parade and the guidon presentation, the march past, the roll past, the advance in review order and the sound of my hand slapping the stock of my rifle during the Present Arms. I could feel the National Anthem inside me while the band played it. Some liked “The Queen” or “O Canada”. I loved “The Maple Leaf Forever”.

I loved walking through our position in complete darkness checking the welfare of my men and NCO’s and ensuring them that they were not alone, as we stood in our trench at first light, on stand to. I liked the weight of my steel helmet on my head and the embrace of my webbing. It made you feel like superman though in your heart you surely knew you were not. I loved the weight of my rifle or pistol and knowing I could outshoot a lot of my men. It was an ongoing competition during range practice to outdo your friends as well as your superiors. There was pride in self and country; and growing mastery of the soldier’s trade. An adolescent could find adulthood. A man could find fulfilment and old man finds great joy. I will never forget that I was once a soldier. There is no higher calling. I would do it again in a heartbeat. I liked the traditions of the Army and those who made them.

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Unknown author.