

435 Squadron

Honorary Colonel Investiture Speech

December 8th, 2006.

LCol Ness, and Honoured Guests.

I would like to begin by thanking LCol Friday and the entire squadron for your immense hospitality over these past few days, and in the lead-up to this investiture.

I would also like to add my thanks and recognition to General Law for his life-long service. It is my hope that from time to time I may be able to call upon his considerable insight and experience to guide me in this role.

To say that I am honoured to stand here as your Honorary Colonel understates the deep sense of pride, duty and affection I already feel for this Squadron. In the brief few days I have spent in your company, I have found it a fascinating, invigorating and at times deeply moving experience.

Without taking up an inordinate amount of time, I thought I would share a few things about myself, and how I came to this position.

But before I do, I must say I am quite impressed with one of the more recent acts of bravery undertaken by this squadron, by appointing someone like *me* from the *music* business to be your Honorary Col, as there could hardly be two more different cultures. As a military friend of mine once said, “the difference between your theatre and ours is that we are rehearsing for a performance we never hope to give.”

There is an old Irish expression: “It is a long road which knows no turning...” and then there’s a take-off on that expression which goes: “It is a wrong toad that knows no learning...” There is also wonderful saying of the Chinese philosopher, Lau Tzu: “A good traveler has no fixed plans and is not intent on arriving.”

Well, I would have to say that *all* of these would apply to my life’s path so far. I set out to be a veterinarian and then found that music chose me, rather than I, it. This path not only afforded me an unusual relationship with my “art,” but it taught me at an early age the humility that no matter how much you think you know what you want, life sometimes takes you by the scruff of the neck and offers you surprises and changes, other possibilities and opportunities. Even in the heart of disappointment your talents, potential and your capacity to effect change may lie in completely different areas than where you thought they were - and sometimes you just need to go with this.

I grew up in a town about 80 miles from here as the daughter of a nurse and a livestock dealer. From an early age I was always up to something, fueled by an insatiable curiosity and an unquenchable thirst for adventure. As a red-headed tomboy I rambled through the

lumber yards and railway tracks of the small town of Morden, climbing in tree forts, playing street hockey, and generally ticking off the boys whenever I could.

In many ways it was a charmed childhood and I had excellent role models in my parents. The town was small enough that everyone knew and looked after each other. As with many rural communities it operated as a hybrid of self-sufficiency and community service.

One of my fondest childhood memories is of my father being called out in a March blizzard to assist in taking an expectant mother to the hospital. We still had a sleigh and team of horses on the farm, and so once he had dropped the woman off at the hospital, he came driving home down our street, team of horses and all...and I recall being so proud.

Similarly, I remember joining my mother on some of her Christmas day visits to the elderly and disadvantaged, as she would drop off some food and Christmas cheer. On various occasions over the years our own family was the recipient of many acts of generosity, in good times and in bad.

This was just something people did, and these simple, often spontaneous acts of kindness seemed more an extension of one's sense of honour than anything else, a capacity to think beyond one's self, for the betterment of the common good.

On one level, these are simple and wonderful memories. But for me they were also the life-shaping influences that form the roots of strong communities. Communities which take charge and responsibility for themselves and their own well-being, through a belief that our destinies and survival are hinged on our ability to look after each other and also through an assertiveness which says "I would rather take charge of my destiny than have it thrust upon me."

I learned that not only could this approach be beneficial to my career, but perhaps was an integral underpinning of a healthy democratic society.

And if it is true that democratic states exist in degrees, then surely the healthier ones are those whose citizens treated the process as a participatory activity - not a spectator sport. Whatever I was going to get out of my life, my career or my society, it was going to be in direct relationship to what I put into it.

In 1985 I made my first recording, after borrowing money from my parents which they had earmarked for my university education. I made that recording in one week, (which of course, I would love to do now) ran off 30 or so cassettes, and after I had given the usual complement to friends and family, decided to play at the St. Lawrence market in Toronto in order to sell the remaining cassettes.

Over the course of 4 years I would load up my harp in my Honda civic on a Friday night, travel to Toronto from Stratford and crash on a friend's sofa in order to get myself to the market early to secure the best busking spot. I would come to find, that between doing

this and singing down at Harbourfront on a Sunday afternoon, it was a rather lucrative way of making money

From time to time there was an issue of being stigmatized by the perception that this was a fancy way of begging. I remember seeing a friend of mine from Winnipeg who I hadn't seen for many years, emerging from the back of a crowd of people... with tears running down her face, saying "Oh , Loreena, has it really come to this?" and me replying, "Well, thankfully it has."

In those years I would take the money I earned from busking and reinvest it in my next recording or tour, until eventually I built up a company which now has 10 staff, 2 offices and launches tours and initiatives all around the world.

But it was not only in the music business that fate took me by the scruff of the neck. In the summer of 1998 my fiancé, along with his brother and a work colleague perished in a boating incident in Georgian Bay.

To say this was a life-changing event, would not be overstating things. As the families and I saw the search and rescue exercise evolve into a search and recovery one, we decided that we could and would not let such a sacrifice go unmarked.

We sought for the positive opportunity inherent in this most tragic of circumstances. Surely the greatest tribute to these young men would be to do everything we could to prevent a similar tragedy from happening to others.

It was out of this event that The Cook Rees Memorial Fund For Water Search And Safety was born. And it was in this way that I was first exposed to the search and rescue community.

The Fund has gone on to generate between 3 and 4 million dollars and has become a catalyst in the field of water safety as we disperse monies to improve the training and equipment of rescue and recovery personnel, and to provide supporting research and public education initiatives. A primary area of focus is that of prevention, so that rescuers like you will be called out less often.

Now I have to say, that prior to this, my knowledge of what our Canadian forces have done for us has been painfully slim. I do not come from a military family and although my grandfather fought in the first World War, he died at an age when I was too young to make any inquiries into this part of his life. And even as I grew older, the military was seldom mentioned except on Remembrance Day. Suffice to say, this did not make for a firm foundation of appreciation and I know that among the Canadian public, I am not alone.

I have largely attributed this lack of awareness to our perception that we were living in a time of peace and as a nation we could now turn our focus and resources to other perceived priorities. How wrong could we be? And so, through a collective sense of

complacency, I fear we have gravely undermined one of the most valuable assets a country can have.

It has been sobering to learn more about how Canada has chosen to assign certain domestic and international responsibilities to its Forces, and how the slicing of those responsibilities are different from other countries. And I know there are many people in Canada and around the world whose lives have been massively and positively changed by their involvement, whether Canadians realise it or not; be it in search and rescue, border control, disaster relief and international humanitarian aid, or peacekeeping, peace-making and even combat situations.

And only now, in the face of the human costs in Afghanistan, do I feel the Canadian public finally waking up from a long sleep. Waking to the fact that yes, we have a military, and it is comprised of deeply devoted men and women, from this town, that village and this city all across the nation, who are out fulfilling their duties with far too little recognition, and sometimes paying the highest price. *We need to be paying attention. You are doing it on our behalf.*

I am hopeful there is a window of opportunity here, not only for the Canadian public to better understand and appreciate what an enormous task is facing our men and women in Afghanistan and elsewhere, but also to see what you do for us every day of the year, day in and day out, 24/7 in all types of weather and circumstances. *You truly stand on guard for us.*

It is my hope, as I continue to upgrade my own understanding of what you do, that through this position as Honorary Colonel and through my own skill set and connections, I can play even a small role as a bridge to the public or a conduit of communication on your behalf. I also appreciate that this is not just *your* career choice, it is also your family's career choice. I am deeply appreciative of that and I am here for them too.

In closing, I would like to say it has been wonderful to spend these past few days getting to know what you do, how you do it and what your needs and concerns are. Not only the gents who took me up flying and made sure my helmet wasn't placed on backwards, but also those who quietly behind the scenes, be it in technical or administrative support, lay the very important foundation for this squadron to be effective in its missions. I have enjoyed getting to know you, talking with you, flying with you, but not jumping with you....yet!!!! And I look forward to the time ahead as I expand my "appreciation of the situation' and serve you to the best of my ability.

Thank you once again for allowing me the privilege to be your Honorary Colonel.