

## Military Family Resource Centre Gala Feb 23, 2008

### Hon Col Loreena McKennitt Speech

General Hillier, Lt General Crabbe, Major General Duval , honoured guests.

Thank you LCol Friday for those very kind words and thank you for arranging this heat wave to welcome me back to Winnipeg. I know it's been a frosty week.

It is a great privilege to be invited to speak to you this evening, for as a citizen I feel I am no more deserving of this platform than any of you.

I hope there will be nothing in my presentation which will put you off your food, but rather leave you with a little more food for thought! At the end of the evening, however, I will happily sing for my supper.

Tonight, in celebration of the Military Family Resource Centre at 17 Wing here in Winnipeg I 'd like to share with you some of my travels, experiences and reflections resulting from this first year serving as the Hon Col of 435 Transport and Rescue Squadron.

I accepted this role, largely inspired by the sentiment that democracy does not thrive as a spectator sport – that if we care about the democracy we live in we should all do our part to preserve it. So, it is hoped that I can play even some small role as a conduit of reflection, between our Canadian Forces personnel and the civilian population.

Over this past year, I've developed an 'appreciation of the situation' – as some military folk are fond of saying – as I have studied the ingredients, activities, history and context of the greater Canadian military family.

It has been important for me to learn and understand that, although we may use the word 'military' which may conjure up a wide range of associations for different people, our Canadian Forces personnel do many things which extend far beyond a battle field.

Their mandate includes search and rescue, humanitarian aid, sovereignty patrol, re-supply missions, international peace keeping, peace making, and combat roles, not to mention international and domestic disaster relief. Here in Manitoba, who can forget the extensive military relief effort in battling 'The Flood of the Century' – with 435 Squadron playing a leading role. And of course in Toronto they're grateful the military can dig them out of a snowstorm every once and again.

It has been an amazing year. I have witnessed first hand, and often from the back of a Hercules aircraft, re-supply missions to our northern most communities, search and rescue procedures, air-to-air refuelling during major coalition training exercises in Cold Lake, and far reaching national sovereignty operations across Canada and the far North. I experienced first hand the rigours of a Snowbird's training flight in Moose Jaw and most recently, a sobering repatriation ceremony in Trenton, Ontario.

It has been very important for me to get to know our men and women in uniform, where they come from, why they joined, and how they

undertake their responsibilities. It has been equally important to understand how their career path has affected their ability to have and maintain a family, children, husbands, wives and parents who, behind the scenes, stoically support them every day of the year.

I have learned an enormous amount this year, and I suspect my learning has only just begun.

A vital part of this analysis has been to take into account that militaries around the world are unto themselves *unique* entities, endowed with their *distinct* past and present, and with *distinct* political and economic associations.

In Canada, we are fortunate to count our military as a relatively neutral instrument, instructed by the government of the day, on behalf of Canadians. As well we know, this is not, nor has always been the case elsewhere in the world. Our present Canadian Forces are the extension of the history and traditions of the very brave men and women, who from across this land fought and died in vast numbers in two great wars and more. It is *they* who have afforded us this life of liberty, privilege and affluence.

And because of that each Canadian government of *whatever* political stripe, is responsible for what that instrument does on our behalf – and who may *die* on our behalf.

For that ‘instrument’ is much more than just equipment and protocols, but real people and their families who continue to support Canadians, Canada and the international community .

We as citizens owe it to them to be informed about the work they do, the challenges and risks they face. For in their neutrality lies a vulnerability for which each Canadian citizen holds a duty of care and it is this idea that I am wishing to express tonight.

I have grown to share the concern that we, as citizens, have lost touch with how our country is run. That we have become increasingly weary, cynical, complacent and ill informed, partially through the absence of instruction of history and governance in our schools, partially through a complacency which may come at times of plenty and opportunity, partially through the contamination caused by partisan rhetoric.

All of these things can affect how our men and women in uniform are deployed and equipped for their duties. We must not let them become caught in political or media crossfire.

For the media too play a role in all of this as it shapes a great deal of our perceptions. And although we continue to gain great public benefit from a robust press, on occasion and from my own experience, it can disappoint us by abdicating its own code of ethics pertaining to balanced journalism and factual accuracy. Their commercial pursuit of sensational stories which are 'interesting to the public' must not override what is *truly* in the public's interest, and we must be prepared to hold them accountable as well.

The men and women in the Canadian Forces deserve informed and responsible leadership, who in turn are supported by an informed and involved citizenry. We, along with our leaders and political representatives, must undertake our full due diligence. Our instructions

to our military must be commensurate with our national expectations. And we must also be prepared to pay the price, for without question, their lives and the lives of many others, depend upon us.

And in the responsibility we owe these men and women, we must not forget about their families left at home. These individuals are robust, determined and proud and often far removed from the support of *their* extended families. They face many issues which come from constant resettling, the difficulty of single parenting, and the emotional worry which comes from having a loved one away for great lengths of time, often in harm's way. Not only must they endure the stress which comes with a family member in a profession that is under constant public scrutiny, but they may also be asked to bear the additional burden of media intrusion at their most vulnerable moments of bereavement.

I've had a few opportunities now to stop by the Military Family Resource Centre and it is a real going concern. It is an invaluable place, run by an extraordinary and devoted group of individuals, many of whom are volunteers. I remember my first visit there and being overwhelmed by the scope of their support, ranging from services for young children and youth, prevention and intervention services, volunteer programs and quality of life services which include deployment support, employment assistance and second language training. I would urge anyone here this evening to find the time to stop by yourself and say hello.

Before I conclude, I'd like to take a moment to illustrate a bit of the caring, sharing and support that goes on with the MFRC. I'd like to read a brief passage from a note forwarded to me by the family of Master Corporal Jaime Aubuchon, who is still serving in Afghanistan. Her

family, who is present tonight, Mr. and Ms. Neil and Chris Marnoch, have kindly allowed me to share their thoughts with you.

To: Loreena McKennitt

Our daughter, Master Corporal Jaime Aubuchon with 1 Combat Engineers Regiment based in Edmonton, was deployed to Afghanistan on August 2, 2007. No sooner was she deployed than we heard the news of soldiers who were killed. I didn't know how to handle the emotions I felt. I was panicked with worry. My husband and I, not being in the military, were not prepared for war in the same way that soldiers are. Because our daughter has a family of her own and is based so far away, we hadn't been involved in any pre-deployment training and were not familiar with the resources available to us.

I contacted a friend who does volunteer work with the military. She connected me with the 17 Wing Military Family Resource Centre (MFRC) in Winnipeg. We met with a counselor, Hayley, and found that what we were going through was quite normal and that the MFRC would help support us through this difficult time. We soon found comfort in a Parent's Support group. We attended meetings and a dinner and found that other parents shared the same feelings.

We learned more about the mission and how other families cope when their soldiers are away, and most of all received emotional support. One day when I was having a meltdown at work after reading of another soldier who was killed, I contacted Sandra at the MFRC through email.

Within minutes Hayley called me on the phone and helped me get through it.

It is very hard living a normal, comfortable life in Canada while your loved one is overseas in harm's way. The MFRC has helped me understand that my feelings are normal and to find my inner strength.

What strikes us both about military people is a willingness to help in any situation. We've noticed this characteristic among Jaime's friends who are soldiers and see the same in the staff of the MFRC. Our daughter's tour is almost over. We'd like to thank the MFRC for being there for us.

Neil and Chris Marnoch

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I'm sure so many of you can relate to those sentiments.

Although I am not as familiar as perhaps some of you will be with our Canadian Forces personnel, my travels and experience with the squadron, have shown them to be exemplary and often noble individuals. I have found them to be stoic, deeply devoted to their missions and keenly attuned to their professional and moral responsibilities. I have also found them to have a fierce sense of humour in the most dire of situations.

Tonight, we are deeply privileged to have some of the finest men and women of the Canadian Forces, in our midst. Around, behind and

beside them are some of the most remarkable families you will find anywhere. We, as Canadians, owe them *all* our duty of care.

In closing, I would only like to say it is my fervent hope that we will all learn to be soldiers of democracy, to be ambassadors and advocates for diplomacy and respectful discourse when possible and defenders of the common good when necessary, and in times of great pain and need, that we remember also that we can be – must be – ministers of love, compassion and generosity.

I thank you all very much for attending this evening and supporting this very important organisation. On behalf of all of those who will experience the benefits of your support, I thank you. May I wish you a wonderful evening here tonight.