



themes and perspectives that I believe have a contemporary relevance and of which I knew so little. At the same time it must be accepted that I am no academic or authority, just someone on her own personal path of discovery. For those who wish to follow along, my role might more resemble that of a catalyst or a conduit.

It was in the context of this approach, and partially as a result of setting up The Cook-Rees Memorial Fund for Water Search and Safety in 1998, that in December 2006 I became the Honorary Colonel of 435 Search and Rescue and Transport Squadron in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada. It was with *immense* pride that I accepted this honorary role, knowing full well that what lay ahead of me would be a path of education that would take me into directions I haven't, until now, quite anticipated or appreciated.

I don't think it would be stretching things to say that the cultural and disciplinary way the music industry does things and the military does things are somewhat different. In that regard as well as others, I knew there were things to take into consideration. I knew that an association with the military would come as a surprise to some people, as the word "military" conjures up a wide array of associations for a wide array of people from a variety of geographical places and historical circumstances. With this in mind, it should be understood that I accepted this role in relation to the *Canadian* military, as Canada is the country in which I make my home and for which this role is relevant.

As a person coming from a completely different field of expertise, and not being "staff trained" – in other words, with military training – I wanted to ensure that I could genuinely contribute in some way. Additionally, I have taken great care in protecting my independence of voice. As a conduit of sorts, it is my hope and intention to play a meaningful role in *explaining or sharing* our military rather than *selling* it to a civilian population, and to bring civilian perceptions and concerns back into the military community with which I am connecting.

My first task has been to undertake, as they say, "an appreciation of the situation". Through spending time with the members of 435 Squadron, I have set out to learn who they are, what they do, why and how they are doing it and what motivates them; and to acquaint myself with their issues and seek to learn how the general public perceives them.

It has been several months since that wintry day of my investiture last December, and since then, I have had the privilege to witness some of the extraordinary things these men and women do on our behalf every day of the year, year in and year out, quite invisibly and many times with little recognition other than from within their own ranks, or on a personal level, in taking pride in a job well done.

I have witnessed highly sophisticated, and at times extremely risky, search and rescue exercises; preparations for natural disasters such as floods and fires; the transport of supplies to northern communities and the military bases in the frontiers of our country; the monitoring our national borders; as well as the preparations for the squadron's

transport-specific roles shouldering Canada's international responsibilities in places such as in Afghanistan and elsewhere.

And yet it was only been through a process of paying greater attention that I have realised that a distinction needs to be made between the government and the military. In Canada, our military is still a relatively neutral instrument instructed by the government of the day, undertaking missions on behalf of Canadians and sometimes other people around the world. Not only was I unaware of all that was going on, I was stunned by the scope of it all and the extent of my own ignorance including who these people are and how they are instructed.

With over 2000 Canadian Forces personnel stationed in Afghanistan, it is certain that our military has entered many of our psyches in a way that it hasn't for very long time. We are relieved when they come back safe and sound, and are shaken when they return dead or wounded.

And yet as a neutral body, our forces are vulnerable in variety of ways. I think it can be safely said that the expectations we have of them likely exceed either the personnel or resources they have to undertake and respond to those expectations, be it domestically or internationally. I have wondered if over the recent decades, as a result of our becoming too comfortable, complacent or ignorant, we have abdicated our responsibility in giving our political representatives the guidance or confidence to equip and direct our military in ways commensurate with our expectations.

In the meantime, a shortage of personnel has resulted in long hours; a resourcefulness born of necessity that defies imagination; and, at times, sacrifices that are nothing short of remarkable. The sacrifices these men and women make on our behalf are not only made by those individuals, but also by their families, who know many hours of uncertainty, absences and at times even the losses of loved ones. No matter how they may have entered into this career path, their commitment is clearly not simply a career choice; it is a way of life that these individuals and their families have chosen, ultimately to build on the incredible legacy we have been bequeathed by our forebears and to contribute to Canada as a society and the world as a whole.

I can confidently say, after speaking with and spending a considerable amount of time with many members of our Canadian military family, they are some of the most caring and devoted individuals I have met in my life. I believe that it is our duty to them to ensure that they are well directed and well equipped to undertake the work *we* expect of them. We owe them our attention, our interest and our care. By supporting them responsibly, we will not allow "evil" to triumph. It is an honour to be of service to the men and women of the Canadian Forces. – Loreena McKennitt