

CFB Edmonton rises to challenge of post 9/11 insecure world

RYAN CORMIER (feat. DAVID BERCUSON)

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EDMONTON - Master Cpl. Felix Charette joined the Canadian Forces in December 2001. It was only coincidence that he enlisted weeks after Sept. 11. He'd always wanted to be a soldier, the same way a child instinctively wants to be a police officer or dancer.

Five years later, he fully understood his fascination. He returned from Afghanistan and felt like the entire city watched his unit drive from the airport to CFB Edmonton. It had been a brutal year in Kandahar and many soldiers who died were local.

"It was 2006 when we started to get thanked for what we do, no matter where we were," he said. "You could be at the grocery store and someone would approach you. They would buy us coffee at Tim Hortons all the time. We had police escorts and firefighters were saluting us. It was crazy."

Military pride spread through Edmonton as the base became crucial to the Afghanistan mission. Military influence is now felt through north-end development, a new generation of veterans, deep support and rehabilitation facilities considered the best in Canada.

By the time the combat mission ended, the base had become the army's western anchor.

The war, which was spurred by the horrific events of 9/11, gave CFB Edmonton its identity.

"We've all heard the term, the army of the west – now that's Edmonton," said David Bercuson of the Canadian Defense and Foreign Affairs Institute.

In the late 1990s, 3,500 soldiers were transferred to Edmonton from other western posts shuttered by federal budget cuts. The base became the headquarters for Land Force Western Area, which commands troops from Thunder Bay to the west coast. Other consolidation collected light-armoured vehicles, tanks and helicopters into one location.

By 1999, when Maj. Gordon MacLeod arrived, the base was crowded, yet not cohesive.

"At the time, we were trying to find who we were, our place in this city," MacLeod said. "We didn't have a lot of strong ties off the base. That relationship wasn't prevalent back then, it wasn't forthcoming."

Approaching 2001, the base had grown to an integrated 'superbase'. The timing was by chance, but CFB Edmonton was set for a war no one yet knew about.

"No one could have predicted that the Canadian Forces would go through such a sustained conflict," Bercuson said, "but superbases like Edmonton were great for Afghanistan because it's always easier when you can put a lot of troops in one base. Administratively, cost-wise, efficiency and so on, it was easier this way."

Roughly 30,000 Canadian soldiers served in Afghanistan from 2002 and 2010. Though estimates vary, at least 10,000 of them were based in Edmonton when deployed.

Of the 157 soldiers that died, 40 were based in Edmonton.

MacLeod was on a mountain training exercise near Kananaskis on Sept. 11. Like all CFB Edmonton soldiers, he was immediately recalled to the base. The runway was prepared for any conceivable landing. Security was tightened and checkpoints were set up at each entrance.

Though the announcement took weeks of argument in Ottawa, soldiers in Edmonton knew where they were headed, MacLeod said. "Within a week, we were training. We all packed up our kit, were staged and ready to go all the time. We were on 48-hour notice for a while."

Edmontonians were among the first Canadians deployed in Jan. 2002. Roughly 750 soldiers from the 3rd Battalion of the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry and Lord Strathcona's Horse were ordered to Kandahar City. Edmonton soldiers raised the first Canadian flag at the multinational base.

Weeks later, four Edmonton soldiers were killed and six injured by an American bomb in a friendly-fire incident. They were the first casualties.

The grief was sharpest in Edmonton. Dozens of wreaths were laid at the base entrance and yellow ribbons began to bloom on trees. Roughly 16,000 people attended a memorial service at Rexall Place. The war became a household discussion.

Bob Mann, deputy director of the Military Family Resource Centre, saw it as a turning point between the military and city.

"That point was really the first time that Edmonton, and the rest of the capital region, looked upon the soldiers as their soldiers. No longer did the military just happen to work here."

Lt.-Col. John Reiffenstein, current commander of CFB Edmonton, remembers the event, though posted elsewhere at the time. "Sixteen thousand people out for a memorial? That was incredible. We may not have seen that anywhere else."

Though support remained high in Edmonton, there was another surge as 2006 brought more grief. Thirty-six soldiers died that year, the worst of the conflict. In Edmonton, homecomings were treated as events. Yellow ribbons had become permanent fixtures nearly everywhere, from minivans to front porches.

"That was very moving," MacLeod said. "That was one of the first real changes of connection between the military and community. We're only roughly 5,000 out of a million people. That's a small part, but we now feel it's a very important part."

Mann said the combat mission's end will not dilute the community forged over the decade. "The entire base, all these people, have a greater sense of mission for having been involved in something so serious. The whole mindset has changed, with both the city and the army."

While tragedy formed the bond between Edmonton and the military, Reiffenstein believes pride will sustain it beyond the war.

"We shouldn't underestimate how much of this bond is about success, about achievement. Edmonton likes success, it calls itself the City of Champions. I think this city identifies with soldiers who have fought and won."

There are still soldiers in Afghanistan as part of the Operation Attention training mission. The majority of the 560 Canadian Forces personnel currently mentoring the Afghan army and police are from Edmonton.

Also, Edmonton soldiers are helping move equipment from Kandahar to bases across Canada.

And as always, Reiffenstein said, there is always training. While some is catch-up to skills that weren't crucial to Afghanistan's counter-insurgency, most is the usual military life.

“There’s always units ramping up to go some place, we always have to be ready for when the government may want to send us somewhere. One of the legacies of 9/11 is that you have to be prepared for anything to come down the pike.”