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LOCAL

Families deal with overseas postings

By Sarah Elizabeth Brown

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For months, Jack Drewes went online to check the weather in a place he's never been.

As the father of a 22-year-old corporal guarding construction teams in Afghanistan, Drewes sought out news about that part of the world.

"A little tense," Drewes said of having a son serving in a war zone. "You listen to the news a lot.

"You didn't want to ignore (the news). On the same token, it occupied your mind a lot," Drewes said.

"I found myself going to the weather channel and seeing what the weather was like in Kandahar. Isn't that weird?"

Drewes' son Christopher returned recently to his home base in Edmonton where he serves with the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry.

"Phew," the dad said.

"I once got a call from him on a mountaintop in Kandahar in the middle of the night," said Drewes. "I guess they have (satellite) phones in all the LAVs. And so it was the middle of the night and these guys were just being guys, goofing around, and they all decided to call home."

The 22-year-old said, "It's cool up here Dad," and described looking out over Kandahar.

Later, Drewes did some time-zone calculations and figured his son phoned three hours after a Canadian sergeant was killed by a land mine while on patrol March 16, though the younger Drewes didn't, and couldn't, say anything then.

"I think he called me letting me know it wasn't him."

Drewes and his wife are far from alone in Thunder Bay.

Lt.-Col. Brent Faulkner, the commanding officer of the Lake Superior Scottish Regiment and 18 Service Battalion, estimates 35 local families have a reserve or regular force soldier serving in a hot spot overseas. There is also one civilian contractor from Thunder Bay working in Afghanistan, he said.

Also, upwards of two dozen naval reservists from HMCS Griffon are deployed elsewhere, largely doing duty on this country's coasts.

Janet Neil doesn't have time to become a news junkie.

Her husband, LSSR Capt. Tom Neil, is part way through a tour in Afghanistan, where he's fighting the information war with a psychological operations unit.

Back at home, Neil runs her own bookkeeping business and is raising their three children, ages five, three and two.

Though her husband headed to Afghanistan in early February, he's really been gone since March 2007 for workup training in Edmonton, except for a few trips home to visit.

It's a "big challenge" she said, especially the scheduling.

"In a two-parent household, you've got another person you can rely on for downtime," said Neil.

Her sister-in-law and babysitting niece live here, and one day each week a friend with three children takes care of Neil's trio. On another day, Neil has all six. Her parents have made extra trips from Ottawa for birthdays and March break.

It's different for regular force soldiers, who went home each night during pre-deployment training, she said. For her family, they were already apart for a full year before Tom headed overseas. During that time, the kids' schedules have changed, which means adjusting on the fly.

"It's a big juggling act," she said of organizing school, her clients and care for her kids, "let alone any of the stuff around the house that has to get done."

Her eldest son, Duncan, knows his dad is in a war and helps her count down on a calendar as Tom's leave gets closer.

"The other two, it's just daddy's gone," she said.

"They're so young, time is such a mystery to them."

Some days, her kids just about drive her nuts with their fighting and teasing, she said. Other days, they invite each other to play. It's difficult to tell if any acting out is because they're struggling with their dad being gone or if it's simply the usual age-related stages. Overall, they're doing well, she said.

Duncan once wore his dad's homemade neckwarmer to school.

"He was just so pleased to say, 'This is my daddy's and he's in the war to make other children happy and safe,'" said Neil. "So he's very proud."

She's always known her husband wanted to do an overseas tour. He'd been slated to go a couple of years ago, but pulled his name because she was pregnant with their

second child.

"I don't want anyone to live with regrets about not doing things," said Neil, who met her husband during her own five years in the reserves. "And he is really enjoying what he's doing, I think because he's seeing what a difference he's making.

"Some people just look at me like I've got a third eye: 'Oh my god, how can you do that?'" Neil said of when others learn her husband is in Afghanistan.

"A lot of it is they don't have the military background," she said. "Obviously I'd rather have him at home but I understand why he wants to go."

Some people try to debate the war's politics with her, but she doesn't engage.

"I just don't. You know what, you have your beliefs, I have mine – that's fine."

To her, her family isn't much different from those with husbands gone west for work.

"It seems that more families are doing this kind of bizarre scheduling," she said. "You go where the work is.

"Boy, I have a lot of respect for single parents who are (actual) single parents – at least I know my husband's coming home."

He's able to call weekly, she said.

"Satellite phone from bizarre places more often than not," she said. "Well, not bizarre places, just places where he can't tell me where he is."

For Rose Kaucharik, mother of Warrant Officer Henry Kaucharik, phone calls are a sensitive subject.

"I choke up just talking to you," said Kaucharik. "Even when the phone rings, it bugs me."

She's unplugged the phone in her bedroom. She doesn't think she could bear being woken up by it in the wee hours.

"I think of him all the time. Not only him but all of the others that are there."

Each day, she cuts out the comics and sticks them in an envelope, a tradition she began when her son served in Cyprus. She mails the cartoons to Kandahar along with her four- and five-page letters.

"He feels he's there to help and make a difference," said Kaucharik, whose father and husband served in the First and Second World Wars, respectively. "Even at home, he's right there to help."

Though naturally not one to talk a lot – and not allowed to say much about what he's doing in Afghanistan – her son calls home regularly.

"The last time he phoned was Mother's Day, of course."

Each time a Canadian soldier is killed, he calls his wife and asks her to pass on to his parents that he's OK, the mother said.

"The last boy, just going to the mailbox and picking up the paper and seeing that – it just broke my heart."

Not long after her son arrived in Afghanistan, Kaucharik received an e-mailed photo of him with Tom Neil, standing in front of the Kandahar base Tim Hortons.

"I'm always showing everybody that picture."

At the Park Avenue Armoury, home to another sort of family, the talk is often of the comrades serving overseas, said Faulkner.

"If they get an e-mail from them, they mention 'Hey, I got an e-mail from so and so, and this is what he's doing,'" said Faulkner, who also receives some of those "eye-opening" messages.

One deployed soldier has become a father – he made it home on leave either the day of or the day after the birth – and has already been in Faulkner's office to show off the newborn.

Prior to soldiers deploying overseas, the armoury hosted two gatherings for families. In January after the soldiers were gone, staff from the Military Family Resource Centre in Winnipeg, including a social worker, gave a presentation to families about what to expect when military personnel come home.

"So that they know they're coming from a country where they'd be driving a tank down the road and they get back to Canada where they're driving down the expressway in a small car," said Faulkner. "So how to deal with (returning soldiers) and how they'll be."

Both wound up and exhausted, returning soldiers need decompression time, he said.

They should also realize "that life has been going on quite well without them," said Capt. Neil Otke, the LSSR's padre, noting they need to sit back and wait to be invited into the routine rather than expect to simply take over.

The military is wiser now about how tours affect families and soldiers – and how to support both, he said, adding it's why padres, social workers and Military Family Resource Centres help to keep communication lines open.

The military has invested so much into soldiers' training, they want to see families succeed, Otke said, because then soldiers succeed.

Before each LSSR reservist was given the green light to deploy, they met with a social worker or Otke to make sure they were prepared.

There can't be any lingering complications at home like a father on life support or a sick child, he said.

"When they want the soldier overseas, they want him there 100 per cent," said Otke, a street minister with a social work background in his civilian career.

He's been taking workshops about post-traumatic stress disorder, and about how a community can receive returning soldiers.

The regiment is sending care packages to Afghanistan, and the regiment's leaders aim to meet each soldier at the airport.

“When they say the army is a family, it really is,” he said.

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