

1/2



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Algonquin Public School students Robbie Patridge and Matija Rasich join Cpl. Robin Rickards as he looks through a student-made book honouring past and present soldiers.

A soldier's story *Young veteran meets students*

BY SARAH ELIZABETH BROWN
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After a school assembly Wednesday, a handful of curious Algonquin Avenue students hung back to ask the visiting veteran questions or shake his hand.

Fit and trim, he's not wearing a vet's familiar navy blue blazer, but the desert-camouflage uniform he wore in Afghanistan from February to August.

And he's only 30.

Cpl. Robin Rickards, a Lake Superior Scottish Regiment rifleman and grenadier, spoke to the school's youngsters — all decked out in red and white — about remembering soldiers who've fought overseas as well as those who helped during natural disasters closer to home.

The students prepared poems, a song and a slide show, as well as a book of art and writing that will be sent to Kandahar for

Canadian troops to read.

Called "Celebrating Canadian Soldiers," the book grew from teacher Natalie Corbin's idea of letting overseas soldiers know folks back home are thinking of them. She'd seen a Kandahar-based soldier interviewed on the news and thought how she'd feel if that was her husband with the fatigue and sadness lining his face.

Collecting the books and speaking about why a soldier serves is the sort of thing veterans have been doing for years.

"It is strange to think of oneself as a veteran," said Rickards, who served in Afghanistan with the 1st Battalion, Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry. "I suppose in a way I am a veteran."

It's when he remembers the Legion Prayer — especially the line "Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn" — that

he feels like one.

He ticks off on his fingers the six Canadian soldiers he knew who were killed.

"It's sort of sobering," he said. "I appreciated it before, but now I personally know people who the years won't condemn."

Afghanistan was his second tour — he did a six-month stint in Bosnia three years ago, doing the same sort of work patrolling and searching for weapons.

But in Afghanistan, the situation called for combat duty once insurgents were backed into the Panjwahi district, where many of the Canadian soldiers killed lost their lives.

He and his fellow soldiers lived and worked out of the rough forward operating bases, ending the tour at FOB Costall near the Pakistan border.

• Continued on page A4

Soldier feels compelled to return to Afghanistan

• Continued from page A1

After crouching down Wednesday to hear a young boy's questions and talking with small groups, Rickards said he prefers to connect with kids that way.

They fire away with questions about everything from soldiers' rations to whether Afghans play Nintendo.

Since returning home, he's spoken regularly with people curious about his overseas tour.

It's not the rigours of combat they want to know about — it's the Afghan culture that has people at home curious, he said.

"They're seen almost as exotic zoo creatures," said Rickards, noting the stereotyped photos of stern-faced Afghans, some posed with rifles, some not.

It's ironic because Afghans "crack a smile like that," said Rickards, snapping his fingers.

"But when it comes to taking photos, it's a very serious business."

He has at least three offers from Afghans to go back and stay with them for a visit, but only when things are better.

Afghans know how their country is portrayed in the outside world, said Rickards.

Reporters covering Afghanistan ask to be taken to specific areas — the most devastated ones, said Rickards.

No one takes pictures of the building cranes dotting Kandahar's skyline, he said.

There's lots going on in the country, and Afghans want to show it off, he said, adding the hundreds of Afghan people he met in his six months there, to a person, are grateful for the world's attention and the Canadian presence.

Not that they gave Canadian soldiers an easy time of it on the sports field.

Canadians play shirts against skins, said Rickards. There, they play soccer shoes vs. bare feet.

"If they get some ice time, Canada will never win another World Cup in hockey," said Rickards.

There wasn't a sport the Canadian soldiers could beat their Afghan counterparts in — from soccer to volleyball to basketball. The Canucks couldn't even win in bocce ball.

Rickards is working full-time for the LSSR, a reserve unit slated to be part of the 38 Brigade Group contingent going overseas in 2008 — most likely to Afghanistan.

He wants to go back, and he has the experience. "It would be negligent of me not to," he said.