

## Spirituality

# Soldier's mom grateful for support along Highway of Heroes

By Pete Fisher

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On June 11, 2007, Trooper Darryl Caswell was killed by a roadside bomb while riding in his Coyote armoured vehicle in Afghanistan.

Trooper Caswell, 25, served with the Royal Canadian Dragoons based in Petawawa. He became the 57th member of the Canadian military to die in Afghanistan since 2001.

On May 29, 2008, a dedication ceremony was held at the cenotaph in Bowmanville, Trooper Caswell's home town.

At the Bowmanville Legion following the ceremony, Trooper Caswell's mother, Darlene Cushman, spoke with the *Cobourg Daily Star* about the pain and pride she felt on the day of her son's repatriation at CFB Trenton.

Her love for her son was immediately in evidence. As Ms. Cushman entered the Legion, she kissed a framed photo of her uniformed son that was mounted at the building's entrance.

Ms. Cushman said she cried most of the way to CFB Trenton on June 15, 2007, still unable to accept her son's death.

"I felt that I was going to go get Darryl," she said.

"A typical mom can run and get a Band-Aid; a typical mom can make things better and, for some reason, I had a mixed up denial thing that Darryl was coming home to his mom. But his homecoming was a different homecoming."

While at the base, the waiting was the hardest part.

When the plane bearing her son's body touched down, and taxied to the terminal, Trooper Caswell's family was escorted onto the tarmac.

When the door of the belly of the plane opened to reveal her son's casket, reality hit.

"That was not a bassinet with my baby in it," Ms. Cushman related. "It was a flag-draped casket with my son, a grown man, so close to his 26th birthday."

She remembered her son was scheduled to fly home on his birthday and buy his first house, take his mother's dining room furniture and start his new life.

"We had a lot of dreams that had all of a sudden just been slammed shut," Ms. Cushman said. "Now, I had my son in a casket with all these soldiers crying but trying to be strong."

The casket was lowered into the arms of eight soldiers who placed it in the hearse.

Ms. Cushman and members of Trooper Caswell's family walked up to the black hearse on the tarmac while other soldiers and dignitaries stood in complete silence.

"I walked out and placed a red rose on the Canadian flag and it was truly hitting me," she said. "Now he's home, but this is how he is home."

As the back door of the hearse closed, Ms. Cushman remembers, the curtains were open.

She rode in the first limousine behind the hearse and remembers seeing the rose on her son's flag-draped casket the entire way to Toronto.

"The red rose moved a little, but it never fell off. It stayed on top."

nobody knows their son more than a mom.

"I know my son appreciated small things. He loved everything. He loved adventure, but he'd give you the shirt off his back, and he was my best friend."

When the procession started off at CFB Trenton, it was daylight. By the time it reached Toronto, it was dusk, but Ms. Cushman noticed a single, bright shining star in the sky.

"I believe that's the beginning. Darryl was showing me light."



Corporal Charles Martel, left, and Corporal Wade Wick talk with Darlene Cushman, mother of Trooper Darryl Caswell, Canada's 57th casualty in Afghanistan, at a ceremony in the young man's honour last month.

PHOTO BY NESPHOTOS

The procession headed out from CFB Trenton, passing supporters who had been watching the repatriation service from the fenceline outside the base.

"Everyone was standing tall, saluting," Ms. Cushman said. "Some were crying, some were smiling — but not that kind of smile; it was a smile of comfort."

Ms. Cushman said she thought there would be fewer people as the procession headed for Highway 401.

"But it wasn't that way. There were people all along that highway."

Ms. Cushman said she can close her eyes and see the people on the bridges along the Highway of Heroes.

"I can see spots that truly, truly respected our pain, our loss and the pride they had for a Canadian soldier and this was my son."

"I looked at the flag-covered casket, my rose and back at the people."

She remembers there was a delay in the repatriation, but people waited; waited to pay their respects.

"I can see everything," she recalls. "The support the OPP gave, the fire trucks, the ambulances, the people, the children, the flags. But there are some spots that stand along that Highway of Heroes that stand out, that are magnified in my heart."

A rusty brown pickup truck was pulled over before one of the bridges. No other vehicles were around it.

"There was a father and a teenage boy standing in the back of the pickup truck, saluting as tall as a tall person could be."

"This man had taken the time to pull over his everyday brown pickup truck to get his teenage boy to stand. And they stood shoulder to shoulder, both arms up, in a perfect salute."

Ms. Cushman rolled down the window of the limousine enough to take her small flag and salute the two men in the back of the truck, as she had in Trenton to acknowledge the people.

"The feeling, as a mother following the casket draped with the rose, with the curtains open... Look to your left, look to your right, look up at the bridges, then look back down to why you're doing this — back to reality."

Ms. Cushman said she knows why people line the bridges: to pay tribute to her son. It gave her so much comfort, she said.

"Do I get a good feeling from the Highway of Heroes? You're damn right. You're damn right."

As the procession travelled past Trooper Caswell's hometown of Bowmanville, the Bowmanville Zoo brought an elephant to the bridge, covered by a Canadian flag.

When the procession passed, the elephant stood up and saluted.

Ms. Cushman remembers thinking, "Am I tired, or have I seen so many people and now I think I'm seeing elephants?"

"So, did Canadians disappoint me? Not a chance." At the time of a repatriation, Ms. Cushman said, family is overwhelmed with what is happening, but the Highway of Heroes is the only source of comfort at that time.

"You're still in shock, you're still in denial."

Trooper Caswell had told his mother that he wanted to be back on Canadian soil before he died.

"It's no secret I buried Darryl with grass in his hand. He wanted to come home and touch the grass," Ms. Cushman said.

"I buried Darryl with his little bag of marbles from when he was a little boy. Our little joke was, 'Hey, Mom, I guess I didn't lose my marbles after all. I can't lose my marbles; my Mom has them.' He has them," she said softly.

As for the hundreds of people who stood along the roads and bridges that day to pay respects to a soldier they never knew, "I can never thank them enough — ever."

Ms. Cushman said her son would be extremely proud of the people standing on the bridge.

"He would absolutely thank everyone on those bridges, and I try very hard to do that for him, because