



(Christina Commisso, a reporter with our sister paper *The Burlington Post*, was part of a small group of media representatives recently invited to spend five days with troops in a training session dubbed Maple Guardian in California. The reporters ate rations, pitched tents and were allowed an up-close look at the life of soldiers in training prior to deployment to Afghanistan. During her stay she met up with Halton Hills soldiers Robin Schavo of Acton and Sean Summerfield of Georgetown.)



The mock Afghan village Shar E Tiefort in Fort Irwin, California where Canadian soldiers are currently training.

*Photo courtesy of Sgt. Lance Wade*

# 'We can't fail where other generations have succeeded'

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"I remember I used to watch footage of the war in Bosnia when I was younger. There was a lot of genocide going on and everything seemed so black and white," recalled the 21-year-old Master Cpl., now preparing to embark on an eight-month tour overseas.

Afghanistan was the main reason Summerfield signed up for the reserves.

"I joined in '06, when Canada started going into the southern provinces, and I decided it was something I wanted to do.

"It's an important mission, not just for Canada, but also for the Western world. What happens here will affect the political landscape not just for the Middle East, but for the entire Asian subcontinent."

Schavo and Summerfield will serve on a force protection unit, defending the 32nd Service platoon.

"We protect (convoys) from ambushes and Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs)," said Summerfield.

For two weeks, Maple Guardian is in full swing. When Schavo and Summerfield leave FOB (Forward Operating Base) King, which is home to about 2,000 Canadian soldiers, and make the short trip to one of the several mock Afghan and Iraqi villages re-created in Fort Irwin's vast desert grounds, the line between reality and make-believe becomes blurred.

"They're in Afghanistan...for the next two weeks they will live, eat, breathe and



The entrance to FOB King at the National Training Centre in Fort Irwin, California.

work as if they're in Afghanistan," explained General John Collin, the man in charge of ensuring the troops are ready to go overseas.

Collin noted Fort Irwin, which covers more than 2,500 square-kilometres and is far removed from the California coast and Hollywood glam, boasts a fantastic replication of the climate and geography of Afghanistan, especially when compared to the sub-zero temperatures in Wainwright, Alberta, where Canadian soldiers typically train before deployment.

"You get a bit of a chill on the back of your neck when you land here, it looks like southern Afghanistan," said Collin.

In the emptiness of the Mojave lie little pockets of Afghan civilization.

Villages consist of hundreds of buildings that include mosques, working restaurants and hotels, occupied by paid "actors"—often ex-patriots now living in the U.S.—playing parts of local residents, store owners and town elders.

"The National Training Centre is an outstanding training facility, they've put a lot into it," said Collin. "The villages are reflective of Afghanistan. It's everything we could wish for and then some."

Of the 3,800 Canadians training in Fort Irwin, 2,800 are preparing for deployment, and for 70 per cent of these soldiers it will be their first tour. For this task force, which Collin described as "relatively young", understanding Afghanistan's cultural sensitivities and language is just as important as "good basic soldier skills."

"It's no longer just about combat skills," said Collin, noting the actors in the mock villages speak Pashto or Farsi and soldiers must use their basic understanding of the languages, along with the help of an interpreter, to communicate.

"They're strongly encouraged to play that culture here," Collin added.

A 20-minute drive from FOB King rests the village of Ertebat Shar, a life-size recreation that mirrors the areas Canadian forces will patrol once they deploy.

There, a paid actor says his role in the exercise is to help the soldiers become accustomed to the language, signage and traditions of the Afghan people.

The task force has seven weeks to prepare prior to deployment and two weeks to live the soldier's life during the simulation. But many Canadians at FOB King have dreamed of a mission like this for years—and next to training at Kandahar Airfield, the Mojave is the next best thing.

"Training has changed so much in the desert. It's more realistic without pine trees and snow around," said Schavo, adding he's preparing himself for the cultural shock and desert climate of Afghanistan.

"I'm a Canadian boy. I'm used to maybe 30C in the summer and -20C in the winter. There, it's going to be around 50 to 60C."

And the weather isn't all Schavo is going to miss.

"Sitting on a patio on a hot summer day drinking beer, I'll miss that."

When asked how the Maple Guardian simulation compares to his day job at Acton's Ashgrove Welding Ltd. he says, "Days here can be a little more stressful and a lot longer," as a nearby army helicopter lands close by, stirring up a storm of dust and sand.

"You just don't see this at a desk job. It's (Afghanistan) going to be really hard for me to adjust, going to somewhere that's been war-torn for so many years, from where I can walk down a street without a rifle in my hand and feel safe."

Following in the footsteps of his brother, Schavo says he's looking forward to something different in his life.

"I just want to put my little footprint in history."



Halton Lorne Scots Sean Summerfield (left) of Georgetown and Robin Schavo of Acton.

*Photo by Christina Commisso*

Summerfield hopes to make a little more than a footprint in Afghan soil.

"Even considering the movement against the war, I think all Canadians should support the troops and support democracy," Summerfield says.

"This mission is very important. We have young girls going to school, we're creating security and eventually they'll have a normal economy."

Pointing to the wars fought by his grandparents and great-grandparents, who saw the defeat of Nazism and communism, Summerfield sees extreme Islamic fascism as the enemy.

"We can't fail where other generations have succeeded."