

Serving in Afghanistan

Milton soldier fighting for peace in Kandahar

By Stephanie Thiessen
CANADIAN CHAMPION STAFF

For most Canadians, the news in Afghanistan is something we have the luxury of turning a blind eye to when it becomes uncomfortable — with either the flick of a switch or turn of a page.

But for a native Miltonian serving in the war-torn country and his family at home, such oblivion isn't an option — they're living it every day, whether in person or through their loved one.

For the past three months, Adrian Burton, 34, has been serving in Kandahar, Afghanistan as part of Operation Archer, the Canadian Forces' contribution to Operation Enduring Freedom.

A few weeks ago, The Champion made contact with Lt. Burton and discussed the possibility of doing an article.

And so an interview via e-mail was arranged. It began with a caution from Lt. Burton: There were many things he wouldn't be able to discuss — and specifics he wouldn't be able to provide — for security reasons.

"The enemy reads our news on the 'net too," he said.

True to his word, Lt. Burton couldn't divulge much when asked what he does in Kandahar. What he could say was he's commander of a platoon that's working with local Afghan nationals, the Afghan National Army and coalition soldiers regularly.

Some of the duties of Canadian soldiers include providing security, stabilizing a fragile economy, reconstruction, and educating and training the local Afghan nationals.

"We are helping the weak and unfortunate who can't help themselves," Lt. Burton said.

He made no efforts to hide the ugly parts of the mission. In June, one of the men in his platoon — from Ottawa — was severely wounded in a rocket attack.

But Lt. Burton said he wanted to focus on the positive — namely the bravery of the soldiers.

"The news is so depressing just talking about how troops are dying," he said. "This great country formed its identity on the labours of our brave men and we are doing it again here in Afghanistan."

Family optimistic

His mother, longtime Miltonian Faye Burton, said she also tries to look on the bright side.

"We all try to have a positive attitude and be optimistic about the whole thing," she said. "We're concerned, but hopefully he's safe — he and everyone else there."

She follows the nightly news religiously because it's often her only source of information, she said, adding it's not always comforting.

"I do feel very nervous when I see the news and I see Canadian soldiers and other soldiers getting killed," she said.

Burton said she wasn't surprised years ago when her son told her he wanted to join the army, although it was difficult to accept at first because of the inherent danger.

"He was always fascinated with the army," she explained, adding even though she and Lt. Burton's father, Roger, didn't give him weapons to play with, he always ended up pretending he was in the army.

Lt. Burton is the youngest of five siblings, but his mother said he's always had a protective attitude toward those he cares for.

It's upsetting when some people say Canadians shouldn't be in Afghanistan, she

said, since her son is making personal sacrifices to help the people there.

"He's there for a reason — to bring peace... I'm very proud of him."

Lt. Burton grew up in Milton and then attended Sheridan College in Oakville, where he studied law and security. After graduation, he joined the army for "a sense of adventure," Lt. Burton said.

He traveled across Europe, the U.S. and Canada as a non-commissioned member of the Royal Canadian Regiment (an infantry regiment of the Canadian Forces), third battalion.

Three years into the experience, Lt. Burton said he decided to move on and worked in the health and fitness industry.

Never one to remain stagnant, Lt. Burton decided after a few more years he wanted to join the military once again, but wanted to pursue it part-time so he could work toward other goals.

He moved around Halton quite a bit during this time, spending a year in Burlington and working in Oakville for a couple of years.

Airborne unit exciting

He joined the Lorne Scots regiment in Oakville and then moved to Toronto where he became part of the Queen's Own Rifles of Canada. This is a light infantry regiment of the Canadian Forces Reserve with the flexibility to quickly drive, jump or chopper into combat as opposed to the more slow moving armor or mechanized infantry.

"It was a natural fit," he said. "They are an airborne unit, so I joined the ranks of paratroopers and started jumping out of planes. It was and still is a rush."

When he returns home, probably in December, Lt. Burton said he's going to spend time with his family and friends. Career-wise, he said he might join the army full-time or go into the private sector.

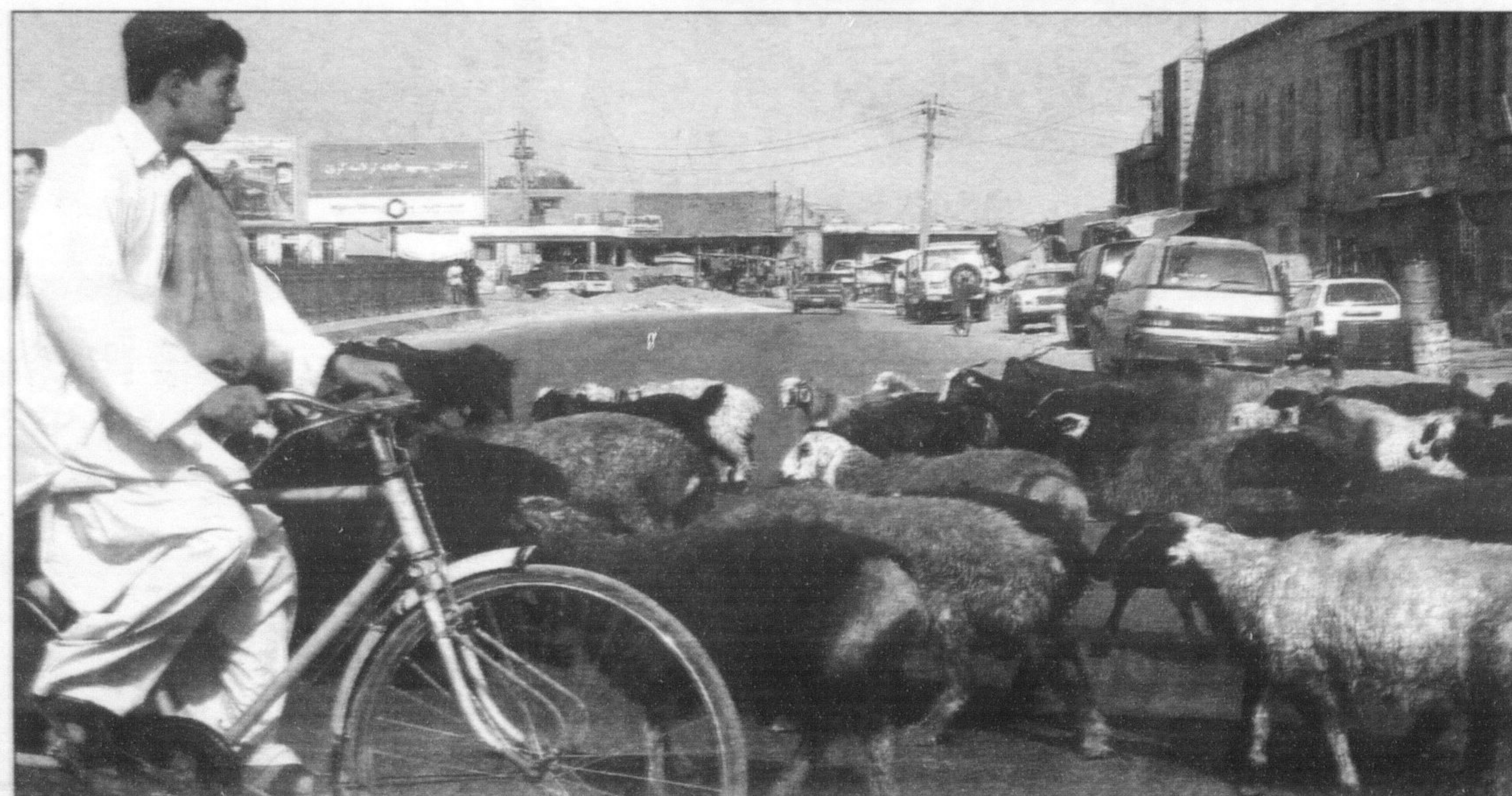
As for young people thinking about joining the army, Lt. Burton said it's nothing to jump into lightly.

"The places we are going now can be very hostile, so they need to know what they are getting into," he said, adding recruits need to be mentally and physically fit, team oriented and flexible.

Benefits include a chance to see the world, learn different languages — Lt. Burton is learning Pashto, one of two national languages in Afghanistan — and be exposed to different cultures, he said.

"This opportunity has given me such an experience I shall not soon forget," he said.

Stephanie Thiessen can be reached at sthiessen@miltoncanadianchampion.com.



At top, Milton soldier Adrian Burton — who's currently serving in Kandahar, Afghanistan — stands with his heavy gear. Above, a photo of dirt-covered roads illustrates a typical scene as Burton navigates the infrastructure. At left, livestock contributes to a different sort of gridlock in downtown Kandahar. Lt. Burton is one of many Canadian soldiers in Afghanistan who are helping stabilize the country's fragile economy as well as contribute to reconstruction, education and training. He arrived at his post about three months ago and is hoping to be back in Milton by Christmas.