



Brendan Insley was surprised to hook up with boy scouts during his tour of duty in Afghanistan. He was a scout in Ballantrae.

On duty in Kabul at Christmas

Former Musselman's Lake resident Brendan Insley is on a six-month tour in Kabul, Afghanistan, with Canadian Forces. A field instructor at the artillery training base in Meaford, Ont., he was promoted to captain and served a tour of duty in Bosnia in 2006. The former Ballantrae scout's family now lives in Rockwood, Ont.

BY BRENDAN INSLEY

Our mission here, although fraught with danger and the occasional setback, continues to make progress.

Despite the continued security issues, most Afghan people agree their lives are better now than under the Taliban. I am proud to continue serving the Canadian people and to share this important mission with fellow coalition soldiers.

I would like to thank everyone for their e-mails and words of support during the Christmas season. It's nice to know everyone is thinking of their deployed troops at this time of year. I am blessed with regular e-mail access, but it's still nice to get something the old-fashioned way.

During the last few days, I have spent my one or two free hours each night responding to the "any Canadian peacekeeper" letters that are forwarded to us from school kids across Canada.

I got a batch from some students out in British Columbia and have posted them around my workspace.

Despite Christmas not having much of an effect on the tempo of operations for the Afghan National Army, it has made it more difficult for us to get things done around here.

A large number of coalition personnel have understandably taken their leave during the holiday season to be home with their families. This, combined with our inability to get answers from people back in the United States has had a serious impact on how long it takes to get any-

thing done.

There was talk of rounding up all the Canadians in the Kabul area and bringing them to the British Camp for Christmas, but I volunteered to take guard duty that day. I just figured the American soldiers who spend their entire days or nights guarding our camp could use the day off more than me. I knew I would find a way to celebrate the event in my own way.

Our team has done a good job of decorating our office which now has no less than three small Christmas trees, several garlands and stockings hung from just about every nail in the wall. The two Germans who work in our section distributed advent calendars and I dutifully ate that small piece of chocolate each day.

My current project involves developing a plan for the training of Afghan weapon technicians so that they are prepared to maintain the U.S. weapons they are scheduled to receive over the next few years.

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The difficulty is their current military culture does not place much importance on proper weapons maintenance, something that will become a critical problem as they move from the AK-47 to the M16. An additional challenge is the Afghan army has no personnel trained in this capacity and, considering the literacy level of the average Afghan soldier, it will be a monumental task to have this in place before they lose confidence in their new weapons.

It's my hope we can adopt an Afghan-first

approach that will allow for the training of a small cadre of soldiers by U.S. personnel who, in turn, will act as the instructors for future courses. Along with giving them the required toolkits, this would allow us to not only assist them in building this capability, but empower them to sustain it.

I had an exciting week recently in Afghanistan. I had the opportunity to go to a city named Jalalabad (J-bad) and spend a few days with the American embedded training team living on an Afghan army base.

The purpose of my mission was to administer a test to potential officer candidates for the ANA but, due to a number of helicopter cancellations, I ended up getting delayed in Jalalabad for a few days, giving me the opportunity to be exposed to an entirely different perspective of Afghan life.

We tested 800 people at my location alone but it remains to be seen how many of them will pass the literacy and general knowledge requirements to be offered a job. Prior to the exam, we had an exercise in administration that would have tested even the best staff officer. We had to create 15,000 copies of a 15-page test in four different versions to prevent cheating.

We had only five days to get all of the exams finished and flown to six cities throughout Afghanistan. Alone, I had to haul 240 pounds of paper in two trunks, as well as all of my personal gear.

I flew into J-bad on an American Blackhawk helicopter and had to wait around at the airfield for a few hours until a convoy came to pick me up. But everything went off without a hitch.

I was even surprised to find out the scouting movement is alive and well in Jalalabad. One of the teachers is the local scout leader and he uses the older boys to escort the children back and forth to school safely.

Lord Baden Powell would be proud.

AT THE SCHOOLS

Board focuses on literacy

The York Region District School Board has highlighted three of 12 literacy initiatives, with the rest to be discussed at future board meetings.

The first is shared beliefs and understandings among all staff referring to literacy.

All schools within the board share the following beliefs:

- All students can achieve high standards given the right time and support;
- All teachers can teach to high standards given the right assistance;
- High expectations and early intervention are essential and;
- Teachers need to be able to articulate what they do and why they teach the way they do.

The second initiative is each school designates a literacy teacher to work with the rest of the staff.

This teacher will also act as a model for best practices in teaching literacy.

The latest vignette highlighted is the daily, sustained, focused literacy instruction initiative.

Schools must commit to include literacy-specific lessons on a daily basis.

For more information, visit www.yrdsb.edu.on.ca

New schools for new year

With the population of York Region steadily increasing comes the need for more schools.

Many York Region District School Board construction projects have been under way for at least a year in hopes of completing many for the start of the 2007 school year.

Additions to be completed and open for use in the spring include three secondary schools:

- Thornhill Secondary School Library addition, Dudley Avenue;
- King City Secondary School science addition, King Road and
- Bayview Secondary School science addition, Bayview Avenue, Richmond Hill.

The board reports all three additions are slightly behind schedule.

New schools scheduled to open in September include:

- Michelle Jean Public School, Richmond Hill, behind schedule;
- Sir Wilfrid Laurier Public School, Markham, on schedule;
- Little Rouge Public School, Markham, on schedule;
- Teston Village Public School, Vaughan, behind schedule;
- Carrville Mills Public School, Vaughan, on schedule;
- Harman Public School, Aurora, on schedule;
- Bur Oak Secondary School, Markham, on schedule; and
- Stouffville District Secondary School, Stouffville, on schedule.



**MARKHAMSPRING
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Markham Fairgrounds
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If you would like to be part of this event please call:

- Karen 905-294-2200 x 265
- Johanne 905-294-2200 x 255



FEATURED GUEST SPEAKERS

Friday, February 23 at 1:30pm —
Marjorie Mason, Mason Hogue Gardens, Uxbridge.



Saturday, February 24 at 1:30 & 3:30pm —
Mark Cullen, Canada's gardening expert!

