

Christmas

"Outside the Wire"

It's 2000 hours on Christmas Eve, and I'm smoking a cigar in the cool darkness with Chief of Defence Staff General Rick Hillier, "outside the wire," at a base called Mas'um'Ghar. Engrossed in discussions of war and peace, people and politics, philosophy and leadership, I'm struck by the thought that this must surely rate as my most meaningful Christmas ever – spent under the protection of Alpha Company 2 PPCLI (Combat Engineers), and the Lord Strathcona's Horse (Royal Canadians).



Earlier, we had visited the logistics lifeline for Canada's role in restoring what had been taken away by the Taliban. In 2006, more than 27,000 personnel and three-and-a-half million kilograms of supplies have moved into Afghanistan.

We are here to visit Canadians committed to the 36-country United Nations International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) under NATO Command. ISAF is tasked with stabilizing and rebuilding war torn Afghanistan. With us are MPs Jay Hill and John Baird, comedians Rick Mercer and Mary Walsh, broadcaster Max Keeping; and singer songwriter Damhnait Doyle.

Christmas Eve day brought a U.S. Army Chinook helicopter (with an

Above: Senior Officers and politicians dish out the Christmas turkey to hungry troops. Below, from left: Conservative MPs, John Baird, Laurie Hawn, and Jay Hill – moving on to their next destination.



Apache gunship escort), to airlift us to bring greetings to Charles Company 1 Royal Canadian Regiment. General Hillier's magic with the troops was clearly evident. He is truly a soldier's General, and I flashback to the movie *Patton*.

We left "C" Coy in the claustrophobic confines of a LAV III armoured personnel carrier, and headed for another outpost where we served turkey dinner to Bravo Company 1 RCR. General Hillier and I kibitzed about the Leafs and the Oilers, and we all noted our pride in our soldiers, and how much Canadians at home appreciate their sacrifice and commitment.

Back at Mas'um'Ghar, we retired to our sleeping bags and I reflected on the privilege of sharing a special night with special Canadians. Going to Game Six of the 2006 Stanley Cup Final in Edmonton with the Prime Minister is now the second coolest thing I've done in my new job.

I awoke at about 2200 hours to the distant sound of several high explosive bombs hitting their targets. Someone was busy, and it wasn't Santa Claus. Getting up for a nocturnal natural necessity marked the first time I've done that with an armed escort wearing night vision goggles. It's nice to know that someone values politicians.

On Christmas Day, we switched rides to the Nyala armoured patrol vehicle. It's not as protective as the LAV III and rides like a Brahma bull; but it gave us a good look at villages, people and countryside along the notorious "ambush alley."

Although on alert to potential threats, all we saw were Afghans getting on with life. Shops were open and most adults watched passively as we rolled by. Kids smiled and waved thumbs up. Some were having a snowball fight, but they declined to "attack" our convoy. It would have been fun to join in, but potential headlines – "Conservative MPs attack Afghan children" – kept us on our way.

Our next stop was "home" to a Royal Canadian Dragoons Recce Squadron and 2 Royal Canadian Horse Artillery ("the guns"). With great interest, we watched their work with the new 155 mm M777 howitzer. It's an impressive (and loud), piece of firepower, and we toted the 100-pound rounds from the rack to the gun. Good exercise, but I can't imagine doing it for hours in 50° heat.

The Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) in Kandahar City was out next

stop. More food, more talk and a live Christmas address by the Prime Minister at 0300 Ottawa time. The PRT focuses on reconstruction, and is working hard to help Afghans do it themselves. It's frustrating by western standards, but they're a committed bunch.

After 30 hours outside the wire, we arrived back at Kandahar Airfield for Tim Horton's double-doubles and the Christmas show for 800 soldiers and civilians. CTV's Max Keeping emceed the event – Rick Mercer and Mary Walsh had them rolling in the aisles; the band, Jonas, and singer, Damhnait Doyle, had them dancing in the aisles; and Hillier inspired them. The troops enjoyed their ration of



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Conservative MP, LCol (ret) Laurie Hawn addresses troops in Afghanistan



General Hillier asks the key question: Are you a Leafs fan, soldier?

"That's serious firepower," notes Laurie Hawn, taking a look at one of the new M777 Howitzer guns that are in use in Afghanistan. Produced by BAE SYSTEMS, the rapidly deployable M777 provides accurate artillery fire support. It is the world's first 155mm Howitzer weighing under 10,000 lbs. The weapon has also been selected by the U.S. Marine and Army Corps.



two beers and, for a few hours, could just enjoy the moment.

Our final stop was a trip north to Kabul to visit ISAF. We had the unique opportunity to speak with Abdul Wardak, Afghanistan's Defence Minister, former CDS, and former Mujahadeen fighter against the Russians. He has seen it all, knew Osama bin Laden, and has some very interesting insights into decades of regional history. He believes that Osama is still alive and being protected by other parties in the area. He also feels that Afghanistan paid a high price in the downfall of the Soviet Union and believes that the West now has an obligation to keep his country from failing. He's grateful for ISAF and Canada.

Christmas in Afghanistan was a wonderful experience. A personal highlight was chance meetings with about 20 people with whom I had previously served. Progress is being made in security, reconstruction, training the Afghan National Army and Police Force, and promoting a good justice system and good governance.

Our troops bring food and medicine, as well as security. Progress is slower than anyone wants, but it is real, and all we heard was commitment to and confidence in the mission. More Canadians should see and hear this.

The round trip from Edmonton took 48 hours flying time with Air Canada, CF Airbus, C-130 Hercules, and U.S. Army Chinook. We had 15 in-flight meals and 15 in-flight movies. I plan to do it again next Christmas. **FL**

LCol (ret) Laurie Hawn is the Conservative MP for Edmonton Centre. This article is based on a letter printed in the Edmonton Journal. Reprinted with permission.