

# Christmas

## "In Flak Jackets"

A few months ago, General Rick Hillier promised me a Christmas I would never forget; turns out he is a man of his word.



DND PHOTO

**Cpl Ryan Thorburn, Laurie Hawn, Jay Hill, and Rick Mercer settle in to a C-130 Hercules for a quiet & comfy flight to the next stop.**

General Hillier is a very persuasive man. He is also a Newfoundlander. And while he is the Chief of the Canadian Forces it has been suggested that he might think he is the chief of all Newfoundlanders. He'll call you up and suggest that on Dec. 25 there is only one place you should be – and it's so special that by agreeing to go there you render your life insurance null and void. You aren't asked so much as you are voluntold.

On Christmas morning, I found myself in Sperwan Ghar in the Panjwai district of Afghanistan sitting around a single-burner Coleman stove with a dozen Canadian soldiers. *Rush* was on the stereo and we were watching a pot of Tetley tea bags threaten to boil. Outside it was wet and muddy, but inside the sandbag bunker where these Royal Canadian Dragoons ate and slept, it was warm and as comfortable as one could expect under the circumstances. Corporal Frank Farrell was in charge of the pot, and this was *not* to be rushed.

This was my third trip to Afghanistan, but my first at Christmas. General Hillier was on a personal mission to shake hands with every man and woman wearing a Canadian uniform in Afghanistan and the

Persian Gulf and I was along for the ride. The way he described it was simple: "It's Christmas" he said, "and all we are going to do is pop in and say hello to a few folks."

In Canada "popping in to say hello" at Christmas is just a matter of arranging for a designated driver or making sure you have cab fare. This was a little more complicated. It started with a nine-hour flight overseas, stopping in Croatia for gas, and then onward to a military base that dare not speak its name or reveal its location. Once there, we immediately boarded a Sea King helicopter for a night flight across the water so we could land on the deck of the HMCS *Ottawa*.

On this leg of the trip there were three other Newfoundlanders: broadcaster Max Keeping; singer songwriter Damhnait Doyle; and my old colleague Mary Walsh – and three members of the Conservative caucus: whip Jay Hill; MP Laurie Hawn; and John Baird (now the Environment Minister). I was

happy they were issued flak jackets and helmets because I had a sneaking suspicion that the combination of Walsh and the three Tories might make some recent skirmishes with the Taliban insurgency seem tame in comparison. If it came down to a three-on-one donnybrook, my money was on the Princess Warrior.

And so, on the night before Christmas Eve, our little gang of Newfoundlanders, along with 50 or so sailors, closed the mess on HMCS *Ottawa*. We laughed until we were stupid. It felt like Christmas.

After sunrise General Hillier addressed the troops on the deck of the ship. This was the first of countless speeches he would give over the next four days. He is funny as hell and inspiring as anyone I have ever known. He makes soldiers laugh and then he makes them cry, and he thanks them all in a way that makes everyone stand a bit taller.

From a show business perspective he is a tough act to follow, but follow we did. When it came Damhnait's turn to say a few words she sang a song, and if there is a better way to kick off an adventure than watching Damhnait Doyle and 250 sailors sing "O Canada" on the deck of a Canadian battleship as it sails the Gulf, I can't think of it.

After *Ottawa*, it was back to the base for a three-hour nap before a 3 a.m. wake-up call for the flight to Kandahar. Once in Kandahar we had the standard briefing that is mandatory for visiting entertainers and or the head-injured. When the siren goes, do what you're told, when everything seems fine, do what you're told and, when in doubt, do what you're told.

From there we went "over the wire." It was Christmas Eve and General Hillier wanted to make it to all the forward operating bases. These bases are all former



**Mary Walsh evaluates the naughty and nice in the crowd as she "distributes" goodies during a Christmas night concert for troops at the Kandahar Airfield in the newly built Canadian gym.**

PHOTO: CPL DAVID MCCORD



*A solemn photo op before things get silly on HMCS Ottawa.*

PHOTO: DND

Taliban strongholds. For the most part they are high points of land that were hard-fought for. Some of the bases are nothing but points of land with soldiers living in tents, trenches and bunkers. This is the front line of a war.

Charlie Company, at Patrol Base Wilson, was the first group. These are the men and women who are working under maximum threat levels in Afghanistan. They are out there on patrol every day, for days at a time, engaging the enemy. They have all lost friends here. They have a bit of the ten-thousand mile stare – which is to be expected – so from the point of view of a guy who tells jokes for a living this is what you would call a tough crowd. General Hillier was right though, he told me that just showing up was enough and everything else was gravy.

That afternoon we made our way by convoy to Strong Point West, home to Bravo Company. It was still Christmas Eve and we arrived in time to help serve their Christmas meal. General Hillier worked the turkey, senior officers worked the potatoes and vegetables and I pulled up the rear as chief gravy server. I must admit I felt pretty darn important serving

the gravy. These guys get a cooked meal about every three to four days. For the most part they eat rations out of a bag. Plus they get shot at. Anything hot with gravy is a very, very big deal. As the man with the gravy ladle I was probably – for the duration of the serving line – the most popular man on Earth.

And so, this year for Christmas dinner I sat on the ground in the dust and ate turkey loaf and gravy on a paper plate. Everyone except me had a gun. There was lots of talk of home and, like anyone's Christmas dinner, there were lots of pictures being taken.

Everywhere you go in Afghanistan where there are Canadian soldiers you see Christmas cards and letters supporting the troops. Some of the tents and accommodations are decorated with so many home-made cards from school kids that you would swear you had wandered into an elementary school lunchroom and not a mess hall. It's amazing to see groups of battle-weary soldiers wrapped in ammunition and guns stopping to read these things with the attention that is usually reserved solely for the parent. I was in a tent with two guys in their early 20s who

were poring over a stack of letters and class photos and separating them into piles. I was a little taken aback that these young guys, in the middle of a war zone, would be so moved by support from Grade 4 classes until I realized the deciding factor for the favourites pile was which teacher was hotter.

On Christmas morning, the convoy headed to Sperwan Ghar. The troops here sleep in dugouts with sandbag perimeters. After the speeches and hellos a corporal asked me back to his quarters for a cup of tea. He was, like so many guys here, a Newfoundlander. And so that's where I spent Christmas morning, watching Cpl Farrell stir the teapot while a dozen or so guys hung out and exchanged cards and had a few laughs. The crowd in the bunker wasn't there just for the tea. They had been waiting a long time for Cpl Farrell to open the Eversweet margarine tub that he received a few weeks ago. In the tub was his mom's Christmas cake. When the tea was perfect and our paper cups were filled, the tub was opened and we all agreed: Bernadette Farrell makes the best Christmas cake in Canada.

The trip carried on. We visited more forward operating bases. General Hillier made good on his goal of shaking hands with practically every soldier in harm's way this Christmas. By late afternoon we took the convoy back through "ambush alley" to the main base in Kandahar for the prime show for about 800 soldiers in the newly opened Canada House.

Max Keeping was our Master of Ceremonies, Gen Hillier gave a speech of a lifetime, Mary Walsh made me laugh like the old days, Damhnait Doyle sang like an angel and the Montreal rock band Jonas played late into the night. I was supposed to take the mic for 15 minutes, but I stayed for 25. A tad selfish but, honestly, I can't imagine I will have so much fun performing ever again.

Everywhere we went on this trip men and women in uniform thanked our little gang for giving up our Christmas to be with them in Afghanistan. I know that I speak for everyone when I say we gave very little and we received far too much. We met great friends, we had lots of laughs and, dare I say, had the best Christmas ever! **FL**

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*On to our next stop via Nyala express.*