

BLATCHFORD'S TAKE: FALLEN SOLDIER

In the end, will the price we pay in Afghanistan be worth it?



CHRISTIE BLATCHFORD
CBLATCHFORD@GLOBEANDMAIL.COM
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She made the same trip - the long road home - in the belly of a Hercules and then in an Airbus that now 86 Canadian soldiers, one of them her own dear son, also have made.

Andrew (Boomer) Eykelenboom and his fellow fallen comrades were in coffins when they came back to Canada from Afghanistan. Maureen Eykelenboom was alive, as perhaps she hasn't been since Boomer was killed in a suicide bombing on Aug. 11, 2006, because, at last, she was exquisitely alive to the enormity of her loss and the grief she had kept at bay with the work and travel and sheer distracting busy-ness of Boomer's Legacy, the charity she set up after Boomer's death.

Every time I have seen her or talked to her in the past year, as she moved across the country pitching fundraising projects, giving speeches, working with other bereaved parents of soldiers or raising money, Mrs. Eykelenboom has been resolutely composed, seeming if not quite cheerful, always sanguine, that wonderful word that my Oxford dictionary describes as having a temperament that is a "courageous, hopeful, amorous disposition."

But for once, in the back of that plane, picturing the lanky drink of water who was her young son on his last flight in another Herc, she couldn't suck it up or push back the tide of emotions.

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In the summary of her visit to Kandahar Air Field earlier this month that with typical efficiency this small determined woman has already put together for the Canadian Forces, Mrs. Eykelenboom wrote, "I will never forget being in the back between the cargo, giving myself that permission to sob, alone at first," until some of those travelling with her heard the sounds of her sobs over the roar of the engines and came back to comfort her.

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Her assisting officer, Lieutenant (1st) Dave Disbury, a social worker, told me I was really good in my head, but I hadn't dealt with Andrew's death in my heart ... my first instinct was to deny, for my heart truly has been broken. But I couldn't deny him then, because I knew he was right. I totally recognize now how much I have hidden by keeping busy with the Legacy fund or with Boomer Caps [the little caps knitted by Canadian moms for Afghan babies and youngsters], just how much I sealed that door on my heart and would not go in."

She had a legitimate reason beyond the impetus of most next-of-kin visits, as these things are called, for going to Kandahar.

Boomer's Legacy gives every cent of its donated money to the Assistance to Afghanistan Trust Fund, which in turn puts cash quickly and with a minimum of red tape into the hands of Canadian soldiers - mostly those who work most closely with Afghans out of the Provincial Reconstruction Office in Kandahar City - who see a need.

Four projects are now under way that meet the intent of Boomer's Legacy, "to directly support the people of Afghanistan affected by poverty and war with emphasis on programs and services for women and children." Boomer was a medic, and was terribly affected by the kids he met on his tour.

Two children, a little boy with a major facial disfigurement and a 12-year-old girl with a congenital heart defect, have been successfully treated in Pakistan; a newborn whose mother died in childbirth has received surgery correcting a condition that had required a colostomy bag, and a little girl with cerebral palsy now has a wheelchair modified for her needs.

Mrs. Eykelenboom was there to present a cheque for \$80,000, bringing to \$128,000 the amount that the Boomer fund has given thus far to the Assistance to Afghanistan fund, and she did this on Canada Day.

In her four-day trip, she also spent a lot of time talking to soldiers, some of whom had served with Boomer in 2006 and were on their second tour. They noticed significant positive changes since they had first been in Kandahar, and their natural optimism and knowledge that they are making a difference buoyed Mrs. Eykelenboom.

There was, as she says, no political rhetoric, no agenda, with the troops. "They spoke from their hearts," she says, "and you can say, yes, it is good; yes, they're making a difference.

"We want to know that the price that is being paid is in the end going to be worth it. As a mother I can hardly even say that. Is losing my son worth it? In the bigger picture of history, if we can make a difference, then maybe yeah."

She met Niaz Hussaini, the young Afghan interpreter whose life Boomer is credited with saving. Mr. Hussaini, who lost both legs in a rocket-propelled grenade attack and is now walking on artificial legs with the help of a cane, remembers that day well, and told her how the young medic gave him the feeling that he had no choice but to survive. "He's lovely," Mrs. Eykelenboom says. "I didn't want him to go. I just wanted to absorb being in his presence. Knowing he's alive just makes it okay."

The highs were high, the lows lower than she could have imagined. "Would I go back again?" she asks. "You betcha. As awful as that place is, as hard as it is, as hot as it is, I'd be back in a flash. But not as a tourist, only if I could help. I understand totally why they go back for a second rotation, or more."

Sometimes, she'd look at the young soldiers, think, "He looks like Andrew, but that's not his smile ... I was wanting Andrew to come walking around a corner. I know that's not real, but I still want it."

For more information, go to <http://www.boomerslegacy.ca>.