

Their final journey together

A soldier must bring his fallen friend home: 'This is going to be hard'

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Wounded Master Cpl. Hugh Brennan has spent this New Year's in his hotel room waiting for the phone to ring.

When it does he will travel one more time with Pte. Michael Freeman, his close friend killed in the line of duty Dec. 26, for the final leg of his journey home to Peterborough.

"At some point the coroner is going to call," Brennan said in an interview last night. "I don't know when."

In Toronto, he waits and licks his physical, psychological and emotional wounds received as he was sitting beside Freeman when he was killed in Afghanistan.

An autopsy has to be conducted on the 28-year-old who died after being blown up by an improvised explosive device on Boxing Day near the Canadian Armed Forces base near Kandahar. He is one of 104 Canadian soldiers to die in Afghanistan and one of nine in the month of December.

And to think, less than a week ago Brennan and Freeman, and all of the rest of the LAV (light armoured vehicle) team of 3rd Battalion Royal Canadian Regiment's 5 Platoon based in Petawawa, were celebrating Christmas.

The next day it was back to work. Nine Canadian soldiers climbed into the LAV and headed out on patrol.

"We stopped for lunch at the forward operating base," recalled Brennan, who grew up in Belleville and whose parents now live in Napanee. "Then we headed back out and at 12:45 it happened."

The blast was severe.

"I saw yellow smoke and smelled diesel," said Brennan. "Then I saw and felt rocks hitting me in the face. It was happening fast but it felt like it was going on for 10 minutes."

The badly damaged LAV ended up on its side. "For me it felt like getting punched in the face," he said. "We were hit really hard."

When the dust literally settled, one by one the crew tried to get out of the vehicle.

"Because of my pack I was stuck," he said.

Seated next to Freeman, he was looking to try to get him out. He then he heard the words that have been ringing in his ears ever since.

"Somebody yelled, 'Mike's gone. You have to get out because the vehicle is on fire.'"

At that point "one of the guys pulled me out." He saw some of the crew "lying on the ground" and the "crew commander administering first aid."

Brennan's back was badly twisted and he received several deep puncture wounds. "What really surprised me was how calm everyone was," said Brennan, who is on his second tour in Afghanistan. "We had to get something done and we did it."

Several needed medical attention but will recover. Freeman took the brunt of the blast.

"It is always in the back of our minds," he said of IED's.

But you learn to live with it. "We all know if it happens, it happens," he said.

It happened to them.

And even though they rationalize it, the last few days, being with him when he died and then being the one who escorts him home, has been devastating for the 25-year-old Brennan, who is on pain medication.

"I don't know if it has hit me yet," he said of his friend's death. "The hardest part is I have not seen his family yet. That is going to be hard."

That will happen when the coroner releases Freeman's body. Brennan will travel with him to Peterborough where there will be a funeral on Monday.

He said he is bringing home one special soldier. And one special person. "He was an extremely hard worker and one of the best drivers I have ever known," said Brennan of his pal. "When we would bitch and complain he would just laugh about it."

Nothing fazed him. He was the capable driver who always knew what to do and when to do it.

"I gave him the name Chewy -- as in Chewbacca from Star Wars," said Brennan, for the first time in our interview offering a short chuckle.

"He called me Han Solo," he said. "I would say punch it Chewy and then we would take off (in the LAV)."

Away from battle and patrols, Freeman was an interesting young man who had a young, kind, adventurous and generous spirit. "His dad sent him his golf clubs and he has his own driving range near our tent," said Brennan. "When he would hit balls, the local kids would run out and get them. He would always pay them with candy and food. He was priceless. He was like everybody's crazy brother. He was a real character."

The Canadian soldiers enjoy the Afghan people -- which makes it so difficult to accept that some of the population wants them dead. But, he said, it is the minority. "I have seen the positive," Brennan said of the work Canadians have achieved there. "I believe a good percentage does appreciate that but some are on the fence and those are the ones we have to (convince)."

Until they do, they are deadly. "The insurgents have no chance in a firefight. We would take them out every time, so using the IED's is their only chance," he said. "They are getting pretty good at it."

The military investigates every death and wherever possible eradicates those responsible and destroys their laboratories. As far as appropriate retribution toward those who killed Freeman and two others the next day, his response was "use one's imagination."

The fact those in combat zones are at constant risk does not deter them. They are a close-knit unit, who would all dive in front of a bullet to save each other. "Watching the guys say goodbye to him in Kandahar was really hard," he said.

But witnessing the outpouring of emotion on the Highway of Heroes trek from CFB Trenton to Toronto Tuesday, solidified for him that a country is behind them. "I don't think there has been a moment in my life when I was prouder to be a Canadian," said Brennan, who limped over to the crowd and shook the hands and hugged supporters as he arrived in Toronto. "It was special and breathtaking."

He said he had heard of the Highway of Heroes but didn't realize it would be like that. He plans to tell his fellow soldiers when he gets back to the war. "Once I am healed up I am going to go back overseas," he said, adding Pte. Freeman would have done that if he had lived and it was someone else who died. "I don't want to leave my section shorthanded."

Before he can get back to help, there's a phone call and a funeral that have to happen first.

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