

Driver of LAV gets coin for fallen soldier

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KANDAHAR — Cpl. Dany Olivier Fortin got his coin.

It was a treasured souvenir, a special coin handed out by the chief of the defence staff, and it was placed on Fortin's flag-draped casket in the belly of the big Hercules that carried Fortin, Warrant Officer Dennis Brown of St. Catharines and Cpl. Kenneth O'Quinn on their journey home.

The three Canadian soldiers were killed Tuesday when their armoured vehicle struck an improvised explosive device (IED) on a road in the Arghandab District northwest of Kandahar City, a usually quiet area, if such a thing can exist here in the dangerous dust.

The coin was placed on Fortin's casket, where his beret and a medal already rested, by Sapper Darryl Dawson, a 23-year-old from Whitby who will show you the type of soldiers and the quality of the men and women who represent our country here.

Dawson had been driving the vehicle.

It was late in the afternoon Tuesday on a brilliantly sunny day and the vehicle they call a LAV (light armoured vehicle) was returning from a successful defusing of an IED that had been reported earlier in the day. These soldiers are part of the quick reaction force, members of the provincial reconstruction team based in Kandahar City. They do some of the most dangerous and important work here, clearing the roads of the sickeningly ingenious devices, often made up of discarded batteries and wire, old mines or rockets.

"We were about half way home," Dawson said Thursday, sitting in the sun outside New Canada House at Kandahar Airfield, "when we hit whatever it was."

The blast propelled Dawson up and out from his driver's seat, his helmeted head forcing open the hatch closed above him, but not bolted, and ejecting him out over the front of the vehicle. A big contraption on the front of the LAV designed to cut wires that might maim a soldier on top of the LAV kept Dawson from falling onto the road.

The fact Dawson, a tall man, likes to hook his toes under a heater block while he drives kept him from getting blown straight out of the vehicle. That and the fact the hatch probably slowed him down a bit.

"I don't lock it down," Dawson said. "I'd rather be thrown out than break my neck inside."

He's not supposed to tuck his toes under the heater box.

"I wasn't wearing my seatbelt, either," said Dawson, "for the same reason I don't lock down the hatch."

Stunned by the blast that ripped through the vehicle, Dawson still had the presence of mind to know the engine continued to run and was smoking. He crawled back inside and pulled the engine stop lever.

"I thought the engine might catch fire. I could see the back (of the LAV) from where I sit and I couldn't see anything."

He scrambled back and found a wounded comrade, removing what he called "a big slab of metal," that was resting on top of him, as well as dirt and branches. He unclipped the wounded soldier's helmet and called for help from the medics.

"They pulled me off him, sat me down and took my armour off and my helmet off," Dawson said. "I tried to talk to him and keep him calm."

Dawson doesn't remember much after that, except waking up strapped to a stretcher with a neck brace on in the hospital.

"My only request was to (use the washroom) and have a smoke," he said.

When his CAT scan came back clear — he suffered just scrapes and a sore back — Dawson had the cigarette.

He was visited by Chief of the Defence staff Gen. Walt Natynczyk, who gave Dawson one of the souvenir coins representative of his position (it is a popular custom in the military).

Dawson looked at the coin and was reminded of a pledge he had made to Fortin. They had been on parade at a forward base a while ago, but somehow missed out on receiving the souvenir coin offered that day.

"That was a waste of time," they said to each other. "Why'd we come?"

Dawson told Fortin he would get them both coins at some point. He thought about that as he turned in his hand the coin the Natynczyk had given him.

"It was useless to me if Dany didn't get one, so I was going to give him mine," Dawson said.

Dawson's need of another coin made its way back to Natynczyk.

He gave Dawson another coin at the viewing Wednesday night before the emotional ramp ceremony at the airfield.

"He gave me a hug and told me to be strong," Dawson said. "That made me happy that he got me the extra coin. I got Dany a better coin than I said I'd get him. I got on the plane and said goodbye."

Dawson said he felt a bond with the others. He was the latecomer, not joining them until January after the others had formed in October.

"They welcomed me with open arms," he said.

Brown, the oldest, "was like my dad, what he said, giving me advice. I figure he's got 15-20 years on me. I trusted him. He was a really funny guy. You could hate everybody in the world, but if you met him, you couldn't hate him. He was too funny, too friendly."

The warrant officer and the private called each other by their first names.

"All four of us were really close," Dawson said. "We were basically like a family."

Dawson had a chance to meet some of the members of Team Canada here Wednesday, the group of ex-NHLers and musicians here to entertain the troops.

Hall of Famer Lanny McDonald ran over to sign a Calgary Flames sweater and give Dawson a T-shirt from his microbrewery in Montana.

"Free beer there for the rest of your life," McDonald said.

"Wow," Dawson said. "Why is everybody making such a big deal of this? I was just doing my job."

"I can't believe you jumped out and started pulling people out," McDonald said.

"I was doing my job. They were my friends," Dawson said. "They would have done the same for me."

He has two months left on his mission. He and fiancée, Angela have a wedding planned for October.

"I'm still young," he said. "I recover quick. The way we're trained, you've got to soldier on. It starts off as a job with all these rules and becomes a lifestyle."