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Wounded Canadian Troops Share Stories, Inspiration With Mullen

By Donna Miles
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OTTAWA, Feb. 10, 2009 – The chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff heard firsthand accounts today about the mission in Afghanistan from Canadian soldiers who recently returned from deployments there, including two amputees who have elected to stay on duty.



Cpl. Billy Kerr, left, and Master Cpl. Mike Trauner, right, Canadian soldiers who lost limbs to improvised explosive devices in separate attacks in Afghanistan, say they believe in the mission and will continue serving in the Canadian army. With them is Capt. Stephanie Smith, a critical care nurse who helped bring them home to Canada for care. DoD photo by Donna Miles
(Click photo for screen-resolution image); [high-resolution image](#) available.

Navy Adm. Mike Mullen met with about 40 soldiers. Among them were Cpl. Billy Kerr and Master Cpl. Mike Trauner, who lost limbs to improvised explosive devices in separate attacks outside Kandahar.

"As has been the case for me in recent years, whenever I sit down with those who have been injured, I come away more inspired by them than I had expected and anticipated," Mullen said during a joint news conference. "These are two great men who look forward to fulfilling their own dreams. It was an honor to be with them."

Kerr and Trauner share not only similar injuries and therapies, but also a belief in the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force mission in Afghanistan and a desire to continue serving in the Canadian army.

Kerr, 41, is a reservist who volunteered for his second deployment to Afghanistan, where he served as an embedded mentor for the Afghan National Police. "I thought it was something worth doing," Kerr said of his decision to return. "I felt like it wasn't done."

Kerr's second tour of duty was a near-constant fight, with the enemy uncomfortably close to his base. "At 300 meters you got shot at, at 400 meters you were in a big fight, and at 500 meters you were at their door," he said.

But as an infantryman, he said "wanting to get in the thick of it" was simply "what you do, ... part of your mentality," so he embraced the mission as he patrolled with the "Razorbacks," a unit that blended infantry and military police troops.

During a foot patrol in October, Kerr was the fifth soldier into a doorway when a remote-controlled blast severed both legs and his left arm from his body. He never lost consciousness, and remembers looking at what was left of his body and expecting -- even wanting -- to die.

He didn't. Rushed for care at Kandahar Airfield, then Landstuhl Army Medical Center in Germany, then back to Canada, Kerr cheated the death he had expected. Less than two months after his injury, he was took his first steps on two prostheses. He expects to be able to walk with a cane by late April.

Trauner, 29, shares a similar story. Less than three months after deploying to Afghanistan in September, he encountered an IED during a dismounted patrol west of Kandahar. The blast -- most likely from an artillery shell strapped to a mortar, he believes -- knocked Kerr 20 feet into the air and destroyed his weapon.

It also took both of his legs and broke 25 bones in his left hand.

Asked by medics who rushed to his care in Kandahar to rate his pain level from 1 to 10, Trauner told them it was 100. He said he died twice -- during his initial surgery, then during the flight to Landstuhl -- but was brought back to life.

Eight surgeries later, Trauner expects to receive his prosthetic legs later this week. He's still being treated for his hand injuries at a rehabilitation center here.

Both Trauner and Kerr want to stay on active duty. "I really, really do," Trauner said, while conceding that he most likely will have to move into an administrative position. "I'm very proud to stay."

"I'm not going anywhere," echoed Kerr. But unlike Trauner, he envisions himself being back in an infantry job. "I want to be kicking in doors again," he said. "I would be back there now if I could."

Kerr dismisses what he sometimes hears on TV or reads in the papers about the mission in Afghanistan going downhill. "Opinions are always opinions," he said, adding that people who haven't been there don't really know what's going on there.

"I think we are doing some good and making progress there," he said. "I felt really good going into this mission. I left like I was really contributing."

Trauner said that as a soldier, his job is to follow orders and do what he's told. But deep down, he said, there's a deep personal motivation that inspires him to continue serving.

"If we didn't do the job, who would?" he said. "We do it because we don't want our families and other people's families to be at risk."

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