

The working wounded

In Afghanistan, Canadian fighters have been sustaining serious injury on a scale not seen since Korea. When they return, what prospects are there for soldiers who can't soldier any more? Siri Agrell investigates

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Inside the offices of the Royal Canadian Regiment sniper unit, Master Corporal Jody Mitic spends most of his day alone. Occasionally, other soldiers will poke their heads through the office door to say hello, or to let him know that they've shovelled his driveway.

Sitting at a wooden desk typing e-mails on an outdated PC, he's the only soldier here dressed in civilian clothes. His prosthetic feet rest on the bottom drawer of a dented filing cabinet. The steel rods that now serve as his shins peek out between his worn hiking shoes and the cuffs of his baggy warm-up pants.

On his left forearm a dramatic tattoo displays the Roman numerals I-XI-MMVII — Jan. 11, 2007, the date when, as the leader of an elite sniper team doing reconnaissance in Afghanistan, MCpl. Mitic stepped on a land mine and triggered the explosion that took both his legs from just below the knee. After extensive rehabilitation, the 31-year-old returned to work at CFB Petawawa a year later.

"I don't know how long I'll be here, because I'm not deployable," he says. "I'm kind of in the way."

Since Canada's mission in Afghanistan began in 2002, more than 280 service people have been wounded in action, suffering shrapnel wounds, nerve damage and amputated limbs and, in many cases equal damage to their identities as soldiers. It is the first time in decades that Canada has found itself with a military population with permanent disabilities, one that is likely to grow.

The Canadian Forces' traditional policy is that all soldiers, even those injured in combat, are required to pass the universality-of-service test, a physical threshold that proves them ready to return to war. When a career administration board deems them unfit, they are given three years to accept medical release.

But as more soldiers incur disabilities serving their country, it has become more urgent to ask whether Canada has done all it should in return. In December, Chief of Defence Staff Rick Hillier announced orders to personnel to apply policies more flexibly, allowing the injured to remain in the forces even if they must transfer to less physically demanding jobs outside the infantry.

The Globe and Mail has also learned that last summer, more quietly, General Hillier directed that no soldier injured in Afghanistan is to be released from the military without his express authority.

"He's saying, 'I'm not going to let an administrative board make that decision for those folks. If you've got somebody who you think maybe should be released, it's got to come to me for confirmation,'" says Karol Wenek, the Canadian Forces' director-general for conditions of service.

In an e-mail to The Globe this week, Gen. Hillier himself explains: "Our first responsibility is to help our people heal. ... Next is to look at how we can best support them and give them an opportunity for a full military career. That may mean they need to transfer to a new occupation that is compatible with whatever medical realities they still face."

If lifelong military careers are now a possibility, new questions emerge for the permanently injured. Some wonder if they can redefine the very concept of soldiering, demonstrating that legs of flesh and blood are not necessary to carry them into the field of battle.

Others struggle to establish fresh roles, looking for meaningful work away from the front lines, whether in or out of the forces.

The challenge remains daunting. Brigadier-General Linda Colwell, director-general of military personnel, points out that any changes in the protocol must be made carefully. Keeping the disabled in the military might mean a smaller number of infantry will be available for combat.

"We have only a finite number of people in the forces, and if you are unable to deploy, that means that your buddy has to go twice," she says. "People have to be able to pull their whole weight."

Late last year, Private Frederic Couture of CFB Valcartier provided one chilling glimpse of what it can be like when that capacity is gone. Having stepped on a land mine nearly a year earlier, leaving him with one leg amputated below the knee, Pte. Couture killed himself in November in his Quebec home.

"I'm 21 years old and I've lost my foot," he screamed at the time of his injury. "What am I going to do now? What do you think I'm going to do?"

The advocate

MCpl. Paul Franklin didn't know what he wanted to do before he joined the military in 1999, at the age of 28. After high school, he had bounced around from job to job, eventually settling on a gig selling light fixtures.

"I hated my life and hated my work," he says now.

In the army, he was trained as a medic and sent to Afghanistan as part of a field ambulance with the 3rd Battalion of Edmonton's Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry, work he found challenging, exciting and personally rewarding.

But on Jan. 15, 2006, a suicide bomber in a taxi smashed into his convoy, killing Canadian diplomat Glyn Berry and severely wounding three soldiers, including MCpl. Franklin.

He became the first Canadian medic injured in the line of duty since the Korean war and the first soldier to return from Afghanistan missing parts of his body.

His left leg was severed mid thigh by the blast, his right leg amputated later, also above the knee, during one of 26 surgeries he has faced during his long recovery.

"Right from the beginning, I knew my job as a medic was over, done," he says. "My left leg was gone and I'd never be a soldier again."

But MCpl. Franklin had no intention of leaving the military. He returned to work in September of 2006, six months after losing his legs, and began logging half-days with his old ambulance unit, expecting to use his field experience to teach soldiers about the bloody realities of being a medic at war.

His expectations did not mesh with opinions in his unit. "They wanted me to shred paper and move books around the library, basically disappear from the front lines," he says. "I wanted to teach tactical medicine."

Last year, he was offered a job at the Canadian Forces medical school, but not as an instructor: They wanted him to work as a security guard.

He was shocked by the proposition, which would require him to quit the military and be hired as a civilian. He was taken aback further by comments from some soldiers who said a wounded man in a wheelchair did not belong in uniform.

"You'd hate to think that a medical unit doesn't understand what it's like for someone to return to work with these kinds of injuries, but obviously that was the case," he says.

He requested a transfer to base headquarters, and since then has created his own job, as the voice of injured soldiers. He works five days a week, from 8 a.m. until noon, answering e-mails, giving speeches, visiting schools and keeping in regular contact with wounded infantrymen such as MCpl. Mitic.

MCpl. Franklin considers it his calling to defend injured soldiers' right to meaningful employment, and he believes he is making headway.

He hopes that Gen. Hillier's new orders will allow him to remain in the military indefinitely. "We'd basically be an exception," he says. "In a sense, I'll be medically released from the army after three years — and then that file will move to Gen. Hillier's desk and he'll hold those files under his vow to keep the wounded members in service."

Even with his official military status in limbo, MCpl. Franklin plans to stick around for at least the next 18 months, when he reaches his 10-year-anniversary as a soldier and becomes eligible for 20 per cent of his pension, which, combined with his medical payout, is "not a

bad chunk of change."

He compares his present advantages to the 1994 plight of Bruce Henwood, a Canadian soldier who was forced to take medical release three weeks after driving over a land mine in Croatia and losing both his legs below the knee.

Internationally, MCpl. Franklin adds, Australian soldiers hurt in Afghanistan must take medical release one year after sustaining an injury. And even in the U.S., only 1 per cent of the approximately 750 amputees who have returned from battle in Iraq and Afghanistan has returned to work in the armed forces.

The relatively low number of severe injuries in the Canadian ranks should make it easy to find new roles for the wounded, and MCpl. Franklin believes that some will even be able to deploy again one day, if only to a command base or naval ship.

"That might not mean everything the soldier wants, but it's something," he says. "The army is trying. They may not be doing it right, but at least they're trying."

Corporal François LePage, an LAV gunner with the RCR's Eighth Platoon, has benefited from some of those efforts. He was hit by gunfire from an American plane in the notorious "friendly fire" incident of Sept. 4, 2006, that killed Pte. Mark Graham, a former Olympian, and injured 37 other soldiers. The shrapnel ripped into Cpl. LePage's back, thigh, knee and foot.

Today, at the age of 27, he has served only six years of what he still believes will be a lifelong military career. He was initially placed in a newly formed casualty-management unit, which allowed senior officers to keep tabs on wounded soldiers, make sure they were attending physiotherapy appointments and keep them busy and motivated while on the mend.

Now, Cpl. LePage is working as a regimental police officer, a liaison between his former infantry brothers and the Military Police, the unit he hopes to join eventually.

"They tried to place me in an area where I could recover as fast as possible and explore a side of police work that interested me," he says. "I wanted to leave the infantry because I had seen more than enough, you know?"

As an MP, he could still redeploy, but will likely be kept far from the front lines.

"Would I want to go into a war, like I did, again? Probably not," he says. "I'm proud of wearing a uniform, and I still love the military, but I have different ambitions now."

The man of action

For others, ambitions are not so easily realigned.

"Ever since I was five years old, I always wanted to be in the army," MCpl. Mitic says. His mother told him that he wasn't allowed to have toy guns in the house, so he built them out of Lego. "I was one of the weird little kids who always wanted to play soldier."

At 17, in 1994, the boy raised in Brampton, Ont., joined the military reserve and began playing soldier for real, signing up full-time three years later. An office job was never part of the plan for MCpl. Mitic, who was 6-foot-4 and 220 pounds of guts and muscle before the land mine took his legs.

He wanted to shoot, to spy, to be out in the field providing intelligence that would feed his regiment's tactical efforts. He threw himself into training. In 2002, he was one of just three soldiers from his base to pass the gruelling course for entrance to the sniper team.

During two tours in Afghanistan, he worked side by side with members of the U.S. Green Berets, picking out targets, calling in artillery or aircraft strikes.

"Hell yeah, it was satisfying," he says. He planned eventually to apply to JTF2, the Canadian special-forces unit employed by the army for high-value tactical missions.

The mantel in his two-storey home on the Petawawa base is crammed with framed photos of him in uniform, the coffee table home to a well-thumbed copy of the Koran, books on political and military history and a copy of *Run Like Hell: Amazing Stories of Unconventional Military Strategies That Work*.

The day he lost his legs, MCpl. Mitic's sniper team had been part of an unconventional strategy hatched from within the Canadian Forces. Plagued by roadside bombs, the army had taken to bulldozing its own routes through the landscape, cutting large swaths they could then monitor and protect. The snipers were to go in ahead and ensure that enemy elements were not present.

Just after 4 a.m. the plan was called off — a tank had hit a mine on the way to the site — and MCpl. Mitic and his team were on their way back to their station. As they cut through an abandoned Afghan compound in the dark, they missed a sign in a tree warning locals that danger lurked nearby.

The last soldier in a single file, MCpl. Mitic thought that he was stepping in the footsteps of those before him when he put his boot down in a doorway, his weight bearing down on a mine that had been buried on top of a mortar round.

"If it was just the mine, it would have taken just the one leg," he says. "But it had a little extra oomph behind it."

Two weeks earlier, MCpl. Mitic had met a beautiful blond medic named Alannah Gilmore, who was stationed in the same spot as his unit. It was her field ambulance that arrived at the scene after the mine detonated.

"One minute you're thinking, 'Man, this guy is cute,'" she remembers. "The next thing you know, you're picking him off the ground."

MCpl. Mitic was airlifted to Germany and then back to Canada, where he spent almost eight months recuperating in a Toronto hospital, getting up on his new prosthetic legs after just three weeks and slowly learning to walk again.

After he returned to CFB Petawawa last September, he spent the next four months using up his accrued vacation and overtime to adjust to his new disability-friendly house on the base, with the doors widened and carpet removed to accommodate a wheelchair, and the laundry and bedroom relocated to the main floor.

With the \$250,000 payout he received as a dismemberment benefit and a matching figure provided by his army insurance, he bought himself a Mustang and a house in nearby Pembroke. His mother, Joanne, will move there this spring.

He also reunited with MCpl. Gilmore, who had been transferred to the base upon her return from Afghanistan. The couple are expecting a baby in August.

With a child to care for, MCpl. Mitic's future is looming larger than ever, and the money he received is not enough to let him relax about employment.

"To make me not worry about it, they'd have to add a zero," he says.

MCpl. Mitic earns between \$50,000 and \$60,000 a year, nowhere near the \$100,000 tax-free salary soldiers earn in years they deploy. The base is giving him time and space to heal while he figures out what he is capable of doing with his prosthetic limbs, and has offered him a role teaching reconnaissance and sniper courses in the meantime.

"If they're employable in part, even if they don't meet the universality-of-service standards, they could be retained," says Mr. Wenek, the military's condition-of-services director. "And that's largely a result of the fact that we're short people so we have to make use of all the skill sets that are available."

But even though MCpl. Mitic wants to put his training to use, to be the kind of soldier he once was, he is not sure that his new role will be able to sustain him. "Everything's changed for me," he says. "My whole plan was the army forever."

The pragmatist

Mike Barnewall had no intention of becoming a career soldier when he signed up with the military at the age of 27 in April, 2002. He planned on being a cop. But a land mine when he was serving in the Pashmul region of Afghanistan on Nov. 21, 2006, cost the corporal a leg and changed his attitude toward the job.

He soon realized that people in and out of the military community assumed that he would quietly accept medical release and disappear. "It used to be that when a guy was traumatically injured, they were processed out. You were pretty much done," he says. "I was going to change that."

After doing rehabilitation near his parents home in Windsor, Ont., he returned to CFB Petawawa last May. A rifleman with Bravo Company before his injury, he was now moved to an operations and training unit, where he organized schedules for shooting ranges and oversaw the resources necessary to keep forces primed for action, a clerical job normally filled by a healthy soldier.

"I didn't want them to just make something up for me. That's bullshit," he says. "'If there's no work for me, I'm not coming to work,' is how I thought of it."

Determined to make his usefulness known, he dedicated himself to proving his continued physical prowess. With a prosthetic leg attached below one knee, he began skiing, playing hockey, running and pushing himself to join his fellow soldiers in whatever sport, trek or feat of endurance was on the agenda.

He decided that he was going to pass the universality-of-service test, which requires soldiers to, among other things, fire and maintain a weapon, work irregular or prolonged hours and meet common fitness measures, including a gruelling, 13-kilometre march carrying 60 pounds of gear.

Along with his personal pride, he says he was driven by the fears of his fellow soldiers. "Every new soldier, everyone who goes overseas, they have that fear of what could happen to them, that if they get hurt, they're totally fucked," he says.

"But if you've got guys who have been through it, who have traumatic injuries, but are still going to work in the army, I think that would be a huge psychological help."

But then last fall, he began to hear the first whispers that policy might change, and started to rethink his plan. "Being in the army just wasn't making me happy," he says. "I knew I didn't want to do it for the rest of my life."

He began examining the policy for medical release and saw that the military would pay him 75 per cent of his salary for the first 21/2 years, while also paying his tuition if he went back to school. So on Jan. 8, Mr. Barnewall started classes at St. Clair College in Windsor, the beginning of a degree in human-resource management. Most of his classmates have no idea he was in the army and don't even know he is missing a leg.

In Edmonton, 24-year-old Pte. Will Salikin will also begin college next month, after his own medical release from the army. He was just 22 when he was injured in the same blast as MCpl. Franklin was. The jeep he was riding in was thrown 20 metres, breaking his neck and hand, shattering the bones in his arm and leaving him with a severe head injury.

Within a month, Pte. Salikin was back at work at his Edmonton garrison, determined to go about business as usual. At first, he remained with his infantry unit, but had to stay behind when they were sent to train. He was bored and lonely, and soon requested a desk job at headquarters, where he found his new work satisfying and his physical health quickly improved.

He was thinking about taking a posting in British Columbia and even considering another deployment to Afghanistan, until in August, 2007, Pte. Salikin entered a phase he characterizes as "remission."

"My physical state started to decline," he says. "And, uh, my mental state I had never really tackled — and it came back and bit me pretty hard."

He is no longer well enough to deploy, he says, and has decided to take medical release and go to school, most likely at the nearby Northern Alberta Institute of Technology, where he can continue to see his current doctors.

He reflects now that he probably returned to the military before he was ready. As one of the first soldiers severely injured in Afghanistan, he didn't know what else to do.

Pte. Salikin's biggest fear remains that without the army he is useless, unemployable. "That's pretty much what I thought of right away and ever since," he says. "Especially in infantry, we don't have a whole lot of marketable skills out in the real world."

The civilian option

Last fall, Ed Clark, chief executive officer of Toronto-Dominion Bank, was watching television when he saw a news segment on a basketball game between wounded Canadian soldiers.

When the broadcast ended, he picked up the phone to contact Gen. Hillier and expressed his interest in hiring some of the men and women who had been injured in Afghanistan. In December, the bank quietly introduced their formal recruitment partnership with the military during a meeting of senior executives in Toronto, attended by Gen. Hillier.

So far, six soldiers have been referred to TD, one has been hired at a branch in Fredericton and offers have been made to two others.

"These people are unbelievably brave, they have to think on their feet and stay calm, they're obviously accomplished," Mr. Clark says. "As it happens, they now have a physical barrier. ... But you don't need legs to be a great banker."

Although some soldiers may find it hard to believe, the private sector is beginning to take note of injured personnel and to offer them jobs outside the military.

In his e-mail to The Globe and Mail this week, Gen. Hillier writes, "If they decide that a civilian career is what will work best for them, then we have great partnerships with private companies, and the public sector and working with Veterans Affairs to make that transition as seamless as we can.

"We have some very good brains working at how we can support these fine men and women, and their families, to make sure that we do the right thing."

Through the army's Transition Assistance Program, more than 200 private- and public-sector employers have posted employment offers for wounded soldiers on a sort of internal Workopolis site, offering jobs at organizations including Tim Hortons, Coca-Cola, Toronto Police and Fire Services, Brinks Canada, WestJet and Dell Canada.

Two years ago, new legislation enacted in Ottawa also allowed medically released soldiers to be given priority consideration for jobs in the federal public service. And several provincial government ministries, including the B.C. Ministry of Natural Resources, also have stepped forward to offer employment to the wounded.

The private-partnership model follows the lead of non-profit American groups such as Hire Heroes USA, which have sprung up south of the border to help find work for injured veterans of the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq: The Wounded Marine Careers Foundation offers apprenticeships in film and media production, while the Wounded Warrior Project maintains an employment-counselling service called Warriors to Work.

Job fairs are also regularly held at the Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C., attended by employers such as Cisco Systems, defence technology company Northrop Grumman and engineering outfit Kiewit Corporation.

In Canada, there is no centralized facility for wounded soldiers, who are instead sent to recover close to home, spread out across the country.

"This is a new issue and I think we're all learning," Mr. Clark says. "People who put their lives at risk in service to their country should not have trouble integrating back into Canada if they choose to leave the military. I think we owe them that."

Employers are just starting to realize that there is an opportunity and an obligation to offer employment options to these soldiers, even if it means seeking them out.

Mr. Clark dismisses the idea that the skills and values of an army career are non-transferable, saying most companies hire people on the basis of character, leadership and problem-solving ability.

"We can train people how to be bankers, if you've got an inclination," he says. "You hear what some of these people did, I'm not sure I'd be up to it, so I'm sure they can handle my job."

The long shot

In the Dundonald Hall Fitness Centre at CFB Petawawa, MCpl. Mitic is about to try running twice around an indoor track, a distance of 500 metres.

Next weekend, he will participate in a five-kilometre charity run in Toronto for people with disabilities, wearing a pair of carbon fibre prosthetics shaped like the letter C. As he slides the futuristic gadgets over the stumps of his lower legs, the wife of another wounded soldier comes over to say hello, asking who taught MCpl. Mitic to use the new running aids.

"No one! Who's going to train me?" he jokes, pretending to look around.

Now that Mike Barnewall has taken medical release, MCpl. Mitic is the only amputee stationed at the base. He is working with a trainer who, while enthusiastic, had never seen such severe injuries outside the pages of her university textbooks before now.

"I'm doing pretty well for a guy who's making it up as he goes along," he says, beginning to jog.

For now, physical fitness is his top priority, before considering going back to school to become an officer or to land a better job in the private sector.

"I have a degree in long-range shooting and sneaking up on people," he says. "I don't think that's going to get me too far with any Fortune 500 company."

But a promotion or a corner office is not really what he wants. He has been reading lately about Captain David Rozelle, a U.S. soldier who redeployed to Iraq in 2005, after losing a foot to a land mine there in 2003.

"If I was just missing a foot below the ankle, I'd already be back overseas," MCpl. Mitic says. "I'd love to deploy again on combat missions."

But without legs, even with prosthetics, he could not climb over walls or navigate the rough terrain of the Afghan landscape. To compensate, he would have to build his upper-body strength to near superhuman levels, able to pull himself and 60 pounds of equipment up and over any obstacle.

He knows it is improbable, but he wants to exhaust every possibility of staying in the army before acknowledging the option of medical release. While his base is willing to support his goal, he is not sure they are ready to send a double amputee into battle.

"If I get to the point where I say, 'I think I can stay right here,' they're going to put me through the ringer, and I expect it," he says. "But I'm an infanteer and I want to stay an infanteer."

MCpl. Mitic has not fired a gun since losing his legs, but has had one tattooed on his left arm, parallel to the Roman numerals, a large black machine gun inked between his elbow and wrist. Next to the barrel are the words "NOT IN VAIN."

But for him, what would it mean for his injuries to have a purpose? He talks about Canada's role in Afghanistan, but then admits that his

own ability to remain a soldier would help give context and meaning to his loss.

"I'm good at my job," he says, looking down past the tattoo to where his feet used to be. "I was. I might be again."

Siri Agrell is a reporter with Globe Life.