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Canadian soldier keeping memoirs of experiences in Afghanistan

By Bill Graveland, THE CANADIAN PRESS

BAZAR-E PANJWAIL, Afghanistan - In the heat of battle, thoughts of home or loved ones don't flash through the minds Canadian soldiers, the usual reaction is nothing at all.

Canadian soldiers are trained to the point that thinking is the last thing they do. The first thing they do is react.

If Canadians are attacked - whether it's a suicide bomber attacking a convoy, a vehicle driving over an explosive device or a direct assault by the Taliban - the soldiers immediately take up positions, return fire and secure the area.

"Nothing went through my mind," admitted Warrant Officer Kevin King, a tank commander who was reliving an attack near this village west of Kandahar about a month ago. King, 39, is the troop warrant officer for Lord Strathcona's Horse (Royal Canadians) and is in charge of a group of 15.

"We train the guys drills. You do your job when you're reacting to a familiar order. Afterwards, things go through your mind. At the time, in the heat of the battle nothing - just getting the job done."

King knows a bit about training. He was in Bosnia on three tours and taught armoured training at CFB Gagetown from 2004 to 2007 before taking a transfer to Edmonton and a chance to go to Afghanistan.

Now he is stationed in the Panjwail district - the birthplace of the Taliban, where rocket attacks over the forward operating base are a daily occurrence. The base itself, located at the foot of a mountain, is referred to by the troops as the "catcher's mitt" both for its shape and the fact that so many rockets land here.

The arrival of the tanks to this destination in late 2006 gave a boost to the foot soldiers in the region and sent a message to the Taliban, which refers to the tanks as "dragons" and usually gives them a wide berth.

But attacks do happen. Although thoughts don't go through the minds of soldiers engaged in operations during battles, there is plenty of apprehension before and lots of time for a retrospective after.

"I think about it a little bit before," King said, as he stood atop a brand new Leopard 2 tank. "Everyone has a journal I think. They write their thoughts before and after but not during."

"Every time I deploy I write a little journal - I write every day, what I'm doing, how I feel, how I feel about this op and that op and the butterflies," he admitted.

King, who is closing in on 20 years in the Canadian Forces, said having a journal allows him to keep a record and can run to the mundane, such as how many mice he has caught in his tent, to feelings before and after contact with the enemy. He has two children at home Jasmine, 9 and Tarin, 6 and his wife Seema.

"If something were to happen, it's for her and the kids," he said.

"I think everyone has the same thoughts because you never know what's going to happen," King added. "There's the old I don't know how I feel about this operation and then a few days later - everything's good."

King, who was sporting a full head of bleached blond hair, dyed it on a bet as a way of boosting morale. He was also lamenting his efforts at growing a moustache, which someone standing nearby suggested made him look like a porn star.

"The morale was pretty low because we were being deployed early so I went home and dyed my hair and came back the next day. Everyone had to shave their heads. I have to keep it till I go home on

holidays."

King said it is difficult to see children on the street who instead of waving at Canadian soldiers opt to throw rocks or pretend to shoot weapons at the convoys. He said the village here has seen its economy pick up since the arrival of the Canadian base. The warrant officer said it's important to all soldiers to feel that they have accomplished something.

"Absolutely. We all do and the end of the seven months if we feel like we've accomplished something personally and for Canada then you've done a right thing."