

## **Perth Inside Out**

### **The Lasting Legacy of former Perth resident Dave Lavery – Part One**

**By Terry O’Hearn**

A thick, icy fog blanketed the runway, and the temperature registered around 60 degrees below zero Fahrenheit, when a Canadian C-130 cargo plane crashed while attempting to land at Fort Wainwright’s Ladd Field in Fairbanks, Alaska on Jan. 29, 1989. The huge plane broke in half after hitting the end of the runway, and skidded about a quarter of a mile down the tarmac, killing eight crew members instantly. Another would die later.

On the ground that fateful evening was Pathfinder Sergeant Dave Lavery, who would move to Perth a few years later and bring his beloved Polar Bear Plunge event with him from CFB Petawawa. The Perth Polar Plunge event has raised more than \$342,000 for worthy community organizations since 1994 under the guidance of Lavery.

The Patrol Pathfinders to which Lavery belonged were an advanced infantry unit, and while most members were already elite paratroopers before joining, the Pathfinder training included airmobile, rugged terrain, and amphibious operations. The Pathfinder qualifying course is known as one of the world’s toughest for special forces.

On that night, Lavery was with Captain Dave Hirter, and they were part of an advance group for the joint Canada-USA airborne Exercise Brim Frost. The Canadian forces had been scheduled to participate in the exercise with about 435 paratroopers, but after the crash Canadian officials decided not to take part.

Lavery recalls that: “It was bloody cold when the plane crashed, and by the time I got to the scene, the wreckage and bodies were on the

runway. At first, I thought some of the bodies I came across were mannequins, or training aides for the exercise. They were frozen solid in such a short time.

“I came across one of the soldiers, and he was still strapped in his jump seat, so myself and a U.S. soldier worked on removing him. I used my jump knife to cut the seat and straps that were frozen to the runway. We were able to get him onto a stretcher, and I remember he wasn’t wearing his parka. His wounds appeared superficial - broken bones etc. We were able to get him to the hospital and I stayed with him as they tried to revive and stabilize him, but unfortunately, he passed away.” After spending a long night checking up on the survivors, and accounting for the dead, Lavery and his friend Hirter had the grim task of going to the morgue and identifying the rest of the victims.

Continuing with the narrative: “The people of Fairbanks reached out and did everything they could to assist with this disaster during a very emotional time. They held a service when we departed. It was my job to bring back the deceased, and I remember draping the flags on all the coffins inside the cold C-130 Hercules aircraft - such a weird feeling.

“We moved down the runway close to the wreckage of our other bird - then revved up the C-130 ready to take off. The coffins were all shaking, and it was damn cold inside that bird, but I just wanted to get in the air as soon as we could. It was a sombre flight back into Edmonton.”

The night before departure, Lavery recalls going to one of the local bars to try and drown his sorrows and obscure the memories of what he had seen, and also to pay tribute to the men who had died. “As it turned out this was a bikers’ bar. “When I went into the washroom, I noticed there was a back door leading outside, and I thought to myself I certainly would not want to fall out there and pass out. You would freeze to death in minutes.”

“I saw through the mirror three or four men come in and stand behind me, and when I turned around, I was confronted by them immediately. They asked what I was doing and if I was a cop. I said ‘No, I am with the Canadian Airborne Regiment.’ With that, they said they were so sorry and brought me back to the bar and looked after me all night. They were the local Hells Angels chapter.”

Lavery moved from Perth to Kabul, Afghanistan in December, 2009 where he is the owner of a successful business located within a compound there. Ironically, he and his partner Junping survived a 2011 attack on the Finest supermarket on Jan. 28, the day before the anniversary of the plane crash. So, memories come flooding back every Jan. 28 of the bombing attack, and then the next day of the horrific plane crash. What led Lavery to settle in Kabul, was that he served with the United Nations as a Security Specialist from October, 2001 to December, 2005.

The exceptional career of David Lavery is a perfect example of why Canadian warriors are revered by allies and feared by the enemy, and will be continued in next month’s column.

## **Lasting Legacy of former Perth resident Dave Lavery – Part 2**

**By Terry O’Hearn**

In the previous column we talked about a horrendous airplane crash that occurred on Jan. 29, 1989, when a Canadian cargo plane was trying to land at Ladd Field in Fairbanks, Alaska. Former Perth resident and Polar Bear Plunge founder Dave Lavery had been on the ground that evening as a Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) Pathfinder Sergeant, and he would move to Perth with the well-known Polar Bear Plunge, an event he had organized at CFB Petawawa. We will now fill in some details of a distinguished military career leading up to that crash, and the years which followed.

On a side note, many of you will notice the extensive use of acronyms here when discussing the military, but it cannot be helped. To illustrate the complexity of the subject, the CAF provides a manual of more than six hundred pages just for the purpose of deciphering and usage of abbreviations and acronyms.

Lavery recalls that his ambition to serve his country began at an early age, and from the age of 18 he was with several reserve units. He began his military career with The Royal Canadian Dragoons (RCD) regiment in Penticton, British Columbia in 1974 and served with them until 1976. The birth year of the RCD, Canada’s senior cavalry regiment, took place in 1883, however their traditions can be traced back to 1759, when a group of volunteer cavalry was raised from young men across the province of Quebec.

He then joined the Governor Generals Foot Guards (GGFG), and was with that senior reserve infantry unit from 1976 to 1977. Since World War II, the GGFG has served in Ottawa, including performing the world-famous changing of the guard ceremony along with the Canadian Grenadier Guards. The history of both regiments, however, dates back to a much earlier in time.

In 1977 Lavery joined the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, Royal Newfoundland Regiment (RNR), and served with that unit until 1980. The RNR is a Primary Reserve infantry regiment of the Canadian Army, and part of the 5th Canadian Division's 37 Canadian Brigade Group, tracing their origins to 1795. Since 1949, the RNR has been a unit of the CAF.

Lavery “made the big move” when he joined the CAF in January of 1980. He was shipped directly to the Royal Canadian Regiment (RCR) Battle School in Petawawa, where he underwent 16 grueling weeks of infantry skills. He managed to graduate as the top candidate and marksman.

After the Battle School, he was posted to 1RCR (1<sup>st</sup> Battalion), at London, ON, and then moved to the training base CFB Cornwallis in 1983. Cornwallis had been strictly a navy base until the unification of the forces in 1968.

“In 1985 I was posted to the Airborne Regiment, then returned to the RCR Battle School as the Warrant Officer in 1990.” The Canadian Airborne Regiment (CAR) would later suffer a severe blow with the Somalia scandal of 1993, and a political decision was made to disband the CAR following an inquiry. The decision did not sit well with CAF personnel.

Lavery returned to 1RCR in London in 1991, and it was not long before the government of the time announced the formation of Joint Task Force 2 (JTF2). He was then selected as a candidate, and led the training at the Dwyer Hill facility, becoming one of the founders of JTF2 in 1992. He served in that capacity until 1994.

The call came in 1995 to return to 1RCR to carry out Sergeant Major duties. After that posting, he was called back to JTF2, and served with that unit again until 1999. Details of operations carried out by Canada's most elite special operations force remain classified.

It was then on to the "Clothe the Soldier" project (CTS), in an advisory capacity for airborne units, and he carried out those duties until the year 2000. The Canadian Disruptive Pattern (CADPAT) uniform was implemented during that time, and the uniform would generate interest world-wide and be imitated by other armies.

Lavery finally retired on Jan. 21, 2000, as a Sergeant Major, MMM, CD with 23.5 years of service. Here it must be noted that to be considered for the Member of the Order of Military Merit decoration, the recipient must have demonstrated "outstanding meritorious service and leadership in duties of great responsibility."

Lavery left Perth and Canada after 9/11, and has been serving in various capacities assisting with humanitarian security assistance, and now the private sector. Even though living in another part of the world, he still has a "high esteem for our country and the flag which represents it. I regard the precious flag with profound gratitude and respect, and thank all of those who sacrificed so much to pave a better way for all of us. We still wear the Canadian badge with honour. My entire team here in Afghanistan has a dual badge half Canadian and half Afghan, and you will see Canadian flags within my compound all year round."

Although Dave Lavery does not seek any recognition for his service to country, please join me in a salute to one of Canada's finest - warrior, humanitarian, and citizen of Perth, Canada, and the world.