



"I SEE SOME COLLEAGUES GET BOGGED DOWN BY BUDGET CUTBACKS AND CONSTANT CHANGES. BUT, HONESTLY, IT'S NEVER BOTHERED ME. I'M USED TO THE MILITARY WHERE YOU CAN HAVE YOUR OPINION, BUT IN THE END YOU SHUT UP AND DO YOUR JOB."

— JENNIFER MARTIN

Jennifer Martin, OCT, doesn't necessarily share her naval experience with students.



FOUR ONTARIO TEACHERS WHO ARE

Forces for change

When they aren't preparing lessons, teaching, marking and guiding their students, these OCTs can be found in such places as Afghanistan, Haiti and Sudan, helping improve the lives of people in these struggling countries.

BY JOHN HOFFMAN

As Jennifer Martin, OCT, approached the school in Kabul, she could see children peering out at her through the bars on the windows. Martin, a lieutenant with the Royal Canadian Naval Reserve, on leave from her job as a mathematics teacher at Collingwood CI in 2010, was visiting an Afghan police outpost in Kabul when she became curious about the nearby dilapidated school building.

"It looked awful, like it should be condemned," she says. "There had been no maintenance in years. The paint was flaking and it still had some wounds from war on the outer walls. The courtyard was a pool of filthy water with a few bare spots."

Inside, the building was damp and dimly lit. Floors were rotting or non-existent. Even so, this school served 1,800 students a day, in three shifts. "The children were literally sitting on top of one another. Some had to sit on the floor when they couldn't squish into the benches. Some of the classes had a blackboard, but no chalk," says Martin. "Most had no books, pencils or paper."

It was a stark contrast to Martin's life back home in Collingwood. There, she seems like just another math teacher. But Martin leads a double professional life: working full-time as a teacher and part-time for the Naval Reserve. And she's not the only one. A fair number of Ontario

teachers serve in the Canadian Forces. What drives them to join up varies with each individual, but the impact of the experience is something they all bring back to their homes and their classrooms.

Martin's disgust at the Kabul school's physical setting was matched only by the charm of the children inside it. "As I walked around the school they jumped with excitement to see me, all happy and bouncing around. I think I represented hope to them."

Through an interpreter the children and Martin traded questions. "They would say, 'I'm going to be the president,' or 'I'm going to be a lawyer,'" she says. "It was heartbreaking, and I felt rude because I was thinking in my head, 'How? You have nothing.'"

Although Martin's job in Afghanistan had nothing to do with helping schools, she began to amass school supplies with the help of her family and friends, teachers and students from Collingwood CI, some colleagues from the American army, and even strangers who heard of the project.

In the end Martin raised \$10,000 worth of supplies — enough to outfit all 1,800 students at the Kabul school and hundreds more at a nearby orphanage and a school in Helmand province. "Each child got a pencil case and within it would be scissors, pencils, pencil crayons, a highlighter and a notebook," says Martin.

Improving women's lives

Sarah Surtees, OCT, and member of the Canadian Army Reserve, also volunteered for deployment to Afghanistan in 2010, where she worked to build co-operation among the military, local government officials and the local population. One achievement the Grade 7/8 French Immersion teacher at St. Theresa Catholic ES in Callander is particularly proud of was setting up a program to help Afghan women upgrade their sewing and weaving skills. "Along with making clothing for their family," says Surtees. "They could make money selling garments in local markets and a women's co-operative."

Surtees also had turns on patrol. One day, in a village in Kandahar province, Surtees noticed a little boy with a gash on his leg. "It was covered with what looked like a piece of plastic wrapping," she says, which she later found out was due to lack of proper first aid supplies and knowledge. Surtees worked with local leaders for months to gain their trust and to find Afghan nurses willing to make the perilous road trip from Kandahar City. In the end, 30 women were trained in first aid and given supplies. "Each of those women would have been responsible for looking after 10 to 20 people, so I like to think we had a micro-impact on a lot of lives," says Surtees.



Martin feels she represents hope to Afghan students.



Helping Haitian students helps Stepaniuk cope with witnessing tragedies.

The longest day

That impact goes both ways. Daniel Stepaniuk, OCT, vice-principal at Ancaster HS in Ancaster, had one of the most grisly days of his life, on his daughter's 11th birthday. Stepaniuk, on leave from his teaching job at Westdale SS in Hamilton to participate in a UN peacekeeping mission in Haiti, was the lead planner for rescue and recovery at a school that collapsed in a suburb of Port-au-Prince. "It was a three-storey school. It just pancaked to the ground," he explains. "The third floor ended up in the basement." About 100 people died — most of them children.

Stepaniuk's job included everything from contacting the US embassy to requesting an urban search-and-rescue team, and co-ordinating security to co-ordinating on-site planning and troubleshooting as the situation unfolded. Stepaniuk arranged water delivery for diggers, found generators to power their equipment, schlepped lumber and jack posts to be used for shoring timbers, lent his headlamp to a medic,

and, at one point entered the structure with a team of experts to map the inside of the building to make sure no rooms were missed. It was a gut-wrenching and, at times, haunting experience. In his journal entry about the search, Stepaniuk wrote:

"I feel like we are visiting a tomb and I treat everything with respect. Here is a junior grade classroom. The teacher has had the children make colourful fish, which have been attached together to form chains. These hang from the ceiling to decorate the classroom. Over there, amongst the broken desks and chunks of concrete I see lunch bags. Some of the kids were probably wondering what mom sent for lunch when disaster struck... In this room the ceiling is buckled, but not down. I hope all these kids got out."

Fortunately Stepaniuk also had the chance to be part of projects that yielded happier outcomes during his time in Haiti and when he served in Bosnia in 1998 as part of NATO's peacekeeping and stabilization efforts after the civil

war in the former Yugoslavia.

"One of the things NATO peacekeepers did is what we called quick impact projects, to build relationships with communities," he explains. "We'd go into a community and ask, what do they need? How can we help," he says. "In the area I was in, many people had been in refugee camps or hiding in basements, children hadn't been going to school and the schools had been either destroyed or damaged. Our soldiers and engineers put roofs on schools, painted them, built playgrounds and even school desks. We also donated school supplies. Getting kids back to school is a big part of the healing process for people in war-torn areas."

Bringing it back to the classroom

Martin and Surtees don't necessarily talk to their students about these experiences, but agree that they gained skills and insights to use in the classroom.

Surtees's time in Afghanistan gave her stories that helped make learning more

tangible for her students. "At the intermediate level, we're trying to get students to look at the bigger world. When I was teaching a science unit on energy and heating, a student asked, 'How are homes heated in Afghanistan?' That led to a discussion about bukharis, the metal wood-burning stoves most Afghans use to heat their homes."

Martin says her Afghanistan experience was a jarring lesson that many Canadian kids take their right to an education for granted. "I met two little girls who'd had acid thrown in their faces simply because they had attended school. Yet still they came back to school," she says. "It actually hurt to think that these kids fought to go to school, yet some of my own students back in Ontario skipped school when they felt like it and were too privileged to realize what they had."

His 2006 deployment in Sudan gave Christopher Federico, OCT, co-ordinator of the Canadian and World Studies Department at University of Toronto Schools, an up-close perspective in

conflict resolution and international relations that he brought back to the classroom. "I worked with Sudanese people and UN observers from almost 100 countries, including people from Rwanda, Pakistan, India and former Soviet-bloc countries," he says. "That experience helps me convey to my students that history is not just a litany of facts, but a tool for understanding why decisions have been made and the impact of those decisions."

Of course, civilians all wonder if military experience makes you a better disciplinarian? Yes, but not in the way you might think, says Federico, "The cliché version is that military leadership is about being directive — my way or the highway. But that's rarely the case in the military. Most of the time it's more about motivating people to do a job and empower them to have good ideas. Working with students is very much like that too."

Stepaniuk agrees. People have said to him, "You have a background in the army, so you'll be able to sort these kids out." But Stepaniuk says military

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leadership is about bringing people together. "My strategy with students is to build relationships. I have the best chance of getting through to them when I can show them I have their best interests at heart. I like to think that our school boards give us time off to do a mission with the armed forces and then we can come back and do a better job, a more humanistic job, as teachers." **PS**

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PHOTO: COURTESY OF DAN STEPANIUK