

Rough Transcript
Sgt (Retired) Ryan Flavelle, 41 Signal Regt (28 July 2016)

Deployment(s): Afghanistan 2008

Interviewer/Transcriber: LCol M.C. Vernon

Note: Quotations are not 100% verbatim

Timecode	Content
0:25	Why deploy? Military was huge part of his life. Joined in 2001. Finished Basic just before 9-11. An eye-opener. Every summer in Kingston, Shilo, Dundurn. Lots of employment for a signaler. Doing his undergrad in History. Finished that and started workup training in Shilo. About 10 months of workup training, then eight of deployment. He put in weekdays and weekends prior, so a strong commitment. A summer job that paid pretty well. Usually got four months of employment every summer, about \$8,000 for school. Started workup in 2008.
3:00	Reasons? Myriad, "deep rooted psychological reasons. Don't ask a historian. Pretty complex." Afghanistan had been in news for a long time. Knew he wanted a deployment. Not necessarily that one, but maybe that one. Need for signalers. Unit wanted to fill 12 slots initially. A lot for a unit of 40 people. He'd read a lot of history about the country. "Saying I believed in the mission is trite but true. Why we were there, harkening back to 9-11. Thought I could do good work and make good money doing it."
5:00	What did you want from this? He doesn't know. He volunteered to serve with the Patricias, as opposed to the National Support Element. The B Company slot was sought-after. "You needed to be a real, live soldier. You couldn't fake it, drinking Tim Hortons for six months and talking about how scary the rockets were. I definitely wanted to be hard." Good friends in the infantry, like Nathan Thompson in the Calgary Highlanders.
7:00	Reaction? Girlfriend, now-wife, wasn't bothered. But probably was. She got super-fit that summer, working out in Calgary. She didn't stand in his way. Supported him fully. Parents—especially Mom—were more difficult. "Not super keen. Tough. But it was my decision. Even though I felt bad she was scared, I'd jeopardized her health by jeopardizing my own. She accepted it. Dad was taciturn. Stiff upper lip. Likes to know the details and I couldn't give them. He didn't like the idea of not knowing where I was." He later opted to write openly about what he was doing. Often it was pretty tame. Occasionally it wasn't.
9:15	Work ups? With B Coy, 2 PPCLI in Shilo. Very high level of physical fitness. "If you weren't fit going into that country, you were in a lot of

	trouble going over there." He wasn't up to the standard at first, but "dug deep to finish the first run". His section commander was MCpl Lisette Leblanc, fit enough to be an Olympic athlete and responsible for B Coy HQ physical training. Then it was a matter to get into the battalion routine. Regular Force moves slower than Reserve Force due to time constraints for the latter, such as a three-day weekend exercise. Regular Force takes longer to make it "perfect", such as exercise set-up.
11:50	He was slow on the first exercise, working in LAVs for the first time. After three days, he was surprised to learn they would be in the field for a further 11 days. He gets sedentary in a field routine, 10-12 hour shifts sitting in the same chair, eating rations. "Not a recipe for a healthful existence!" With bursts of demanding fitness training, and dealing with extreme cold in Shilo's winter. "Like I've never experienced before." He picked up radio stuff quickly. Unit made allowances for his initial fitness so long as he provided the specialist knowledge they needed from a signaler. Became good friends with Patricias.
14:40	[Recording hum]
15:10	Reg/Reserve relations? "They very much look down on reservists. That's to be expected. It's their job. Especially a battalion gearing up for war. Who've lost friends. Who are taking reservists, some of whom are 'right the fuck out of her'. Especially one case of an inexperienced master corporal." They are intensely pragmatist and conservative. They love their battalion/regiment and don't want it sullied by outsiders. But once new people are in place, they gel. In the long run, they wanted you to be able to do their job. His boss was Regular Force, whose health was questionable, so they got rid of him. "You could feel second-class, my cap badge was Signals, but nothing on my uniform denoted I'm a reservist." Very little directed at him. Just guys venting, like they do in the military. "As soon as boots hit the ground, when it mattered what they were doing, it didn't matter any more." He thinks he proved pretty capable of doing his job. Tricky, here and there, but close friends with quite a few of the Patricias. But it was a high stress environment. You get pissed off with people around you sometimes. "Soldiers are your brothers, but sometimes your brothers are just dickheads."
20:00	"But those guys had my back. If I died overseas, they would have looked after me."
20:30	How adequate was training? Could give signals-specific points. He wasn't trained in all technical aspects, but he was trained to figure it out. To learn relatively quickly. Good support mechanism in-country to help too. "Training's training. It's not war. It's impossible for it to adequately prepare you. Like guys in England for four years prior to D-Day, when it all went out the window. No plan survives contact." Would like to have received more language training. But he was fit and

	prepared to do his job and to cope with the stress of his job. He was not ready to deploy when he first went to the battalion in Shilo.
22:50	<p>Expectations? IED threat was high in mind. A cornerstone of the training they did, constantly doing 5s and 20s, checking culverts. "Expected casualties, and that was not in error. Had quite a number in our company. Expected more combat than I actually saw, in part because I was always out with a large group. The odds of Taliban standing face to face were lower than a section encountering a three-sided ambush." Taliban objective was to cause casualties when Canadians couldn't hit back at them. He heard a lot over the radio, and was in those villages too. "I expected a bit more bang-bang. But that's not the worst thing in the world." Expectations? That's going back a long ways to "before I knew what war was. It's almost impossible to put my mind back to then. Everything changed after the tour." But he did have a clear set of expectations because the training was of such a high caliber. Scenarios were realistic. "Expected I'd sit in a chair, fix radios and drink coffee! It was hotter. " The first helicopter ride into Sperwan Ghar... "it's just like alien to everything you know. Not a paved road in sight. I certainly felt separate from all the other humans and the Afghans. In some instances they were trying to kill me. In others they were BFFs with ISAF. One man was hung in his village for getting too close to us. Not something you see in this country. NDP supporters hung."</p>
28:50	<p>Initial impressions? "KAF is KAF, a bizarre land of hope and sadness. Tears and just smelled so bad. " He liked how Paul Gross's movie Hyena Road depicted the pooh-pond. The American side was worse for smells. So hot, you can't function properly. They arrived in the cool of the night. "Step outside the next day, incapable. The sun just stops you." Tim Hortons, briefings. Briefings are useful but also terrifying, as if the people giving them take pleasure from terrifying you. But they're all true, like graphs depicting IED strikes, "the seven thousand IEDs I the past few years" etc. "It's just a matter of luck whether you'll be the guy who gets hit or not." One day, travelling behind a vehicle that had been hit. This Buffalo had fallen on its side, some of its wheels destroyed. Thirty seconds after getting it moving, it hit an IED. It could have been his vehicle. "We called it a two-fer Buffalo because we got two IEDs for the price of one vehicle." Some people were injured, but not killed.</p>
33:20	<p>The other bad IED story was after Terry Street died, two months into the tour. They had driven into KAF for a battle update brief. Heard a nine-liner on the radio. When the OC returned from the BUB, they returned to Sperwan Ghar, and watched Euro Trip (a movie). The right thing to watch at that time. It was dark and one in the morning and the sergeant major said, "Gear up. We're going to link up with 5 Platoon in Zangabad. The hardest few kilometres in our AO. Bravery had nothing</p>

	to do with it. We just did what we were told. By all rights we should have hit something that night. It wasn't like I wasn't being brave. I think it was same for the guys at Dieppe. 'Sounds like a great idea. This will be bully'. Obviously it wasn't. You have very little choice over where the amusement park ride is going to take you."
37:00	Day job? Based in Sperwan Ghar. It was great. At the nose of the horn of Panjway. Had a bank of four radios. Company, battle group and FOB net—an administrative net to speak with towers. All secure. Four speakers on a table and a laptop, with several field phones to speak to guns, artillery observers. All phones sounded the same, so he had to answer them all in sequence. Day shift was from 0700. Get up. Have breakfast. Get coffee. Sit down. Handover. "It's really important if there are guys walking around in the wilderness that they have someone who cares about them talking in their ear." A huge part of his job was making sure they had comms with everyone on the ground. A typical non-battle day included one patrol. They'd send up a report and he'd type it up. "We never got into a contact when I was smoking. Whenever I was out, nothing happened. But when I came back into the room..." Taliban were almost putting on a show, taking a few potshots around 4:30 daily. The LAV captain would bring a Dr Pepper in and they'd crack them as soon as they heard "contact". He exercised once or twice a day. Played poker. Read a lot on shift.
42:40	The food was excellent. Hot showers. Most of the time, "that tour was pretty right on." Superstitions? He had a couple of Catholic, St Christopher medallions. "Who's the guy?" Put them on his dogtags with elastic. "It wasn't like I was peeing on a LAV tire every time we went out. Not that formalized. Did step in other people's footprints. Which starts to fuck with your mind, mess with your mind, because you never know when the ground is going to explode. To limit the odds of blowing up." Had different ways of putting his kit on, but that's more about "how do I do my job." Not a superstition. "Needed to be ready to fight. To communicate with a number of different entities."
45:50	In the Lone Survivor movie, they just brought the wrong radio. If they'd had the right one, it would have been all about Navy SEALs kill Taliban. Whoever was doing their comms was not doing the right job. This is contemporaneous to his tour. He encountered and solved similar problems at the same time. "Just do your research, guys, and you won't have to jump off cliffs to avoid Taliban fire, guys."
47:25	Memorable? The patrol described in his book The Patrol has stuck with him for years and years. "That was my only experience with death. And I've moved past it as much as I can. Through the book. Other means. That day doesn't have quite the same grip on me as it used to. Not that I really want to talk about it." On the way back from Mushan, a remote outpost, a soldier got blown up just outside Zangabad. Cut in half. They weren't great friends. People who were closer to him were

	more impacted, but he was still deeply impacted by his death. He tried to deal with that psychic distress in the book.
49:50	Later in the tour, near its end, they hadn't been north of the Argandab River for a long time. They figured they should go there prior to their RIP with the RCR. It was supposed to be a big kinetic operation, not exactly like Op MEDUSA, but a lot of soldiers. It was called Op TIMUS PRIME ('lawnmower' in Afghan, but referred to by its Transformers character's name—Optimus Prime.) They were lead vehicle en route to FOB Wilson (?). He remembers asphalt, the first he'd seen in a while. "This is what it's like to be back in the world again." The whole world was going crazy around them, but they were fine in their little bubble. Engineers blew up doors. They slept in a grape field. Did sentry on a rooftop, watching people move about at night. Could hear battles going on all around them. "Our LAV smelt like blood for the rest of the tour after an ANA soldier bled out in it." Stared through night vision goggles for 3-4 hours, with their ramp down, feeling vulnerable. Nerve-wracking. "But to watch the sunrise, hear the birds sing... see the guys sleeping, pretty much at peace. It was moments like this when I realized I was in this, capable of doing it. Like Imposter Syndrome. At that point, I was the real deal as much as anyone else. And that was a good feeling."
56:25	For HLTA he went to Europe with his girlfriend Darcy. Met her in Paris. His French is reasonable, but maybe not that great... French were helpful in English. Paris was fantastic. Went to Luxembourg and met a friend or two. Found out about the death of Capt Leary, shot in the head, when he was in Germany. That death hit him hard. Tough to hear that news so far away. Tough to know he'd be going back. "That night in Munich I drank way past an unhealthy amount of beer. Not a particularly common occurrence on HLTA. Not sloppy drunk every night. That night was not good. Drank an entire pitcher of prune juice at the continental breakfast, then went back to bed." Drank and ate more. "By third breakfast I was ready to face the day." Then went to Vienna, Salzburg, etc.
60:00	"My morale was lower coming back than when I initially deployed." There's an owl statue in Dijon that he went out of his way to touch for good luck. Then in Dubai (Camp Mirage), he was emailing his dad when he learned that all the mustard in Dijon was imported from Saskatchewan, and that the original owl statue was stolen in the 1970s. Disappointed.
1:01:35	Returned to a big pile of mail on his bunk. "Nice to feel the world still cared about me." Back into routine, radio shift and patrolling. "Like going back to work after going to Mexico for a week, expect you could die at any moment."
1:02:30	Last few weeks? [Audio hum] Guys started going home in early September, but he didn't until mid-October. After Scott Shipley died

	<p>when his LAV got hit and flipped, he was pretty wary. "Pretty done with the fucking country. Pretty done with risking my life. Not something I'm particularly proud of." When RCR got in and offered him the chance to go on an operation—phrased as a question—he chose not to. "I enjoy coffee and reading books until I go back to Canada... I think I'm OK to stick around her. I don't think they begrudged me. Still good friends with some of them." RCR company was switched-on. Relief in place went well, from a communications perspective. When he got to theatre, the food was spectacular. Not complaining about the cooks. But after eight months it improved again with new RCR cooks. RCR came in fresh: "We're gonna kill Taliban, dominate the battlespace. There was a drastic re-evaluation of how we were doing things. Pulling back to Kandahar City. We were way out in the boonies." They'd pulled out of Talukan (where the man was hung from a tree) already. That happened 2-3 months before they left. He thinks they kept Zangabad and Mushan open, but shut Zangabad on the next tour after that—leaving an eight kilometer gap between Mushan and Sperwan Ghar. "Such an ordeal, losing vehicles down the riverbed, a fucking nightmare. Mushan was just cut off. Already in a rough state on our tour. Getting mortared pretty badly. Read Rob Semrau's book about this for his descriptions. Then it got even worse. They had no choice but to close Mushan after they closed Zangabad. We called the op where we tore down Talukan Op FUCK MUSHAN."</p>
1:09:15	<p>As soon as Talukan was torn down, the link to Mushan was three kilometres, making it harder to defend. Mushan was in a pretty strategic location. Which is why Taliban assaulted it so often. It blocked Taliban movement to Kandahar City. Hajji and Talukan were sited poorly for defence. Zangabad was good, but no real road. Plan was to pull everything back and project power from more central locations. Went to a meeting later with a general about his strategy. He didn't expect someone in the audience who'd actually been there. He challenged him about seven soldiers killed in the area Sperwan Ghar-Mushan. General was taken aback, but responded to questions. "Either way it didn't work. ISIS."</p>
1:12:20	<p>How satisfying was the experience? "Both the most intensely satisfying thing I've ever done, and the experience that left me the most spiritually bereft I've ever been left. It was both. Easily the hardest thing I've ever done. Without a doubt. I'm doing my PhD and guys are flipping out about comps, the books to be read. 'Suck it up.'" Getting away from this question, it was difficult to be back with people who had no conception. Difficult to go into Masters and PhD programs as only person in the room who'd done that stuff in a real way. The other alarming thing is to realized "it doesn't make that much of a difference. Just because I've been to war doesn't mean I know the theory any better. I came back just as stupid as when I left. And disconnected from</p>

	my peers. This vast gulf. Done Masters. Done PhD. Worked at the mall. My experiences were so outside this realm. Still feel insulated by my experiences of the war. Don't want to talk about it, but have put myself into a situation where I'm constantly talking about it."
1:15:35	PhD was tough in terms of peer relations, but people were good. But he started seeing psychologist in Calgary and is in a better space in terms of interacting, controlling what triggers him. How he interacts with the general public. It's been six years. A long time.
1:16:35	Homecoming? His anger "wasn't fair. When I got off that plane, there was a lot of stuff going on inside of me. Waiting for that moment for so long. Not ready for it." Got into Edmonton, then flew to Shilo, then to Calgary. Part of his anger stemmed from the fact many people on the plane got to see their families sooner. "I was done with uniforms." The anger surprised him, "furiously angry for no reason. Nevertheless, I was." That anger has stuck with him in certain ways. But he also came back from this tour calmer. A wasp landed on him yesterday. He just brushed it off. As a young man, it would have freaked him out.
1:19:00	He had a difficult time controlling his emotions after he first came home. Now has a deeper appreciation and gets angry much less often now. "At that moment, getting off the C17, I was just white angry, which made no sense." He's learned to deal with it. More emotionally well-balanced now than even pre-tour. "There's no question in my mind about my masculinity, my manliness, any more. There's not much anyone can say to threaten that core of what it means to be a soldier." Having come back, he's secure. "I know who I am. But I'm not always happy with the things I learned about myself. But I know how I'll respond. Can focus on protecting my family, daughter." Not many negative ramifications over the long term. But some in the short term.
1:21:40	What's it been like for your wife? Hard to speak for her. "If I understood women, my life would be so much easier..." She supported him. First time they met, he was in uniform. They started dating in part because of his identity as a soldier. She supported him all through his career. He supported her nursing career. Now their support their daughter. "I love my wife. It's so trite, but she completes me. She's allowed me to come to peace with all this stuff. Not like we talk about it all the time, but there have been some low points. At no point has she not supported me." The things they've learned along the way are put towards supporting their daughter. "I think Darcy is proud of me, but it probably doesn't play a big part in her life. But she's a nurse at a jail, so she has similar institutional experiences..." His experiences allow him to help her. Doing a PhD, there's not much scary stuff going on. "Scariest thing was watching American Sniper." It hasn't always been rosy. "For a long time I thought it was the worst mistake I'd ever made." But you remember the good, forget about the bad.
1:26:00	Spiritually bereft? I was both things. Self-actualized too. Poster: "

	<p>"PTSD is realizing you'll never be this cool again'—a photo of a guy firing over a mud wall in Afghanistan. Hard to recapture. When I got back I felt I hadn't done a good enough job etc. All these negative things. But after six years of reflection... I realized it wasn't that way. I was just done. What I mean by spiritually bereft is hopeless in a real way. But it didn't last. It can't last." He felt hopeless, felt it wasn't worthwhile. Also felt hopeless because he'd never do it again and would lose out on that experience. Friends did. And he sometimes regrets not doing it too. I sit around dreaming about the right tour. Could go to Syria, shave my beard and go..." It's not as intense as what First World War veterans endured. "That was the worst experience ever. Massive casualties. You see that in the Twenties and Thirties, but they change their tune in 1939."</p>
1:30:20	<p>"I miss it. It's the double whammy of missing ... being conflicted and missing what you experienced. It's different as a reservist because in the Regular Force you've got your unit. It's a stable community environment, whereas as a reservist you get paid for another two weeks, 'thank you for your service',..." The community was just gone. "In that sense, I was bereft. Apart from the people who'd been within a kilometer of me for eight months." The other hard part is the loss of pay. "All of a sudden you have no money. What do I do now? I don't want to get a job, that's a terrifying prospect!" He'd saved money for his Masters, however. "It was a difficult thing to go through. I'd still have gone. Six years on, I'm proud of it. But it took a long time to come to terms with it. To be proud of it. If that makes sense."</p>
1:33:10	<p>Mission worthwhile? "I do. Caveat. Oh, caveats. From perspective of academic. Through mandate... through 9-11... a response was needed. It had to be in Afghanistan. Bad human rights record. In that sense, we were justified in attempting to change things. Multilaterally. I said in 2003, if we go to Iraq I'm getting out of the military. Can you imagine if Harper had been in charge?" Was his tour worth it? "That's a more nuanced, difficult question. Eight years after 9-11. Things were falling apart. But I don't think all the king's horses and all the king's men could put Kandahar back together again." Which is too bad. Provided a bit of stability and governance for six months. "I have no idea what Sperwan Ghar is like today. What the life of a villager is like. I assume that it's terrible. UN reports seem to support this.. It's not like our actions turned this around, everyone was voting Liberal and there was peace and sunshine in the streets. But that doesn't mean it wasn't worth it. The idea we're protecting the people of Canada by fighting them in Afghanistan doesn't hold much water as far as I'm concerned. They're two different things: internal security and global security. Yet ISIS is a real thing. It's like by issuing the call to the Global War on Terror that Bush did that we created it. It's like it needed to be named to come into being." There is a radically Islamist terrorist government</p>

	than now exists. "Did we make the world a safer place? That's a hard one. Was it worth it for me? Yes. We did our best. Lots of lessons to learn. We'd do it better next time. Kids are learning to use pistols in school in Afghanistan. Teachers showing them how to use grenades. That's not what we went for." But there's also a Hazara protest in Kabul, but it also got suicide-bombed. It's hard to say.
1:40:45	Book? "I was very dissatisfied with the level of rhetoric I was hearing about the war, with the exception of Adam Day's Legion article about us. He did a fantastic job. People talking about it didn't know what they were talking about it. For example, heard a report about Canadian troops in Zangabad for the first time. What are you talking about? We have a long history in this area. Just because reporter thought it was first time, doesn't make it true. How did you not go through your archives?"
1:42:45	"I wrote to come to terms with that patrol. I wrote to just settle it. To get it clear of myself. Catharsis is the right word. ...I wanted the money. To correct some things I'd heard. To have it be part of the conversation. A real guy's experiences that were not hyper-blown patriotism like some other accounts. But mostly I wrote it for me. To clear that stuff out of my brain and heart. To this day, it surprises me others have read it. Who's my ideal reader? Me!" Now he's thinking about publishing his PhD dissertation with a specific reader in mind, someone interested in the First World War.
1:44:50	Just met a young lady whose boyfriend is in his old unit, who read his book. It surprised him she'd read it. Goal: "To expiate some of the darkness." Having done counseling, learning how memory works. How it's a process of putting the pieces back together, that book "was massively important. I don't know what I'd be if I hadn't written that book. Don't think I'd be as well-composed today if I hadn't written it. I've always cleared things up through writing."
1:47:00	That was more geared to his emotional experience, than his physical experience. Didn't really talk about his job.
	Additional visuals desired: --cover of The Patrol