

Chuck O'Donnell's Story

2007/8 – Defense and Security Platoon – Kandahar Air Field



*Resupply convoy passing through Kandahar City on route to Masum Ghar.
Photo provided by Chuck O'Donnell*

Authors' note

The principal authors of this text, aside from the individual recounting the story, are John Cochrane, a former member of the unit, and his niece Marina Tinkler, a Concordia University student. This record of events was prepared in 2015, many years after they occurred. The authors prepared this record principally using information obtained during interviews with the individuals involved. Where possible, this information was corroborated through interviews with others and a review of pictures and other publicly available information. The record presents the events as the individuals involved remember them several years after they occurred.

Chuck O'Donnell's Story

Mobilisation

From June 2007 to February 2008, Sergeant Charles (Chuck) O'Donnell served in Kandahar, Afghanistan, as a member of the Canadian contingent's Camp Service Company. The Camp Service Company was part of what was referred to as the National Support Element, which was essentially a service battalion responsible to provide logistical support to Canadian troops operating within and around the Kandahar Province of Afghanistan.



*Security and Defense Platoon number 1 at Kandahar Air Field (KAF).
Photo provided by Chuck O'Donnell*

Within the Camp Service Company, Chuck was employed first as a section commander and then as the platoon warrant of Defense and Security platoon 1. The platoon was composed of 41 members, all reserve soldiers. The other members of the Royal Canadian Hussars assigned to the Defense and Security platoons included Lieutenant D. Bisson, Master-Corporal Pilon, Corporal Laurin and Troopers Paquette and Kadijevic. The Defense and Security platoons were responsible primarily for camp security and convoy escorts.

Prior to being deployed to Afghanistan, the Camp Service Company was assembled at Canadian Forces Base (CFB) Valcartier and underwent nine months of preparatory training. To be effective in their intended role, the members of the Defense and Security platoons needed to perfect skills that would help them defend themselves from attack in mounted or dismounted situations. During this period, they also helped the other members of the service company practice basic skills that would be helpful when under attack. The other members of the service company were generally tradespersons, mechanics and drivers who concentrated on logistical and support matters. The Company's training was conducted

primarily at CFB Valcartier, which is located just north of Quebec City. The company also participated in two exercises, each of approximately one month duration in CFB Gagetown, New Brunswick, and at a US military base in Texas. At the end of the training period, the participants were asked to volunteer for service in Afghanistan.



*RCH members in the Security and defense platoons at KAF.
From Left to Right: Tpr Kadijevic, Cpl Laurin, Sgt C. O'Donnell, Lt D. Bisson, Tpr Paquette, MCpl Pilon.
Photo provided by Chuck O'Donnell*

In June 2007, the platoon was deployed to Afghanistan several months earlier than the normal rotation of the main battle group. During this period, the main battle group was first composed principally of the 2nd Battalion, Royal Canadian Regiment and then, after a normally scheduled rotation, of the 3^e Bataillon, Royal 22^e Régiment (R22^eR).

After a few days of pre-deployment leave, the Defense and Security platoon departed from Jean Lesage Airport in Quebec City on June 16th, 2007. They were flown in a military airliner to a staging area at Camp Mirage in Dubai. It was a 17-hour flight with a fuel stop in the UK. During a two-day layover in Dubai, they relaxed, played cards, smoked cigarettes, drank lots of water, and generally became

acclimatized to the time change. From there, they were then flown in a Hercules aircraft to the Kandahar Air Field (KAF). When they debarked from the plane, they were welcomed by a sweltering blast of very hot desert air.

KAF was the main logistical base for the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) operating in the south west section of Afghanistan. It was a very large and important complex that housed approximately 12,000 soldiers from units originating in the different NATO member-countries participating in the operation. This included Americans, British, Canadians, Dutch, Irish, Italians and others.

Upon arrival at KAF, the Defense and Security platoon underwent refresher training and a transition period with the unit that they were scheduled to replace. This training covered first aid, rifle sight confirmation, an introduction to the local situation and other skills and knowledge needed during the tour of duty.

During its tour of duty, the Security and Defense platoons rotated duties between camp security and convoy escorts.

Gate security

Initially, the platoon was assigned to camp security which principally meant guarding the front gate of the camp. Each day, a large number of locals and other visitors entered the camp to deliver goods, perform duties or attend meetings. The platoon rotated through the different positions at the front gate. The other positions were manned by groups of soldiers from other countries, all working under a UK commanding officer and an American sergeant major. One group would control the entrance to a serpentine-shaped vehicle-holding area, while other groups conducted searches of all incoming and outgoing non-NATO vehicles, others searched individuals, while still others checked identification cards and issued passes. The passes issued to the visitors were colour-coded depending on the level of trust granted to the visitor. Visitors with red badges needed to be escorted at all times, whereas more trusted individuals were given yellow or green stickers. These stickers were attached to each individual's birth certificate (referred to as 'Taskira' by the locals). For an Afghan citizen, a Taskira was an extremely important document that had to be carried with them at all times. Throughout their tour, the platoon's time securing the front gate was uneventful. They did however get some exposure to the local population and noted that the locals showed great respect to their elders but were not very accustomed to waiting in line in an orderly fashion.

Royal Canadian Hussars History documentation project
Individual and group experiences of RCH members during the Afghanistan deployment
during the period from 2006 to 2011



*Serpentine entranceway at the main gate at KAF.
Photograph provided by Chuck O'Donnell*



*Tower overlooking the main gate at KAF.
Photograph provided by Chuck O'Donnell*

One final group oversaw the gate with weapons at the ready. The gate was open during the day, closed at night, but it was secured and manned at all times. All the members of the platoon carried a pistol as well as a C7 rifle. The platoon also had a C6, which is a 7.62 calibre machine gun. This weapon was typically located in a tower overseeing the main gate to the camp.



*Guard overseeing operations at the main gate with
incoming transport trucks lined up in background.
Photograph provided by Chuck O'Donnell*



*Local workers and visitors passing through the search
area before entering KAF.
Photograph provided by Chuck O'Donnell*

One of the visitors to the camp that Chuck particularly remembers was a small girl who had been brought to the camp by her Afghan father so she could be given a follow-up examination at the base hospital. At a previous visit, her life had been saved by the camp doctors who had stitched her body back together after an IED explosion had hit the family car. Her father had come to the gate with an appointment paper, but being cautious, had left the daughter across the road until passage to the camp was authorised. After the hospital visit, the girl was briefly left in Chuck's care while her father retrieved his Taskira. Despite her misfortune and her scars that extended up the front of her body, across her face and head and down her back, Chuck was impressed with her resilience and *joie de vivre*. The soldier-babysitter found himself playing patty cake with the small girl until her father returned and carried her off to their home.

Training for convoy duty

The second main task assigned to the platoon was to provide security to the different resupply convoys that moved between KAF and the forward operating bases (FOB's). A resupply convoy was typically formed of up to 10 vehicles of which one third were armoured vehicles providing security and the remainder being soft-skinned vehicles, typically cargo vehicles or flatbeds carrying ammunition, food, vehicles, other supplies, mail and, on occasion, gifts for the troops. The soft-skinned vehicles included several 10-ton cargo vehicles, and a 16-ton tractor truck with a 53-foot trailer. The security vehicles used were the RG-31 Nyala armoured vehicles, which are South-African-designed de-mining vehicles with a V-shaped bottom. Each security vehicle was manned by a driver, a gunner, a crew commander, an observer and possibly a medic.

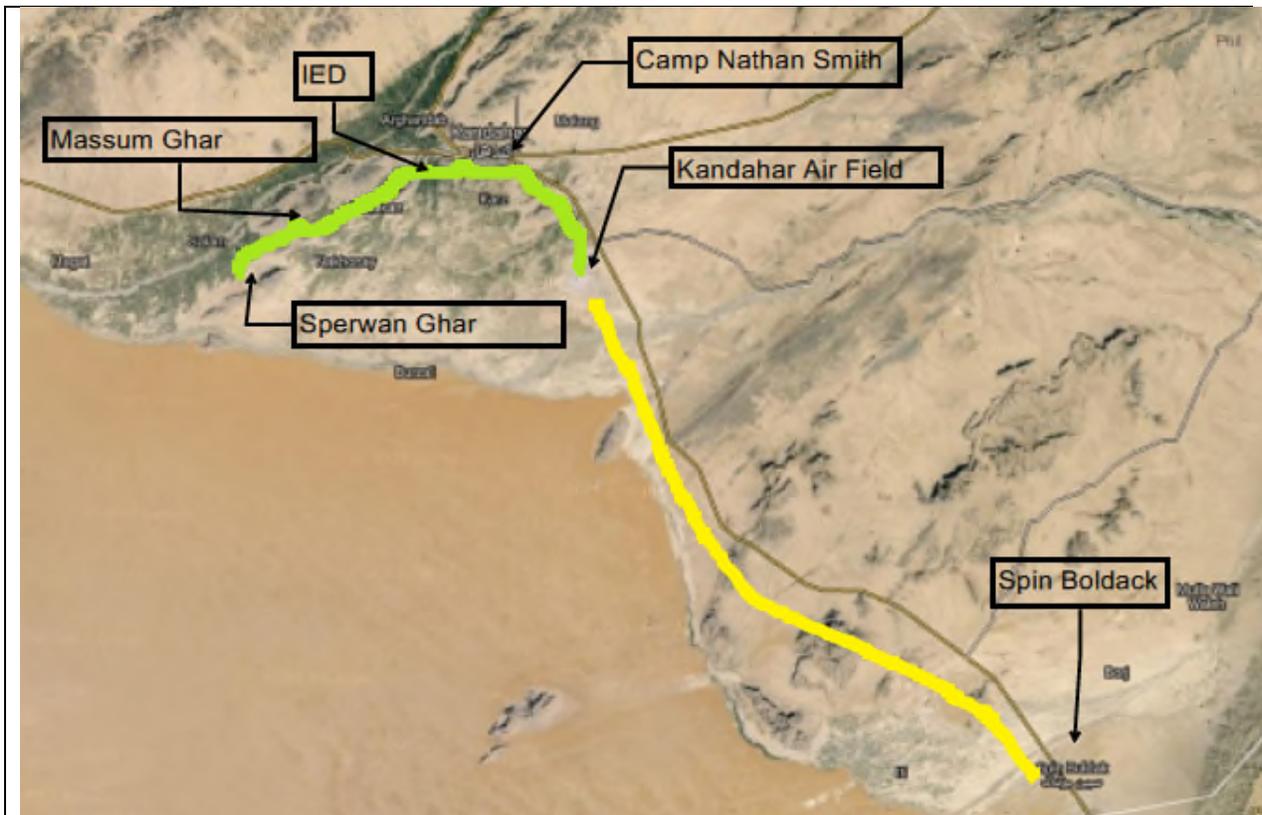
A convoy comprised of 10 vehicles, each keeping spacing of 100 meters between vehicles, could spread up to a kilometer in length. A convoy longer than this would have been more vulnerable to attack.

The convoys moved between KAF and the following forward operating bases:

- Masum Ghar – the route to this location went through Downtown Kandahar City and took approximately one hour. Masum Ghar was notable because the Canadian troops there had built a large Canadian flag out of loose stones on the side of a nearby mountain
- Camp Wilson – this was a small base with 2 platoons from the RCR
- Sperwan Ghar – this base was further west within view of both Masum Ghar and Camp Wilson
- Camp Nathan Smith – this base was at an abandoned factory in downtown Kandahar City approximately 11 kilometers from the airport. The Civil-Military Co-operation team (CIMIC) was located at this site. It had a reputation among the convoy teams for having good food so the convoy teams always appreciated going there
- Spin Boldack – This was a base approximately 100 kilometers to the south of KAF, very close to the Pakistan border. The trip would typically take 3 hours in each direction. During this period of time, this base was the center of operations for troops from the *12^e Regiment Blindé du Canada* (12 RBC) who were equipped with Coyote light armoured vehicles. The first part of the convoy route was on a paved highway but the remainder of the route was on gravel through a long desert valley. It was very hard on the vehicles and there were many breakdowns, notably because of the heat, sand, bumps and dust. Several Afghani police check-points were positioned along this route. It was later discovered that some of these policemen had been bribed by the

insurgents to use their flashlights during the day to signal the approach of a military convoy. These signals allowed the insurgents to lie low until the convoy in question had passed.

The approximate convoy routes are outlined on the enclosed map.



*Photo obtained from Google maps and used in accordance with terms set out by Google
Green highlight shows approximate routes from KAF to Camp Nathan Smith, Massum Ghar and Sperwan Ghar along Fosters Road and IED Alley.
Yellow highlight shows approximate route to Spin Boldack.*

During the transitional period with the outgoing Defense and Security platoon, Chuck underwent on-job training to become a convoy commander. The person responsible for convoy security always acted as the convoy commander allowing the service company members present to focus on the resupply, recovery or other aspects of the mission. The transitional period involved participating in 5 different convoys, but in roles of ever-increasing importance. During the first convoy, Chuck participated as a simple observer. During the second convoy, he observed and monitored radio communications. During the third convoy, he acted as a vehicle commander for one of the security vehicles and on the fourth convoy, he acted as the vehicle commander for the lead vehicle. On the final training mission, he acted as the convoy commander, under the supervision of one of the outgoing team members.



When he was assigned to his first training convoy, he experienced a high level of stress and had difficulty sleeping the night before. As they prepared to leave the camp, his stress must have been evident as he remembers the medic assigned to the convoy saying to him “Don’t worry about it – just go with it”. He appreciated the advice and moved out. After that, he participated in convoys on a daily basis, serving as convoy commander, second-in-command (2ic), or vehicle commander of one of the security vehicles.

JTF-A Commander's Convoy's IED July 26th

Chuck experienced an early baptism to operations on July 26th, 2007, while his platoon was still undergoing the on-job convoy training. Around supertime, the outgoing defense and security platoon received a call to escort a recovery vehicle providing assistance to a convoy hit by a Suicide Vehicle-Borne Improvised Explosive Device (SVBIED) around five miles north of KAF. Brigadier-General Tim Grant, Commander of JTF-A, had been present in the convoy at the time of the attack. That night, the outgoing defense and security platoon had celebrated the end of their tour and had drunk their two allocated alcoholic consumptions. As soldiers are grounded after one drink, it was decided to send out the clearheaded but less experienced convoy duty trainees. Chuck led the convoy which was comprised of three security vehicles and the recovery vehicle, which was a flatbed with a crane. At the scene of the explosion, which had been secured by a platoon from the Royal Canadian Regiment (RCR), it was pitch-black with little visibility. After Chuck had dismounted inside the security cordon and was preparing to report in, one of the RCR guards grabbed Chuck’s vest to halt his progress. Chuck was unknowingly about to walk over the remains of the deceased suicide bomber. Chuck remembers that the site smelled strongly of cordite and burnt flesh. The suicide bomber had been the only casualty. The driver of the general’s vehicle had perceived the threat and taken evasive action, swerving to avoid the force of the blast. Unfortunately, the vehicle had then flipped on its side to the right of the road. The general, who had not been injured in the incident, had moved back to Camp Nathan Smith by the time the recovery

team arrived. The recovery operation took about three hours and the platoon arrived back at KAF in the middle of the night. In spite of the late night, the platoon was on duty early the next day.

Chuck's first IED on August 12th

The route that the convoys took often went through Kandahar City. This was the most direct route and was considered to be the safest. The convoys also used Foster's Road which was also nick-named IED alley. The areas on each side of this road were not passable because they still held large numbers of mines from the Russian invasion of Afghanistan. Since the vehicles were forced to stay on the road, it became an area that the insurgents favoured for the placement of Improvised Explosive Devices (IED's).

On August 12th, 2007, on his 13th convoy mission, on the day of his sister's birthday back in Canada, when Chuck was leading his convoy through IED alley back to KAF from Masum Ghar, his vehicle was hit by an IED. The IED, which had been hidden in a culvert, was detonated remotely just as his vehicle crossed it. The force of the explosion lifted his 11-ton vehicle several feet in the air, tore off the engine, and for all intents and purposes destroyed the vehicle.



Artistic impression of Chuck's Convoy Vehicle on August 12th after it was hit by an IED and then rammed by one of the vehicles in the convoy.

All of the crew were knocked unconscious by the blast and all of them suffered shock and different physical injuries. The first person on the scene mistakenly thought that they were all dead. However, all

survived. Chuck himself suffered personal injuries, including four fractured teeth and damage to his back. He was able to extract his six-foot-one-inch 275-pound body out through the hatch on the top of the vehicle himself but he then collapsed on the ground. To this day, he cannot remember the explosion.

From discussions he had subsequently with others that had been present, Chuck understood that the gunner, still in shock and suffering from a skull fracture, had returned to the vehicle, removed the machine gun, taken up a defensive position on the ground and had started to survey the area for possible targets. He was luckily stopped by others at the scene who noticed that the barrel of the machine gun had been severely bent by the force of the explosion. Had he attempted to fire it, he might have suffered further injury or even lost his life.

Subsequent to the explosion, the injured crew was evacuated to a field hospital at Masum Ghar where they received their initial treatment. While they were being treated, Masum Ghar was attacked with rocket propelled grenades. Later that day, they were evacuated by road from Masum Ghar to KAF in Bison ambulances. During the road evacuation, Chuck remembers being escorted by Corporal Nicolas Beauchamp, a medic who subsequently died in a separate IED incident. He also remembers that one of the other injured crew members seemed to be suffering from amnesia and repeatedly inquired from his stretcher about what had happened and where they were going. He still appreciates the way Nicolas worked to keep both of them calm during the trip. The support provided by the medics in Afghanistan was not limited to dealing with physical injuries.

At the Kandahar Air Field Hospital, Chuck remembers arriving tied down on a stretcher with a neck brace. He was impressed by the triage room and the number of specialists that attended the initial two-hour examination. After making their initial examination, the specialists that were not needed quickly removed themselves from the process. Chuck was kept under observation in the hospital for approximately 12 hours and was then released on restricted duty. During his period of restricted duty, he generally relaxed in his quarters, watched movies, took his medicine, participated in investigation interviews and attended meals. During this period, he was not allowed to carry a weapon or to perform any strenuous activities. After a rest period of approximately three weeks he underwent a second evaluation to see if he was to stay or be sent home. As part of this evaluation, the doctor asked him to touch his toes. Chuck knew that if he could not touch his toes, he would be sent home, an eventuality that he was not prepared accept at the time. It took a great deal of determination, but Chuck forced himself to withstand the pain and successfully touch his toes.

While the medical procedures were underway, an investigating team collected as much evidence as possible to determine if any improvements were needed in terms of equipment or procedures. This team was able to find the detonating cord as well as two aiming sticks that the attacker had used to time the explosion to have maximum effect. The IED, which had been carried in a cooking pot, had blown the concrete top completely off of the culvert under which it had been hidden. Also, it was determined that the second vehicle in the convoy, the 16-ton truck had collided with the lead vehicle immediately after the explosion. Chuck believes that he and the rest of the crew survived due to the V-shape of the hull of the vehicle which channelled the blast up and out away from the crew.



Artistic impression of side view of the destroyed security vehicle and the transport truck that collided with it after the event.

While in the hospital, Chuck recalls being visited several times by the Padre who encouraged him to call home and advise his wife and family of the developments. At first, Chuck was very reluctant to contact them although he cannot clearly explain why, but possibly because he was not yet thinking clearly and possibly because he did not want them to worry. Finally, on one visit, the Padre brought a telephone with him and became very insistent. Chuck proceeded to make the call, first trying to phone his wife, Christine. When he got no answer at her home, he called his parents. His regular routine was to call home on Saturday night at 5pm, so when his family received a call on Saturday morning, their intuition told them that something was very wrong. After addressing their initial visceral reactions, he was able to recount his experience, announce that he was recuperating from his injuries and most importantly confirm that he had survived. Emotions ran very high that day both at home and at camp.

Platoon warrant's IED – 22nd September

After three weeks of reduced duties, Chuck returned to his full workload. To ease back into the job, Chuck was initially assigned as a convoy second in command (2ic), starting with a short convoy with no complications. After this, he participated in 3 or 4 uneventful convoys.

On September 22nd, he was informed that his platoon warrant would be replacing him on the next convoy to gain field experience, taking Chuck's vehicle and crew. The warrant would act as the convoy 2ic. At that time, the 2ic's vehicle, which was typically positioned in the middle of the convoy, would weave left and right of the convoy line to observe the progress of the other vehicles and, when required, quickly advance to control traffic and block intersections. While performing this weaving manoeuvre on Foster's Road, the warrant officer's vehicle was hit by an IED which severely injured his back. The warrant officer had spotted the IED sticking partway out of a hole on the road just before the explosion but the vehicle's momentum had carried it over the IED just as it blew.

Chuck was only informed of the event the next morning at a leadership meeting. He spent the day in the hospital with the warrant officer, who was later evacuated to an American military hospital in Frankfurt, Germany. This was one of the hardest moments of Chuck's tour, as he, and not the Warrant officer, was supposed to be in the vehicle that got hit. After this incident, the convoys reduced their use of the weaving movement. In the wake of this latest IED explosion, Chuck's platoon was returned to gate duty for a month and a half in order to lower the stress level.

Home leave

In October, Chuck took his Home Leave Travel Allowance (HLTA). For this three-week vacation, Chuck returned to Canada to spend time with his family. The route was in a military aircraft from KAF to Dubai and then in a civilian airline to Frankfurt and Montreal. He enjoyed the reprieve from KAF's dry camp policy on his journey and landed home for a joyful reunion with his wife and kids.

It was uneventful overseas during his HLTA, but it was harder to leave this second time. During the second part of his tour, Chuck resumed his regular routine of camp duty but, having now assumed the duties of the platoon warrant, was more involved in administrative functions with office work, planning and meetings. However, in mid-November he returned to convoy duty.

Fireball and flying motor incident

One memorable incident occurred while Chuck was in the last vehicle in an 11-vehicle convoy, almost a kilometer long. At one point, he saw a big ball of fire flare up near the head of the convoy. Then, he saw a vehicle engine fly through the air and land in the gravel on the side of the road near his vehicle. Using the convoy net, he called for all of the vehicles in the convoy to identify themselves starting from the number 1. All vehicles from 2 to 10 responded. There was, however, no communication from the lead vehicle. The second vehicle then used the close range military walkie-talkies (50 m distance) to contact the first vehicle, which was still moving. They managed to establish communications and determine that an attack had been attempted by a civilian automobile carrying an IED. The driver of the lead convoy vehicle had taken evasive action and consequently there were no injuries. The only damage sustained were scratches on the RG-31 and a blown out front passenger side tire. Chuck radioed in the 'Suicide Vehicle IED' to headquarters. The convoy then proceeded to Camp Nathan Smith, where the mechanics changed the tire.

Unfortunate road accident

On another convoy, Chuck was on the highway returning from Masum Ghar, with three escort vehicles and a flatbed, when the lead vehicle collided with a civilian automobile. Normally Afghanis were required to yield the right of way to military convoys. In this case the civilian vehicle approached the convoy from the opposite direction at very high speed. When the driver pulled off onto the opposite shoulder of the road without slowing down, he lost control and his vehicle veered across the road directly into the path of the 11-ton lead security vehicle. After colliding with the small civilian vehicle, the lead security vehicle ended up in the ditch. Two passengers were ejected from the civilian vehicle and sustained serious injuries as they slid across the hard surface of the road. In this unfortunate accident, one of the civilians was pronounced dead on site, and the other was taken to the Kandahar City Hospital by a civilian ambulance. The convoy remained in place for an hour until two vehicles arrived to recover them. While they waited, the convoy members established a defensive perimeter and ensured the safety of the soldiers in the ditch.

Chuck's second IED – December 22nd

A couple of days before Christmas, on December 22nd, 2007, a call came in for the platoon to provide security for a recovery vehicle that needed to go and retrieve an engineer vehicle that had been hit by an IED in a new area of operations north of Kandahar City. Based on the availability of resources, the initial

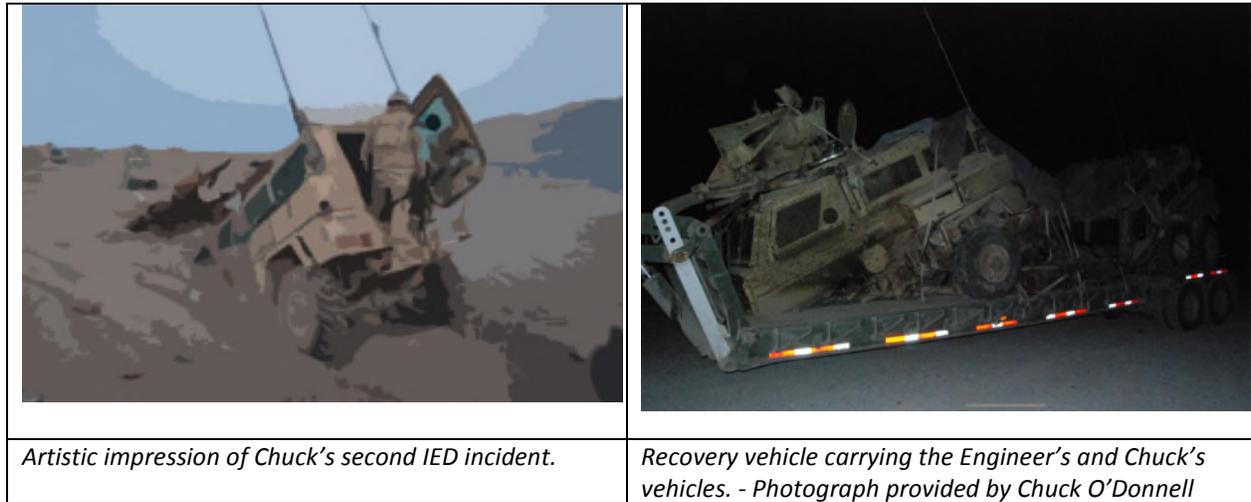
plan was to send a security escort of only two vehicles. Seeing that the convoy was entering into a new area of operation, Chuck pointed out that sending only 2 security vehicles was rather risky. Chuck's suggestion to add a third vehicle as a safety precaution was accepted, but since no other vehicles or crews were available, he and his crew ended up being the third security vehicle in the convoy. Chuck became the convoy second in command this time taking up the rear position.

As they approached the area where the engineer vehicle needed to be recovered, they drove through a built-up area with ten-foot-high mud walls on either side of the road with little visibility, making Chuck uneasy. He told his observer to sit down, close the hatch and use the back windows for observation. Often, the observers in the last convoy vehicle would stand with their shoulders and head out the open top of the vehicle, facing backwards notably to signal to civilian vehicles not to get too close to the convoy. Approximately one kilometer from the recovery site, they passed a police sub-station and came out into a large open area across which they could see the engineers and their damaged vehicle. Chuck was in rear, so it was his responsibility to check in with headquarters. As he prepared to do this, an IED exploded under his vehicle.

There was a large explosion with a big cloud of smoke. This time he saw the explosion and saw one or more of the tires go flying, and then heard gunfire. In the confusion, he checked the status of his crew and then tried to communicate with the other vehicles, but couldn't, not realizing that the communication system in his vehicle was no longer working as a result of the explosion. The convoy vehicles were equipped with 3 methods of communication – the radio for communications with headquarters, an internal communications network for communications among vehicles and a set of walkie-talkies that are used when personnel disembark from the vehicles. The driver then suggested that he use the walkie-talkies, which proved successful.

Then he heard firing, but since he did not hear any ricochets, he concluded that his vehicle was not under fire. He saw tracers off to the right and concluded that one of the other security vehicles was firing. Each of convoy security vehicles was equipped with a remotely-controlled weapon system mounted on the roof. The gunner was seated inside the vehicle behind the crew commander and operated the weapon using a computer screen and a joystick not unlike a joystick for a computer game. The ammunition box carried 1,000 rounds so it did not need to be reloaded very often. Around ten minutes later, all went quiet again. The lead security vehicle came around and secured the area.

The flatbed first moved up the road to recover the engineers' vehicle and then returned to recover Chuck's vehicle. Once both of the destroyed vehicles were loaded, Chuck's convoy joined the larger engineer convoy and went with them to Camp Nathan Smith, and then moved by itself back to KAF.



On the way back to KAF, Chuck had a gut feeling that this was going to be his last convoy as he had seen his fair share of action. After this realization, he decided that he wanted to put a close to his duties by leading the convoy back to KAF. The convoy commander was reluctant to let Chuck put himself further at risk, but a compromise was reached and Chuck was allowed to drive the lead vehicle home.

Back at the base, Chuck was again faced with the task of informing his loved ones that he had been hit by an IED. This time, however, he was thinking more clearly. His first call interrupted his wife's early Christmas dinner, followed by a call to his parents. He assured them that he was not going out again. The following morning, Chuck was informed of the executive decision that he was not going on another convoy, as his superiors were worried that "il n'y a jamais deux sans trois" (bad luck comes in threes). He was asked to concentrate on his duties as platoon warrant from within the camp.

Later, he heard that the gunner in one of the other security vehicles had fired at 2 people seen running and carrying some sort of weapon, possibly a rocket-propelled grenade launcher.

Chuck believes that his decision to ask the observer to sit down and close the hatch was an important factor in minimising injuries to the entire vehicle crew. The blast of the explosion was directed away from the vehicle and the closed compartment sheltered the crew from the after-blast. Surprisingly no one was injured and no one required any medical assistance at all. Chuck cannot really explain why he made this decision other than he was uneasy moving through a closed-in area between 10-foot-high walls.

Afterwards, Chuck remembered that the police sub-station was completely abandoned, a situation that was very unusual and could have been an indicator of danger. He did not really notice this until after the incident.

Christmas and New Year's Day in Kandahar

During the holiday period, the Canadian contingent at KAF had a Christmas party with a typical Christmas dinner prepared by the civilian Pakistani cooks. The menu was comprised of turkey with stuffing, potatoes and vegetables with water and juice to drink. No alcoholic drinks were served.

The officers and senior NCOs served the four hundred or so other ranks in attendance. Chuck was asked to set up the table for the Unknown Soldier. This is a setting at a small table with an empty chair to commemorate those who have died or disappeared while serving their country. While Chuck was focussed on this task, he turned quickly and accidentally bumped into General Hillier, the guest of honour. He quickly apologized and was told to carry on.

On Christmas Day, everyone felt far from home as they entertained themselves by playing cards. They received gifts from friends and families and care packages from support organisations. During the holiday season, they were able to call home as per the usual regulations which allowed for 35 overseas minutes on a weekly basis. The phones were located in a crowded construction trailer, where there were 2 tables, each equipped with 6 bays separated by plywood walls. In certain circumstances, the Padre would share his unlimited minutes with troop members, particularly after an attack. The weekly allotment was valued by all, as even non-users could find a use for their long distance minutes by exchanging them for money or goods like cigarettes and coffee.

A week later on New Year's Eve, the platoon was allowed to have a small party at which each soldier was given a ration of two beers. Generally, they played cards and relaxed. At the party, Chuck remembers hearing one of the younger soldiers complaining that it was always the same people who saw all the action. He remembers encouraging the young fellow not to regret his lack of direct involvement in any of the incidents, emphasising the precariousness of these incidents and the high risk of physical damage or loss of life.

The return home

Leading to the end of their tour, for the last two weeks, the platoon was on gate duty. Their replacements arrived January 20th, 2008, from CFB Wainwright. Watching the soldiers get off the plane in the blistering heat was like watching themselves arrive seven months ago. The platoon in turn trained the newcomers, and took them to the ranges so they could recalibrate the sights on their weapons. The departing platoon was moved out of their tents and spent the last few days quartered in a bunker.

They received their service medals at a medal ceremony in a small gravel parking lot behind the Canadian headquarters. This area had been decorated with a small cenotaph where pictures of the soldiers who died during the conflict were placed. For service in Afghanistan, each soldier received the General Campaign Star – South-west Asia.



*Medal parade at KAF.
Photograph provided by Chuck O'Donnell*

*Chuck O'Donnell (on right) and David Bisson showing their medals after the parade.
Photograph provided by Chuck O'Donnell*

On January 31st, the Service Company flew to Dubai in a Hercules and then from Dubai they flew to Cyprus in an Airbus. They underwent a decompression process in Cyprus, where the Canadian military had rented an entire hotel on the waterfront. It was a five-day process beginning with a three-hour information session. The team at the hotel offered a series of workshops mostly dealing with psychological, reintegration and transitional issues. Some sports activities were also organised. Counsellors were made available to those who wished to make use of them.

Soldiers were told to relax and have fun but that troublemakers would be returned to Afghanistan to be charged. Needless to say, no one was interested in this eventuality. No restrictions were placed on drinking or eating and, after spending time in a place where drinking was severely restricted, the troops let loose. Chuck remembers walking into town and buying and drinking a bottle along the way. He eventually ended up at the Peter Pan Bar which seemed to be a favourite spot for Canadian troops. Chuck remembers meeting the observer from his vehicle, who was very drunk. The observer hugged him and thanked him profusely for saving his life by making the decision to close the hatch on the vehicle the day of the explosion.

The flight home on February 5th brought the plane first to Quebec City and then directly to Pierre Elliott Trudeau in Montreal. As they entered Canadian airspace, they were met and briefly escorted by F-18 jets from Bagotville, one on each side of the airplane. One of the fighter pilots was patched into the intercom of the airbus and offered his thanks to the troops on behalf of the country.

After disembarking in Montreal, they moved through the airport to the baggage and the greeting areas. There was no formal dismissal ceremony but the troops were met by military greeters from the different units and then by their families. Chuck remembers seeing his son and daughter first, the rest of family and then finally his precious wife. Tears were flowing abundantly all around.

The troops were given the next day off then asked to parade half days at the unit for a period of three days. This attendance, was a precautionary measure to deal with any problems that may still be outstanding. Otherwise it was generally a relaxed activity.

Shortly after his return to Canada, Chuck's contribution was further recognized when he received a Commander's commendation for leadership in the Theatre and a Commander's coin.

Conclusion

The personal account of Sergeant O'Donnell's tour in Afghanistan provides a glimpse into the invisible dangers soldiers operating as convoy escorts had to face on a daily basis. While driving between the different military bases, they were vulnerable to the threat of attack by IEDs and SVBIEDs. When an attack occurred, the protection offered by the design of the vehicles they used helped to reduce injury and save lives. Beyond the strength of the vehicles, Chuck's personal story testifies to the resilience and stamina such life-threatening situations require from the men and women working on the ground.

Life thereafter

At the time that this document was prepared, Chuck O'Donnell was still serving as a member of the Royal Canadian Hussars (RCH) as a master warrant officer and squadron sergeant major for Headquarters Squadron. He was also employed on a full-time basis at Air Canada as a manager of operations responsible for cabin environment and quality. During the interviews, he mentioned that he greatly appreciated his employer's personnel policies that permitted employees such as him to participate in militia activities. He was also very much a family man enjoying life with his wife and adolescent-age children.

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