

Youth Remember Canada's Mission in Afghanistan

Hugs Await Izzy Dolls in Afghanistan



Sgt Mike Wright from 2 CER packs 220 Izzy dolls. Recently back from Afghanistan, Sgt Wright is one of many Canadian soldiers who gives these precious dolls to children in war-torn countries.

"It's a bit like eating peanuts," says Shirley Weese, "once you get started you can't stop."

Ms. Weese is one of about 20 volunteers — primarily from the Order of the Eastern Star — bitten by the crochet bug. In all, they made 220 "Izzy" dolls for children in Afghanistan. On December 2, the dolls were presented to members of 2 Combat Engineer Regiment (2 CER) at CFB Petawawa in the foyer of the Canadian War Museum in Ottawa.

"When the football game [Grey Cup] was on, I made two," says Ms. Weese with a grin. In all, she made 10 dolls and plans to crochet more.

Named in honour of Master Corporal Mark Isfeld, an Army combat engineer killed by a landmine in Croatia, all the dolls are handmade and have very distinct personalities.

Shirley O'Connell, a member of the Eastern Star, the largest fraternal organization in the world that welcomes both men and women, spearheaded the idea. Ms. O'Connell, whose husband was in the RCMP, made tiny dolls in scarlets, while others sport blue berets. Some are nurses, others are cowboys and one had a little red hat and wild, blonde pigtails.

Ms. O'Connell first saw Izzy dolls about five years ago when she saw a piece about MCpl Isfeld and his mother Carol on television. But it was only after she saw coverage of the December 2004 tsunami and the heartbreaking faces of the children that she decided to take up the project in earnest.

Destined for children in Afghanistan, she hopes the dolls bring a bit of comfort to kids who have very little. "It's something they can hold on to," says Ms. O'Connell, "to help them through the day."

Sergeant Mike Wright and Major Mark Flint were on hand from 2 CER to receive the dolls. Both knew MCpl Isfeld.

Sgt Wraight served with him in Kuwait and arrived in Croatia just one month after his death. Recently back from Afghanistan, he gave kids Izzy dolls and says they were all smiles when they received them.

In Afghanistan, they often stopped for just a few minutes in the smaller villages outside Kabul to give kids the dolls and maybe even crayons or other small items sent from home. A father of a three and a six-year-old, Sgt Wraight says it is hard to see kids the same age as his own with nothing. "It makes you realize just how lucky our kids are," he says.

Lieutenant-Colonel (Ret) Ken Holmes, President of the Canadian Military Engineers Association, facilitated the donation of the Izzy dolls. He says it is a way to recognize the contributions made by Canadian soldiers and the Isfeld family.

"It's a small way to bring a smile ...to a little child who has no other reason to have a smile on their face."

Interestingly, some of the dolls do not actually have faces. Ms. O'Connell says it gives children the chance to be children and to imagine a happy face on their doll—or maybe a sad face—it's up to them to decide.



Shirley O'Connell (left), who spearheaded the project, and Linda Bush pose with some of the handcrafted Izzy dolls. They are made in honour of MCpl Mark Isfeld who was killed in Croatia and are handed out by Canadian soldiers deployed around the world



A basket of Izzy dolls await their new owners. The dolls—handcrafted by members of the Order of the Eastern Star—were presented to 2 CER at the CWM December 2.