

"No pain, no gain, my friend."



By Brock Weir

"No pain, no gain, my friend.?"

These are the words that often ring in the ears of Aurora's Donna Beek at this time of year. When they passed the lips of her son, Corey Hayes, she was turning over a new leaf, battling health issues to get into tip-top shape to pass all the physicals needed to break into the Canadian Armed Forces at the age of 43, relatively late by military standards.

It was an uphill battle, and Corey was always waiting for her at the top of that hill. He was, after all, the fifth generation of his family to serve in the Army, Navy, Air Force, and marines. From Donna's perspective, joining up was the natural path for her son.

Very proud of his heritage, she remembers him proudly passing his tests in 2006 to drive high-powered vehicles for the military, marking the occasion for posterity on his left calf with a tattooed bulldog, chomping down on a cigar, standing atop two crossed rifles.

As if to underscore his pride, Corey tattooed "November 6, 2006" on the butt of one of the two rifles, leaving the second one blank. When asked what his plans were for the second, he told his mother that when he eventually retired from the military, the second rifle would finally get its date.

Looking at the tattoo, however, Donna says she had a nagging suspicion the butt of the second rifle would never be complete.

Tragically, less than three years later, the feeling became a reality when Corey drove his light armoured vehicle over a roadside IED in Afghanistan, 17 days shy of returning home from his mission after a one month extension.

As a serving member of the Canadian Military, Ms. Beek knew the drill all too well. Getting a phone call, she said, usually signaled good news. She vividly recalls coming onto the base at New Brunswick's CFB Gagetown with her then-husband, Corey's stepfather, and being "accosted, for lack of a better word" by superior officers and ushered into a quiet room.

Not long after, she joined three other families on the tarmac of CFB Trenton for the ramp ceremony repatriating Corey and three of his fellow soldiers back home to be met by their families.

"The four families were lined up, receiving their remains," she recalls. "The first three families were very emotional, screaming, crying, and then, when Corey was the last one off the aircraft, all of us in uniform were just quietly saluting. There was no noise, there were no exclamations, just pure silence."

Being engrained in military life might have helped process their loss slightly differently than other families, she says. They were very well versed in what the job entails, aware of the element of risk and danger.

We understand it. We get it. We know why this happened. We support the missions and why we're there. There are no regrets. We all signed the dotted line, she says.

And yet, when she is called upon to share her story this Saturday evening at the annual Remembrance Day Dinner at Aurora's Royal Canadian Legion, or laying wreaths at the cenotaph on Sunday and Monday morning, those words no pain, no gain, my friend, are still fresh in mind.

She will perform these duties, stoically, as she has done in previous years as Aurora's Silver Cross Mother, giving her the honour of representing mothers across Canada, across generations, who have lost their sons and daughters to the horrors of war.

I told Corey, I like jewellery, but this is one piece of jewellery I don't want to get, she says of her Silver Cross with a smile. I still got it, but it is treasured over everything else. I could lose everything else, but this means the most to me. It will always be associated with him.

When Corey's remains were repatriated in Trenton, his story was much the same as the other three who were also brought off the plane in full honours. Coffins are sealed, families aren't able to see them for one last final time. Anything related to the where, the why, and the how rely strictly on the words of others.

We accept it, but we don't get it, she says. It's part of our life, but it is hard to comprehend. When you have a loved one who has passed away and you go to that funeral and see them in that coffin, it is that sudden shock that it is real. We don't get that. There is always that question, but it did happen.

Because she didn't get that full closure that most families get in other circumstances, Ms. Beek says sharing her story helps foster a degree of that sought after closure.

It works because the more we share our individual stories, it reinforces in our own mind the pride and our love and our continued support for the Forces today, she says. But, it also reminds us that it has been another year of no phone calls, no visits, and just a stark reminder that another year has passed.

We all handle it in our own capacity and there is no right way or wrong way. Some brag they have never cried about it, but that too is unhealthy. You have to purge the poison. Sometimes they cry every time they think about it because the hurt is just that deep. There are many different ways to cope. Is it right? Is it wrong? I am just doing it differently. By talking to people, it really helps put things into perspective.

After hearing the words, no pain, no gain, my friend, in the back of her mind, she recalls an outgoing, fun-loving son who loved people and had a big heart. He was a true gentleman to the elderly and the young and a real rogue when it came to his friends, she remembers, underlining his Arrgh! Bring it on! attitude when it came to any challenge thrown his way.

He was a gentle, kind and decent kid and he just wanted to do good for people, says Donna. He believed in the mission. He hated, absolutely detested people being taken advantage of and he would always come to the aid of the underdog. He would clear the room if he had to. He would always have a candy in his pocket for a child over in Afghanistan and always had time for people.

His supervisors would tell me they were frustrated with him for taking his time with everyone else and he was always really kind.