

THE VETERAN'S VOICE



Ross Campbell

There are very few times in the history of the Canadian armed forces when our soldiers have been placed in perhaps the most difficult position that any government can require of them: the possibility of using deadly force against their own fellow citizens.

During October 1970 however, Ross Campbell became one of those rare servicemen who were called upon to do just that. It was the first time in

nearly 50 years- the last time being the Winnipeg General Strike of 1919-that the military was ordered to use force, if necessary, against other Canadian citizens.

For those who lived through this period, it is easy to remember what led to this unique situation, when the then Federal Government, under the leadership of Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau, had chosen to resort to the War Measures Act (WMA). With the famous words "just watch me", the WMA was invoked for the very first time during peacetime in Canada, in response to a perceived threat posed by the Front de Libération du

Québec (FLQ). This homegrown terrorist organization was the same that had claimed responsibility for the death of Pierre Laporte, Quebec's Minister of Labour, on October 17 of that same year. Laporte's body was found in the trunk of a car, one week after being kidnapped by the group.

The FLQ had also kidnapped James Cross, the senior British Trade Commissioner to Canada. He was held captive for two months as the FLQ made various demands of the Federal Government. With tensions running high among public officials fearing for their own safety, and seeking to maintain law and order, the only acceptable response seemed to be with boots on the ground.



During the course of MSBA's interview with him nearly forty years later, Ross Campbell recalled *"the only time in my career that I had cocked a weapon and was ready to shoot another person was on Elgin Street in Ottawa, unbelievable."*

Mr. Campbell recounted,

"I was down in Brockville (Ontario) and it was Thanksgiving weekend. All these trucks were rolling past on their way to Ottawa. Nothing but convoys. Two days later, I was then sent down to help guard National Defence Headquarters on Elgin Street. They found Mr. Laporte that night. And the next day they woke us up at 3 a.m. and gave us another 20 rounds of ammunition. We already had 40. So that was 60 in all. Three magazines and they were concerned after they found Mr. Laporte. We were right at the heart of it being at Defence Headquarters right down from the Parliament Buildings."

Then came the moment that Ross Campbell will not soon forget:

"We were changing the guard in the morning and it was an absolutely beautiful fall day. By that time, we ended up being a bit of a tourist attraction, this 'wonderful thing that Pierre was doing'. So we were coming up Laurier Street and we had everyone, except cooks and medics, on duty. So we had Vince Jones- he was a clerk and he was in front of me. And Stanley Jones was behind me, he was an REME mechanic. All of a sudden I looked over and there was a great big Buick with Quebec plates and it slowed down. The only thing I saw was the window rolling down and a woman in the passenger seat held up something black that looked as though it had a barrel. I don't know if you know this but you can cock a weapon in mid-air and so I did, as I went down into the prone position. I yelled 'NO!' And Vince got down into the firing position on one knee."

The next thing that happened was an incredibly close call for everyone involved:

"What it ended up being was a woman taking pictures of us with a telescopic lens on her 16mm camera. No one was supposed to take photos or films of us, unless they had press passes. But the safety was off, my finger was on the trigger and if I hadn't of realized what it was in time, a bullet would have gone right through that car, because these were 7.62s. It would have gone right through the door and passed through her and likely into her husband."

With tensions running high, an unfortunate development occurred soon after:

"The fellah got to the corner and so Stanley confronted them because they were at a red light. He was so pumped up that he stuck the end of his rifle barrel into the window. When the light turned green, that guy got out of there as fast as he could but the tip of Stanley's gun knicked the lady's face. We informed the RCMP, as they were in charge of operations overall and they traced the car back to the Quebec side. When the RCMP found them, the guy actually wanted to press charges! The RCMP explained to them that under the War Measures Act, just maybe they could be held for 72 hours and so nothing ever came of that!"

With due pause and reflection, Ross remembered:

"That was scary. The thought of actually shooting or killing a fellow Canadian. In the end, I think Pierre Trudeau did it to get votes. That was certainly how people felt who lived in Ottawa at that time. The press wrote it up as though it was all a social highlight for those in senior government positions... everyone wanted their own guard as a sign of their social prestige and standing. I don't think they ever really thought about the difficult position they had put us in, as Canadian soldiers."

If the "October Crisis" was the only time during Ross Campbell's time in the Canadian Armed Forces that he cocked his weapon, it certainly was not a reflection of the lack of opportunity to do so. MSBA had the privilege of meeting with Mr. Campbell for close to an hour as he shared from the wealth of his nearly twenty year career, dating back to the very start of the 1960s.

"I was always interested in going into the military. So in 1959, I signed up for the Brockville Militia and 32nd loc battery of the Royal Canadian Artillery (RCA), which later became the Brockville Rifles. In 1961, I then joined the regular force, going into the signal corps. I completed depot training with the Canadian Guards at CFB Petawawa and in 1962, was sent to Kingston to the Signals School to study for the signal corps. I was training as a Radio Telegraph Operator or RTG as they called it and, following that training, I was posted to Calgary to 1 squadron at the Currie Barracks. In 1963, I was then posted over to CFB Shilo with the 1st Surface-to-Surface Missile (SSM) battery of the RCA. It was an 'Honest John' outfit- it fired the Honest John rockets as they were called."

As with so many other members of the Canadian Forces during the Cold War era, Ross Campbell was then called up for service as part of Canada's commitment to supporting peace between the Western democratic nations and the Eastern Soviet-led Bloc of nations in Europe following the Second World War. This

commitment led to tens of thousands of Canadian troops being stationed in the Ruhr Valley, at the heart of Germany's industrial capacity.

"In October 1964 I was posted overseas for my first tour in Germany with the 1st SSM battery, based in what was known as Fort Prince of Wales near Hemer in Germany and I did four years. We were a unique unit. It was nuclear delivery! A lot of people do not realize that at that time, the Royal Canadian Air Force had nuclear delivery and so too did the Canadian Army. But the Americans controlled the nuclear warheads. We were part of the British Army of the Rhine. Then we moved down the road to the base at Iserlohn. A lot of Canadian children were born there at the military hospital. By 1968, I was returned to Canada and I was stationed at Petawawa again. I remember that when our exercises were over in Europe, we left three piles of hard rations behind: Canadian, British and American. We left them for the locals. First the Canadian rations went, then the British. No one touched the American rations!"

And as so many other members of the Canadian Forces experienced from the start of the Cold War through to recent years, Mr. Campbell was then also deployed to serve during peacekeeping missions in the Middle East.

As most Canadians now recognize, peacekeeping has become a special vocation of Canada's military, even now being viewed as being part of Canada's national heritage. This is especially true, given that the very first United Nations peacekeeping mission was in fact established thanks to the efforts of later Canadian Prime Minister Lester B. Pearson. In 1957, Pearson was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for creating the United Nations Emergency Force (UNEF), a coalition of several nations that sought to resolve a hostile Egyptian takeover of the Suez Canal. In 1973, with conflict again occurring in the region, this time between Egypt and Israel during the famous Six Day or Yom Kippur War, Canadians again saw themselves sent to Egypt as part of "UNEF 2", to maintain the peace.



"In 1974, I was posted to Egypt. I was stationed at United Nations Headquarters at Ismailia. So I did three months there and our job was to send and receive communications to UNDOF (the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force located in the Golan Heights in Syria) and also we would sometimes do radio relay and repeating for the Canadian Forces too. At Christmas, three guys got killed. "Snake" Miller was one of them. He was a fellow from the 3rd Royal Canadian Horse Artillery. I remember having to handle the communications between the General at

Canadian Headquarters and the troops, as he was having trouble contacting forces on the ground. The General got that all sorted out thankfully."

"After that, I was sent out into the middle of the Sinai Desert and to this day, I have no idea why we were out there. We were a radio detachment at a place called Rabah. A lot of this part of the country was all sand. We had a Swedish staff sergeant MP (Military Police), a Finnish major who was the commandant, and three PPCLI artillery voice communications officers. The others were all artillery or gunners whose job it was to defend the outpost if it ever came under fire. Myself and the sergeant were radio communications. I was there in case we had to use Morse Code, or as we called it in the Canadian Forces 'CW' or Carrier Wave. I was the only guy who could do it. The other guy could only do voice communications. I really do not know why we were there! Stuck out in the middle of the desert. But what was notable was that this was the very first UN peacekeeping operation where women in the Canadian Forces participated. They arrived in January of 1975."

For Ross Campbell, these Canadian service-women hold a special place in his memories.

"One day a jeep and a three quarter ton truck-van showed up and some women and a couple of other guys arrived at the outpost. They went out into the desert and I warned them not to go out, to avoid all of the debris, war junk that was still scattered about from the time of the Six Day War back in 1967. So they went out and two hours later the jeep showed up but the truck did not come back with them. So I asked 'where are the women?' And the answer I received was 'you mean they're not here?' So I thought 'uh oh, this can't be good', as there was a sandstorm blowing in right then. I got on the radio and demanded to speak to the duty officer at Ismalia back at UN Headquarters. I wasn't about to broadcast what had happened all over the place though, because ours was an HF (high frequency) system and was unsecured. Eventually a voice came on the other end 'This is Colonel Ford here!' And I thought 'oh boy this isn't good', as this guy was the 2IC (second in command) over at Canadian Headquarters! Colonel Ford asked what I thought should be done, after asking why I let them go into the desert in the first place!"

Mr. Campbell continued:

"Eventually, I got permission to pair up with a Swedish detachment to go out to find them. But before we left, their officer said 'take the pot-washer' with you. We had local people who cooked and cleaned for us at the outpost and the pot-washer was a Bedouin tribesman. So we took him with us and every now and then, the Swedish officer would get out and climb on top of the truck with his compass to see where we were,

as the compass would not work inside of the truck. Eventually the Bedouin poked me on the shoulder- he spoke absolutely no English- and then pointed at the Swedish officer. He was trying to say, as far as I gathered, that he would show us the way. So I told the Swedish officer and he rolled his eyes because you absolutely could not see outside the windows of the truck. I do not know how he did it to this day but that Bedouin took us right to them! He took us right to them! He pointed this way then that way then eventually we came to a mud wadi (watering hole) and their truck was stuck in the mud. This was like being out in a blizzard in Winnipeg, you couldn't see anything if you held your hand in front of your face. By this time the Swedish officer was a convert and fully trusted that Bedouin. We couldn't get their truck out so they piled into ours instead and we got them back to the outpost. The next day, the Israelis came with an APC (armoured personnel carrier) and pulled the truck out, as they were occupying the Sinai at that time. A bus came down from Jerusalem to take the women back and that was the last I saw of the very first Canadian women peacekeepers!"



Following service in Egypt, Ross then saw a second UN peacekeeping tour in another place where Canadians distinguished themselves, this time on the island nation of Cyprus. Canadians had been sent to keep the peace in Cyprus starting in 1964, when ethnic conflict between Greek and Turkish citizens led to significant hostilities, eventually leading to a Turkish military invasion of the island in 1974. Every regular Canadian Infantry battalion has been sent to Cyprus since that period, making UNFICYP one of the most frequented of all peacekeeping stops for the Canadian soldier throughout the Cold War. Some readers may recall the "Part of our Heritage" series of video shorts produced by the Historica Foundation of Canada, one of which featured the typical experience of the Canadian soldier in Cyprus during this especially tense period.

In 1976, I was sent to Cyprus for another peacekeeping tour and was attached to the Danish Battalion under the 644th British signal troops in Xeros at the northeast end of the island, in the Turkish sector. Us Canadians were typically stationed in the Greek sector... When I was there, it really got scary once. The Turks rolled through with flags on the front of their vehicles and things got pretty hairy for a while before they settled down. In the end, thankfully nothing came from that encounter but you always had to stay alert to prevent things from getting out of control."

With the end of a second successful peacekeeping tour, it was not long before Mr. Campbell embarked on the final stages of his career with the military.

"In 1977 I got a call to re-muster. So I mustered back in as a cook, as cooks aren't going out on patrol! Best decision I ever made. I was posted here to Winnipeg at 17 Wing and I got to cook for the officers' mess and then I even got to go up for six months to our base at Alert. It was a great posting. And as a cook, I ended up being promoted! I couldn't get promoted when I was in the signals corps but the guys up at Alert wrote up a report that made it seem like I walked on water, so I got promoted!"

After retiring from his career with the Canadian Armed Force in February, 1982 - following 23 years and ten days of service - Mr. Campbell employed his newfound culinary talents in a variety of capacities, including at Dauphin Hospital. An entirely new career started however, when he began cooking at the Dauphin jail. That eventually led to a transfer to the Stony Mountain Penitentiary, where Ross decided to move out of the kitchen and into the guardroom. There, he met a fellow corrections officer named Ron Shepard (see MSBA's "Veterans' Voice" project for our article on Mr. Shepard). MSBA had the opportunity to meet these two outstanding veterans during the same interview session.

"I want to echo everything that Ron has said about the importance of school boards", stated Mr. Campbell during his interview. "I believe that school trustees are where the 'hands-on' decisions are made for the community. The local level is where it all happens for the community. When it comes to locally elected officials, you can call them up and they are right there for you, to get things sorted out."

Mr. Campbell then offered some insights about the importance of the sacrifice made by everyday Canadians through their service in past conflicts.

"In terms of the meaning of the end of the First World War, my uncle Elmer Poitras went over the top in the First World War. Around 1939, he was 39 years old and he actually signed up again, to serve in World War Two. I took him on his last parade during Remembrance Day in 1976, out in Brandon, Manitoba. In between the wars, things weren't easy for him, just as they weren't easy for a lot of the veterans who returned from the First War. During the Depression, he rode the rails in boxcars as a hobo like so many

others did. So when the Second War came, he of course signed up. But after that, things changed. My aunt said that the Elmer who went over at the start of the war was not the same man who returned from the war. He had gone into Europe the week after Normandy."

In closing, Ross Campbell then turned his thoughts back upon his wealth of experience, when commenting on the importance of democracy.

"Democracy is the best system, the only system that we have going for us right now. My experience, especially in Egypt when Anwar Sadat was alive and seeing how a country operates under his complete dictatorship, well the people always lived in fear. Everything was always in a lockdown. When I would meet with the Polish or Russian officers who were assigned to UNEF, they just could not understand our way of life."

"My first experience understanding the difference between what we have and what others have was actually in Switzerland of all places, back when I was stationed in Germany. I was part of the Pipes and Drums band and we had been allowed into Switzerland for the first time in full uniform. It was part of an international festival and there was a band there from Prague. You have to remember this was at the height of the Cold War. And so we would go over to try to talk to the Czech band members but as long as there was one guy there, with a red star on his cap, no one would speak to us. He was their commissar. Finally one day we were side by side in the cafeteria where we ate, and only when he was not watching would they speak to us. My wife grew up in Germany when the Iron Curtain fell and when the Berlin Wall came down, we travelled back to where Checkpoint Charlie was. She stood on the East Berlin side and said 'they cannot touch me now'. What does that tell you about the difference between democracy and other ways of life? I think that pretty much sums it up."

"People like to toy and play and do things to the democracy that we have. I think things are pretty good based on what I have seen and experienced. Things can always be better and improved and you cannot stop working towards that, but the democracy we have, that should be protected."

