Personal Reflections on War and Peace, Remembrance Day 11 November 2012
Bridge Street United Church

1. The Reverend Vicki has asked me to spend a few minutes on this Remembrance Day morning sharing with you some personal reflections on War and Peace.

2. To christen the ground for you:

   From August ’94 to February ’95, I was Officer-in-Command (O-I-C) of the Advanced Surgical Centre (ASC) with Canadian Forces CANBAT 2, the Royal Canadian Dragoons Battle Group. We were ultimately deployed to Visoko, Bosnia, near Sarajevo, as part of the United Nations Strategic Force in Yugoslavia. Our BG consisted of 825 CF personnel, including 125 reservists of which I was one, and with 54 medical personnel.

   That was almost 2 years into the “Homeland War”, being waged in Bosnia, Croatia and Kosovo, which was being fought by three factions. First, a Bosnian Serb militia, many of whom came from the Bosnian Army, reinforced by Serbian militia, overall 10,000 fighters; second, the Croatian Army reinforced by Croatian militia, about 10,000 in number as well; third, the Bosniak militia coming from predominantly Muslim areas of Bosnia in response to Bosnian Serb takeover of those lands. The 3 Bosniak combat groups of 3-4000 each were primarily civilian, and thus were initially untrained and minimally supplied.

   From August 2003 to February 2004, I was back in Bosnia with the Canadian Forces Task Force Bosnia-Herzegovina as part of the NATO Sustainment Force, and as Task Force Surgeon responsible for provision of medical care for all Canadian Forces personnel in 4 camps through Bosnia.

   From 92-96, according to United Nations reports, approximately 200,000 Bosnians were killed in that civil war, of that number an estimated 185-190,000 being civilians. (more killed each year than the population of our City of Belleville).

   By the time of my return 9 years later, perhaps a hundred Bosnians were being murdered yearly, usually as revenge killings or from conflict between black market factions. Canada and its peacekeeping partners had enabled a civil peace.

2. Although it would be easiest to denote the factions with ethno-religious labels, the primary drivers of the conflict were neither ethnic nor religious. The Bosnian Serbs were receiving support and weapons from the USSR; Croatia had, before the Homeland War, established and strong commercial ties with West Germany with ongoing support by that country. The Bosnian Muslim fighters received much logistic support, heavy weapons included, allegedly from the USA, which increased their combat capacity by 1995 to equal that of the other 2 factions. World politics were at play in this supposedly
regional conflict. The issues for all three factions in a local sense, were the linkages of a re-attainment of political control to a former position of social dominance, and thus of economic advantage. It was, however, easy to develop distaste and perhaps hatred of your neighbour if your neighbour was from a different ethnic group and or religious adherence than you.

3. Peaceful Canada. Or so is our bias. We have been called “an unmilitary nation.” Desmond Morton has written “More than most, Canadians have distanced themselves from thoughts of war.” “Since about 1815, Canadians have had to go abroad to fight” and “--- Canadians remember wars fought in France, Italy or Korea, not in the Richelieu Valley or along the Niagara Peninsula”.

But war, both in Europe and in North America, has been a formative influence on our Canada. From the time of first Acadian settlements in 1604, there were shooting wars in Canada during 140 of the next 190 years. In the 220 years onward from 1793, Canada has been involved in military conflict in 51 of those years, plus the 36 year long Cold War from 1948 to the second Reagan presidency in 1984.

Since 1993, successive Canadian governments have committed Canadian forces to engagements without cessation in a very nasty type of fighting labelled asymmetric warfare, with one consequence of the federal government’s political decisions being the 30 Canadian casualties in Bosnia and the 163 Canadian casualties in Afghanistan.

Peaceful Canada? Admittedly, everything is relative.

4. War- armed hostilities between nations; hostility or contention between peoples or groups.

And peace- freedom from or a cessation of war; quiet; mental calm; a ritual liturgical greeting.

My own thought is, definitions apart, that war and peace are not separate and independent entities, but rather both are part of the continuum of human existence. From before memory, there have been conflicts at the boundary edges of human interest groups, be they hunters or gatherers or small farmers or nation states or religious adherents. A corollary thought- peace, peacefulness, can and does exist within the presence of war, notably within the human heart and spirit. And war can and does exist in peacetime- consider blood diamonds and the state ordered shootings of unarmed miners in South Africa in September, or Malala Yousufzai in Pakistan or Syria.

5. In Bosnia, the mission statement of our Battle Group reflected the intimate relationship between war/peace.

“*The mission of the RCD Battle Group is to:*

*Facilitate the development of a durable peace* (ie, the implication being that a state of war existed)
within the Federation of Yugoslavia;

to enhance humanitarian assistance to the people of Bosnia-Herzegovina

in order to assist all people of B-H to live in conditions of relative peace and security.”

“relative peace and security” Does that mean an absence of war?

6. Reflections on War and Peace.

i. On War. Bosnia was/is largely agrarian. Farming, lumbering, small herding, with a couple of larger cities such as Sarajevo and Zenica. Many Bosnians live in small villages, which rest in river valleys, on hillsides or on hilltops in an isolation created by poverty and alcohol. There is a dirt street, perhaps 2 or 3, a handful of basic stuccoed cottages with a large main room, heated by coal or wood. Life for most families includes, whatever other job the father may find, a couple of acres to crop, 1 or 2 milk and meat giving animals, a scrawny dog, barter for necessities. Life next year depends upon a successful crop this year providing the seeds for next year’s plantings. By 1994, a few small power and telephone grids remained, occasional water purification systems existed in some regions.

But the fighting raged over 1/3 to ½ of Bosnia’s lands, initially the Bosnian Serbs successful in capturing lands in Muslim areas and near the Croatian border. Later, after being trained and armed, the Bosniak Muslim militias retook much of that lost territory. As a faction gained control, the villages (spelled people) became at risk. Villages would be surrounded by a militia, preventing escape by any villager. The homes would be shelled and/or set on fire with incendiaries. Mortar and artillery shells arrive quickly, and have little hesitation in penetrating wood, straw and tile roofs, nor in setting the interior on fire, nor in making casualties of those inside. 90-95% of the casualties were civilian.

Those villagers and animals who survived the shelling were perhaps the unfortunate. Stage 2 would follow immediately-bullets to the head, or knives across the throat, or bayonets into the abdomen. There are verified stories of death from being impaled on sharpened stakes; of village women regardless of age being gang-raped before death; of little children as dead as their parents and their cows in the tangle of bodies.

To Bosniak Muslim villages, to Bosnian Serb villages, to Croatian villages- a common inhumanity. War.

ii. On War. An 83 mm shell from a Bosnian Serb mortar dropped into the market square in Sarajevo during morning market. Lethal (killing) diameter of a ground burst on asphalt- 15 metres. Many killed and wounded; Major Hilary Jaeger of the CF Health Service and 3 medical assistants who were present at the scene treated the wounded.

Lethal diameter of a ground burst from that mortar in a soft ploughed field- 5 metres- or 4 Canadian soldiers in a soft-skinned jeep, including the O-I-C of the ASC, would have had a very different day.
iii. On Peace within War. Sections of 5-6 CF personnel in Observation Posts (OP’s) built from a sea container (as you see on the CN and CP) with a wooden tower added for better line of sight (and a heavy chicken wire screen to deflect grenades). OP’s positioned to view the line of confrontation between the factions. But to see also means being seen, and therefore targetable. Our 12 OP’s were recording upwards of 500 shot reports daily during early days in our tour.

A decision of our Battle Group Commanding officer- to intentionally position some OP’s on the roofs of schools and hospitals, most of which buildings had been shelled previously, on the supposition that the visible presence of Blue Berets and UN flag on the roof would inhibit further shelling, and thus allow repair. To our moderately surprised relief, it did. Peace keeping. Peace within war.

iv. On peace within war. Drin. A small town of a couple of hundred buildings. A centuries old institutional type building. An orphanage, begging a better one-word description. Three hundred children- a few months old to 10 or 12 years. Previously staffed by Bosnians of all ethno-religious categories. Three floors, central stairwell, small hydroelectric grid in the town, tiled roof, small pharmacy room. When the Croatian army passed through, 2/3 of the staff fled. When the Bosnian Serbs swept back, the remainder of the staff fled, but none of the children got out. Some were killed by artillery; some of the younger died of dehydration and hypothermia. The dead children were buried in shallow graves scooped out with difficulty by the older children next to the orphanage, a field which to my boots felt a holy place. When we first recce’d Drin, the roof was holed by shelling, the power gone of course, the kitchen destroyed and ransacked, windows shattered, pharmacy plundered. But, peace within war- our combat engineers patched the roof, placed a 10 K generator obtained from an NGO, covered the windows; my preventive med tech and the engineers got the plumbing and steam kettles going in the kitchen; our pharmacist shook the central supply tree and replenished life-saving medications; our presence heartened some staff who returned; our contacts with the Medecins sans Frontieres in-country director, a nurse from the Toronto General who worked Emerg there with a friend of mine, enabled the arrival of 2 industrial capacity washers and dryers so that bed linen from 300 kids no longer had to be done outside in a cauldron over a wood fire; many of our BG personnel on their ½ day off every couple of weeks, voluntarily came to the orphanage to be with the kids. Peace within war.

Images of my first reconnaissance there are permanent. The damage, of course. A room the size of our church parlour, a line of cribs jammed against all 4 walls; another row jammed against the wall row, a third row jammed against the second row; perhaps 8 by 3 feet left in the centre of the floor- each crib with at least one infant or disabled young child. The odours of fresh on dried urine and stool; every orthopaedic deformity imaginable; obvious fetal alcohol faces and ear sets among them; 50 pairs of eyes on me- absolute silence- palpable fear- soldiers! And then a move to the nearest crib, and a father wearing a Canadian flag on his shoulder picking up a child with cerebral palsy, to hug and kiss a little head; sighs, wails of relief and joy while my med a’s and I worked the room so that each child had physical contact with a Canadian peacekeeper, with peace in war. Little hands stretching out from their crib prisons, not wanting to let go of my uniform.

v. On Peace within War. From a relationship of trust developed with the directors of the local hospitals in Iljas (a Bosnian Serb town) and Breza (a Bosnian Muslim town)- former med school
classmates and colleagues from Sarajevo University- a negotiation with both of them to allow us (CF armoured vehicles) to accompany (to protect from black marketers) NGOs to distribute pharmaceuticals and medical supplies in their respective territories. It took me an hour to get the 2 former colleagues into the 20th century- the Serb beginning his negotiations statement in 1394 at the Battle of Kosovo Polje before which the Serbs were dominant- the Bosniak beginning in the 16th Century at the height of the Ottoman Empire when the Muslims were dominant- the myths of history. But we succeeded. Peace in War.

vi. On Peace. Again from the hospital director in Breza- about an outlying village with an epidemic of Hepatitis A, a water-borne disease more prevalent in fall. And a response from the CF- a 5000 litre sanitized holding tank, full of our ROWPU water, refreshed weekly by a tanker from our Service Battalion + Hep A immunoglobulin injections for school and family contacts of the Hep A patients. The incidence of Hep A plummeted over the next month. That too is peacekeeping. Peace.

vii. On Peace. A call from an RCR sergeant, i-c of an OP near the Hasevic farm. The father, a farmer, just back from 1 year convalescence from a sniper’s bullet entering his left cheek and exiting through his right jaw. The south side of their home now saplings and 8 ml UN plastic sheeting after shelling the day of his shooting. The mother having kept the smallholding going, caring for their 9 year old who had been bedwetting ever since that day, and a 3 year old- who was the reason for the call. That day, my interpreter was a former professor of languages at Sarajevo University who could translate concept as well as word meaning. The 3 year old had a rare developmental disorder affecting blood supply to the brain, a complete left facial birthmark or capillary venous malformation with consequent deprivation of blood supply to the brain, overgrowth of the left face and head, spastic limbs, absent bladder and bowel control, impaired swallowing and thus the aspiration pneumonia and acute illness of the day. So for the 3 year old, a limited life span, never to be more competent cognitively, inevitably to die of recurrent aspiration.

A discussion with the parents about Sturge-Weber Syndrome, about treating the aspiration, about the short and wearisome life left for the child, about reducing the daily burden on the mother by arranging for the child to go to the restored Drin. A decision of love and commitment- yes, we are grateful for the antibiotics; yes, we want to learn about this disease; yes, our child will stay in our home, in his home. He is our child. The most helpful support for the family of which I could think, beyond treating the aspiration pneumonia, was to provide a gross of paediatric condom catheters to keep the number of daily changes of clothing and bed more limited.

Before we were permitted to depart, the 3 Canadians and the interpreter were seated by the stove (tomorrow’s cheese pie baking there) and were served Bosnian coffee, a special gift. A gift to us from a very large heart; a gift to us of peace.

viii. The last reflection- on the peace of Christ. A hand hewn wooden cross nailed to the wall of a small basement room in a ramshackle factory; unpainted concrete floor and ceiling, concrete block walls, even the air could be grey with concrete dust; a window high in the east wall, covered by a blast blanket; a dozen irregular chairs; a small table at the front of the room under the cross covered with a
clean white cloth; on occasion a guitar. The camp chapel at VK- a site of worship, of song, of scripture, of
tales of shared events and occurrences in our peacekeeping lives; of meditations and messages from
Padre Jim Hardwick and Father Valmont Boudreau; of the presence of the divine among us.

A sacred space; a holy place; a place for peace within war; the Peace of Christ.

R.I.L. Sutherland CD, MD, AdeC

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