ITCHING FOR A FIGHT

A high-stakes adventure in Afghanistan is hard to replicate in peace-loving Toronto

BY MATT LENNOX

For the last 10 years, I've been a reservist with the Queen's York Rangers, a Toronto-based army unit. After basic training, reserve soldiers like me train on a part-time basis—one night a week, one weekend a month. We also deploy, voluntarily, on operations overseas. Four years ago, my unit asked me if I wanted to go to Afghanistan on a 10-month tour. Rather than any notion of patriotism, it was my desire for adventure—for an undertaking where the stakes were truly high—that compelled me to say yes.

In May 2008, after a year of full-time training in Petawawa, I was sent to Kandahar. My job as a watch officer in the task force headquarters was about as safe as it got over there: I coordinated time-sensitive operations, such as medevac, for troops engaged in firefights. Our base was frequently rocketed, but I was never hurt. In fact, I had some very good times, including, as strange as it must sound, the first time I went on a foot patrol into Lako Khail, one of the province's most dangerous corners. As I walked along the dusty road, the only thing that mattered was the moment, and I'd never felt more alive.

After I came home, I had trouble adjusting to life outside a war zone. I was working as a staff officer, going to school for my master's in creative writing and trying to get a collection of short stories published. Those pursuits all seemed pointless compared with the immensity of war. At first, I went through the motions of normal life, but I grew increasingly despondent.

By October, I could barely get out of bed. Small, everyday battles—paying bills, being stuck in traffic—were overwhelming to me, and I was furious with myself for losing control. My family and friends noticed that I'd become withdrawn and morose. I didn't have the words to explain my feelings. I just felt myself slipping further and further from normal. One day, in desperation, I went to the military social worker. She was a calm, soft-spoken civilian who'd seen every sort of mental health crisis that deployments can produce.

Following some initial counselling sessions, I was put on a common antidepressant called Citalopram. But as things settled down into a medicated regularity, I knew I wasn't really better. The pills dulled my emotions, but they couldn't cure my overwhelming sense of futility.

I drifted from day to day, drugged and dazed. Then, on my 30th birthday, my friend Sarah—a poet, activist and all-around sage—suggested I challenge myself by taking up a new hobby. "Why not try something different?" she said. My immediate response was that I wanted to learn to box.

I'd always been interested in boxing. I was attracted to the physical conditioning and discipline required, just as I'd been attracted to the demands of army training. In the boxer and the soldier alike, there's an old-school fighting spirit that speaks to me, which is an unpopular thing to admit in mild-mannered modern-day Toronto. Boxing is an all-or-nothing venture. In sports circles, there is an oft-repeated saying: you can play football or baseball or rugby, but you can't play boxing.

I checked out a club called Centre Ring, near Yonge and Davisville, which is owned by a retired amateur fighter named Wayne Bourque. Bourque, a Métis originally from Fort McMurray, was a three-time North American Native boxing champion in the welterweight and middleweight classes. Right away, I liked his irreverent and upbeat nature. I told him that I didn't have any illusions about starting a boxing career, but that I did want to fight against a real opponent, at least once. He laughed and told me it would take time, maybe more time than I would give it.

I started training right away, and though I'd previously considered myself fit, I was instantly humbled. I couldn't skip for a full minute. The calisthenics were cruel. Punching combinations only showed me how slow I was. I was bad at everything, sore for days. But the pain I inflicted on my body felt purifying and tangible.

I wanted to quit, of course, figuring that humility was victory enough. But to give up would be to give in to a routine devoid of highs or lows. So I kept at it. I trained until I was completely winded, close to puking. I worked the heavy bag, did knuckle push-ups, skipped and skipped and skipped some more. After six months, I was training four or five times a week. I started to feel more limber, more physically tuned, more capable. It was as if my body was compelling my mind to wake up, to prepare for battle.

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Then, in late November, Wayne said, "Okay pal, get a mouthguard, you're ready to spar."

Two days after my 31st birthday, I climbed into the ring. My opponent was another hobby boxer named Greg. Wayne, in the corner, controlled our first two rounds, emphasizing defence and footwork. Only two-strike combinations were permitted. Then, in the third round, he let us go. Greg had fought several times before. He was fast, cunning, had a hard right hook. Even with the headgear, I took some punches that almost knocked me over. But I landed some of my own, and I felt the impact on Greg's jaw. I stayed upright the whole time, and I only quit when the bell rang.

We did six rounds, and when it was over my heart was pounding as hard as it had that first time I went on foot patrol in Afghanistan. My mind was just as attuned to the present. When I left Centre Ring an hour later, the November day seemed brighter to me than any day in the previous year. Maybe it was just adrenaline, but I finally felt awake. And I still felt awake, days later.

Since that first time in the ring, I've continued to train hard, at least four times a week. I still get up every day, go to work, come home, try to plan for an unknown future. I get stuck in traffic, I pay my bills. Nothing has changed...and yet everything has changed. Afghanistan remains in my thoughts every day. But its immensity becomes more manageable every time I strap on my gloves and step into the ring. It's good to have my fight back.

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