

Soldiers honoured in special day

June 15, 2009

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They wore the same rumpled fatigues they did while serving in Afghanistan, the faded tan fabric a stark contrast with the green camouflage of comrades at their shoulders.

As they marched into Dickson Park Saturday on Military Appreciation Day, cloudy skies turned sunny as if on cue -- and applause from more than 100 people in the grandstand filled the air again and again.

"It's good to see everybody out supporting the troops," said Corporal Thomas Bezruki after the welcome home picnic on the baseball field.

Bezruki, 22, is a member of the Cambridge-based Royal Highland Fusiliers. He was caught in a roadside bomb blast Jan. 25. He continues to recover from a broken back, head injuries and a broken left leg.

"The goal is to get back and get healed," said the aspiring lawyer.

While many think of Taliban bombs and injured -- or dead -- Canadian soldiers in Afghanistan, Bezruki said that's not what he remembers most.

It's the time he's spent talking to people, helping and protecting them that sticks in his mind.

"We feel we've made a lot of good friendships there."

The first Military Appreciation Day was hosted by the fusiliers and local support groups for soldiers and their families.

Low-key military displays, tents and a few green vehicles were parked on the grassy outfield. An Optimist club ran a fundraising barbecue and "support our troops" merchandise was for sale. At 2:30 p.m., soldiers marched from the Cambridge armoury along Ainslie Street to the park. People lined the route, applauding and waving Canadian flags.

Nine soldiers wore their tan battle dress. Six of them were from among the 16 fusiliers who returned in March from their Afghanistan tour. The other three were local soldiers who served other units. Another 20 fusiliers in green fatigues -- some of them volunteers for the next tour -- marched with them.

When the local soldiers left for Afghanistan 10 months ago, a send-off party was held in Waterloo Region headquarters in Kitchener.

There, Regional Chair Ken Seiling presented Sgt. Major Mark Adam of Cambridge with a regional government flag. It flew for six months at the Canadian camp in Kandahar. Adam returned it to Seiling in a brief ceremony.

"It's a little bit dirtier, but it is the flag of the Region of Waterloo," he said.

Joanne Ryerse didn't know about the thank-you party until she walked out of nearby Dickson arena after her children played a ball hockey game. With a brother and sister-in-law in the military, training for Afghanistan, she couldn't turn away.

"I think this is awesome: there's awareness even for people who don't have the (military) connections." she said.

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