I did a lot of fun and exciting things in my life thanks to the Canadian Armed Forces. My name is Master Corporal (ret’d) Francine Paquette. I was born on July 24, 1961, in Montréal. I wanted to get away from my father’s strict discipline. I ended up in the Canadian Armed Forces, which was as strict as my father, but at least I had some freedom over my life, the freedom to make decisions. My basic training wasn’t easy because I wasn’t a very active person, but I got fit quickly because it's physically demanding.

I joined the Forces in 1978 in the Royal Canadian Air Force. At first, I was a plane engine technician, then I became a payroll clerk. The first course was a basic course where you learn how to work with the accounts, and how to balance them. Then you have other courses that teach you more accounting -- they are accounting classes really, but that are adapted to the Forces because the system used by the Forces isn’t necessarily the same as the civilian system. When I first joined the Forces, we did everything by hand, on what we called “manual balance sheets.” Every two weeks we had to go through all the balance sheets we had. We had about 400 members whose pay we were taking care of. Now that everything is computerized, it’s as though soldiers have become a number. In the Forces, even as an accountant, we’re soldiers first, so we still need to do our jobs as soldiers before doing payroll.

I spent four amazing years in Europe. It was the Cold War and we were following the Russians. If the Russians moved a bit, we moved a bit too, but it wasn’t just us, the Canadians, the Americans followed too. Everyone, the Allies, everyone moved together. And often what happened was, seeing as we were already deployed, some of us would go on exercise — POOF! When you got the [snowball] call, you had thirty minutes to get to the base, fully equipped and ready for deployment. We never knew if it was the real thing or a drill. We were always on alert. Sometimes it could take an hour, or two, or three, before you knew if it was a drill or not. That’s not an easy thing to live through mentally.

We’d learn different jobs. At that time, I was a CBRN specialist [chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear defence]. Listen, it was stressful to learn all those things and I now have friends who make fun of me because I have a windowless shelter with food and water. It’s a normal closet, except that there is a survival box with sleeping bags in case something happens, and we’re stuck. At least we will have a place to take shelter. We might not live for long, but there’s a little place for us to hide.

In 1997, I was deployed to Haiti from Ottawa. I joined the Second [battalion] of the Royal 22e Regiment. When they were already on the ground, they realized that they were missing an employee, that they didn’t have a finance clerk. So, they asked Ottawa to send one quick. I was already qualified and trained, so I was sent over quickly — I only had a week and then I left. I got the offer, and a week later I was in Haiti. It was a bit hard on my family. Back then, my daughter was little, but thankfully my mother was living with me. So, it was easy enough for me to deploy. My daughter had a difficult time because her dad was in Croatia while I was deployed to Haiti. Her dad had already been in Croatia for six months of a twelve-month deployment. During that time, I was also deployed. Poor thing! Both of her parents were away from home for five months. I have a picture of her kindergarten graduation, where instead of having her parents with her, she has two huge bouquets of flowers representing her mom and dad. So, that’s that.

We were deployed to help the Haitian police, to teach them how to do their jobs, to do police work. According to my colleagues, everything was great when we were with the police officers, they were doing their work, no problem. But as soon as we’d leave, they would disappear.

The people of Haiti have been mistreated, they have suffered greatly, they are fearful of and don’t trust outsiders easily. But on the other hand, they were really welcoming, but they just don’t trust easily. When you read about Haiti’s history, what happened there, I understand why. History robbed them of their possessions. At one point, everyone who lived outside of Port-au-Prince was ordered to come to the city, so the government could supposedly give them things, but they were downright robbed and left abandoned. People live in cardboard boxes on the beach. I was horrified when I first saw that. At home we have six-foot-high snowbanks, but in Haiti they have six-foot-high garbage piles. Pigs walk through all that, eating. It was a real culture shock.

Before leaving on patrols with the Van Doos, they said, “Oh no, no, take off that watch, take off that necklace, take it off. You will get robbed.” I said, “What! But I’m wearing them!” ‟No, no, you will get robbed.” It’s a reality of life over there. People steal because they don’t have a choice. To eat, some have to steal. [You hear them saying,] “My Canadian friend, my Canadian friend, give me some money so I can eat.” And if you don’t give the kids money, their parents hit them later. I found that really … that’s why … it really opens your eyes, and you realize how lucky we are to live in Canada.

We talked with a lot of Haitian people, as many worked at the camp. Canada is known for that, we hire locally. So, the cleaning ladies were Haitian. Every Sunday, we also had a flea market. The Haitians would come onto the base to sell their stuff. So, we ran into them regularly. And yes, the warrant officer worked with an interpreter, but we didn’t. The Haitian language [Kreyòl], however, is easy to learn. For example, “Comment ça va [How are you]” is “Koman ou ye?” It’s pretty easy to learn. If you pay a bit of attention, you can learn the language quickly.

We would have preferred to only wear T-shirts, but the warrant officer didn’t want us to, so we wore our full combat uniforms. I was there in the summer, it was 42 degrees in the shade! For those who worked on the runway, unloading the planes when they arrived, it could be 48-49 degrees. It was excessively hot. In the summer, it’s monsoon season, so every night, at around the same time, it would pour rain. And we’d walk for an hour, or two or three, in approximately one and a half, or two feet of water, because the soil was so dry that it couldn’t absorb the rainwater. When there’s that much water, the tarantulas come out. So, we had to play with them a bit.

When I returned to Canada, my daughter had to live through a sort of culture shock. I realized that in Canada, we’re privileged, we had everything we want, and so I put the brakes on certain things in my daughter’s life. Because I said to myself, “You have too much stuff, you don’t know misery, maybe it’s time you learn.”

Of course, being away from home for that long is not a good thing. We are busy doing our job, but our family misses us. The hardest part is that our families suffer the most. They are the extraordinary people! It takes amazing people to support military personnel in their careers. Because even though they are at home, keeping the same routine, we are not there. And when we come back, we can’t take on our place again immediately. We have to ease back into our place. So, it’s a constant adaptation for the family.

The experiences in the Armed Forces aren’t for everyone. It’s a wonderful life, but it is not easy. It’s not easy physically, it’s not easy mentally, it’s not easy on our loved ones. I have never really spoke about my military career with my close family. When I leave on a mission, I put that stuff away in a little drawer and say, “This is not my reality, this is not my life, I am here to help them.” So, it doesn’t affect me too much. Or, I should say that it hadn’t affected me too much. Today, it affects me more. Today, I’m experiencing it, and we’re talking about twenty years later, because I retired in 2001. But now I am living through some of the emotions that I never had before. Currently, I am seeing someone to learn how to deal with these emotions, because they are emotions I never had, and they are possibly coming out of my military service. I had a dream recently where we were in the middle of a nuclear war. So, that comes from my time in Europe. I probably dreamed about a “snowball”. But those things, they’re normal, they catch up with us eventually.

Interview:

I’m still not used to it. I can’t work with civilians, because they are disorganized. I can’t handle it. I tried to work in several offices and I’m the type that, when I leave my office at night, there isn’t anything on my desk, nothing is left out, everything is put away where it belongs. Everything thing has its place, and there is a place for everything. Civilians, I don’t know how you function. Very often, files are left everywhere, untidy, pieces of paper are missing, there are papers that are unrelated… Anyway! I’m still trying to get used to civilian life, to normal life in Canada, as a non-soldier.