

# The ChronicleHerald

THE MILITARY AFFAIRS COLUMN BY TIM DUNNE

## **A rescue mission for troubled vets**

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Their demons were born in the various Canadian missions in far-away places like Bosnia Herzegovina, Rwanda, Somalia and Afghanistan. Military and RCMP members return from these deployments haunted by the events they witnessed in places where our nation has sent them.

The post-Cold War era has been the crucible for new and more sadistic conflict, beginning in the early 1990s with the ethnic cleansing of the Balkans and Rwanda. It has also added a new generation of veterans to those already plagued by psychological, mental and physical injuries, including depression, attempted suicide and uncontrolled rage.

This makes it difficult, if not impossible, to live with their families or in a traditionally structured environment. Their recollections have induced many to frequently self-medicate with drugs and alcohol.

Those who have served in Canada's international missions should not be left homeless; those whom Canada has put in harm's way should no longer go without a safe, stable and warm place to call home when they return home.

Visionaries Jim and Debbie Lowther and several colleagues established Veterans Emergency Transition Services Canada (VETS Canada) in March 2011 to reach out and help many of Canada's veterans who could not successfully make the transition from their military careers to healthy civilian lives.

"I was helping at a soup kitchen and I saw the person I was serving was a buddy I sailed with," Jim Lowther said, describing VETS Canada's genesis. "That was enough to tell me we have a serious problem."

From its home base in Halifax, the all-volunteer, non-profit and non-partisan corporation began to provide aid and comfort to at-risk Canadian veterans. The organization has grown into an interprovincial network of volunteers, many of whom are themselves veterans. Others, serving military and RCMP, work within their respective communities to find homeless and at-risk veterans.

VETS Canada's goal is to ease the challenges of moving these veterans from the streets or shelters into affordable housing; provide for their health-care needs; help them access the benefits and services from other organizations such as Veterans Affairs Canada and the Royal Canadian Legion; support their search for suitable employment; and act as a referral service or bridge, assisting veterans to access appropriate supports and services.

“We are non-judgmental. If a veteran is homeless or at risk, we will help,” retired Colonel Marie Leloup says, with unmistakable and unshakable determination. She is one of a number of VETS Canada volunteers.

“There are lots of reasons why people end up on the street,” VETS Canada volunteer Barry Yhard explained. “And they aren’t easy to find unless they self-identify. We have foot patrols that actively look for potential VETS Canada clients, and Oak Computing developed a smartphone app so anyone finding a homeless veteran can instantly send us the person’s location.”

Oak Computing is an Ottawa-based software development company that developed the app for Android devices without charge. Westwood Development has assisted with office accommodation and Dulux provided paint. Government surplus office furniture was an obvious bargain.

VETS Canada is completely dependent on donations to support its operations and the volunteers are proud that 90 per cent of their revenue goes directly to operations. They work with Canadian Legion advocates and Veterans Affairs Canada case workers.

Field offices are in Sydney, Fredericton and Kingston, Ont., and new chapters are beginning in Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta and British Columbia. They expect that within six months there will be a chapter in each province.

Tragically, operations in conflict regions have left our veterans with tortured memories that initially cause them to live in tents, couch-surf, live on streets, condemned trailers, unoccupied buildings (squats) and homeless shelters. Frequently, they gravitate to the street and are left to seek a little warmth near a vent or a doorway to have some respite from Canada’s vicious winters.

VETS Canada volunteers have sometimes spent up to 72 hours in hospital emergency rooms with at-risk and suicidal veterans.

A toll-free phone line, 1-888- CAVETS1 ( 1-888-228-3871) connects to an emergency call-in centre that serves the country, from the Atlantic to the Pacific and to the Arctic oceans.

Lowther encapsulated the group’s mission: “We are the last stop before the vet ends up on the street, and we are the first step for them to get off the street.”

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Tim Dunne is a Halifax-based communications consultant and military affairs writer, a Research Fellow with Dalhousie University’s Centre for Foreign Policy Studies and a member of the Royal United Services Institute (NS) Security Affairs Committee. He is a veteran of peacekeeping operations in the Middle East, Bosnia Herzegovina, Macedonia and Kosovo.