I think in a Peacekeeping environment, I feel like I’m a kid in a candy store because I can function with other nations very easily.

My name is Major Samson Young. I currently work with the MPC, Military Personnel Command, here in Carling Campus, Ottawa. I grew up in in Laos, until I was about sixteen years old. Then we became refugees in Thailand for two and a half years. Then in 1980 we were accepted to Canada as refugees. We settled in Ottawa in 1980.

As a boy growing up in Laos, you see a lot of soldiers, right? Because soldiers carrying weapons is kind of the norm, because they said the country was in civil war. Needless to say, they don’t want their son, who has left the country, now he wants to join some entity that they don’t trust. I had to do a lot of convincing research and then say that the Canadian Forces aren’t like that. We govern by law so there’s no abuse of power or authority.

It took me a long time to convince them; my friend, everybody in my family, all my friends except one, who said I made a mistake.

This is my coin when I graduated from my basic training in Chilliwack in 1990. I’m the student from that school #1128. I did some research about what it’s like to be at basic training because it is totally different than civilian life. People told me, they said, “Don’t be surprised if they wake you up in the middle of the night and make you run for five kilometres for no reason whatsoever.” Luckily that didn’t happen.

The first day we arrived in Chilliwack there were in the same room about eighty people or so. Some had long hair, some were normal civilians and we were chit-chatting. And the sergeant-major walked into the room with his pace stick and banged on the table very loud and said, excuse my language, “Shut up!” Then we went quiet and sat. He said that, “In this room I want you guys to know there’s no francophone, there’s no anglophone, there’s no Asian, no black — you are Canadian soldiers. Any comment about your colleague, or your classmate, you answer to me.” This was the culture shock. Now you eat when you have time to eat, time to go to bed, and you march in a certain way. That’s part of the training.

My deployment to Bosnia was called an L-O-T, Liaison and Observation Team. My rotation was rotation three. Basically, our job was to be the eyes and the ears for the commander. We feel the pulse of the population. It’s collecting information and disseminating information overtly so that they know what we’re doing. Also, [we had] to be present with the local authorities, police, the army. When they did some of their daily routine work we had to give them support.

My pre-deployment process was taking a formal course in Kingston at the PSTC, Peace Support Training Centre. They did a very good job at bringing in a Bosnian-Canadian, so they give the cultural [background], what to do, what not to do, what to expect. So, when we go there we don’t get culture shock.

So, we know this part of the culture, what they do, what they did. For example, you go for a meeting, when you arrive on site we say, “Okay, plan meetings here and here.” They said “Nope, one meeting in the morning, one meeting in the afternoon. That’s enough. That’s more than enough.” I said, “Why? It’s 15 minutes.” Yes, but before you get to the meat of the meeting you talk for about half an hour, which they carry on small talk, ask you about family, how you come about, why you join the Forces, why you come to Bosnia. You have to carry on small talk like that because it’s part of the culture. If you don’t, nothing comes out of the meeting. The meeting could be an hour and half, and only about 15 minutes are actually what you come for.

This is one of the churches, I have a picture of this. Also, not just the church but the mosque, the Orthodox church and the Catholic church all have bullet holes in them. Nobody is not guilty. All parties are guilty of doing atrocities to one another. Bosnia being the third-largest landmined country in the world, but in Europe it is the first. Internationally speaking, it is right after Cambodia, Afghanistan, then Bosnia.

From time to time I collected weapons from the local population and do a destruction. What’s the best way to destroy a weapon? Crush it by a tank.

I saw a lot of poverty due to war. So, I went to some villages and see the houses abandoned and bullet holes [were] all over the place. Some villages we go to were completely vacant, nobody was left. And some towns we went to there was 98% unemployment. Some towns are better than the others. A town was better [off] because they have family, relatives, who left the country during the war who now work in Europe and send money back to help them out. So, the families that were not fortunate enough are a lot poorer.

This is one of my prized pictures in Bosnia. These kids were different from their parents, who learned Russian, so they all learned English. Anytime they see a foreigner they are eager to practise their English. I think my multilingual and multicultural upbringing contributed to my ability to empathy — to empathize with people. Plus, I was a refugee myself. When I see a refugee, I can relate to them.

I remember just shortly after arriving in Bosnia, one of the interpreters, she said to me very frustrated, “What do you guys know about us? You come here for six months and you leave. A new guy is going to come in and repeat the same story over again. What do you know about us?” I said, “Well, first of all, I was a refugee.” Right away she apologized, “I’m sorry, I didn’t know.” Right there, our relationship [was] built on that. Here’s a guy who has gone through what we have gone through. We are still friends today. She lives in the States now.

Because Congo is situated in the centre [of Africa], surrounded by 9 other nations, if Congo destabilizes, it [conflicts] would spill over into its neighbouring countries. Not only causing problems for Africa but also internationally speaking. That’s why a stabilized, prosperous Congo is good for everybody. MONUSCO in French is “Mission de l’Organisation des Nations unies pour la stabilisation en République démocratique du Congo." Stabilization in Congo involved, at that time, about 58 nations with over 20,000 civilians and military. It was, and still is, the largest UN operation undertaking in the world.

The DDRRR [Disarmament, Demobilization, Repatriation, Reintegration and Resettlement (mission)] basically, because they understand that if a soldier joined the armed group and they get tired of fighting, if they give up their arms and they get sent back home, and have no job, chances are they may rejoin again. The DDRRR is meant to give them a skill to train them. Any skill they do, normally woodworking or soldering, whatever, and send them back home so they have a skill to market themselves with. So, the channel for them to go back and join the armed group is minimized.

Each UN camp we have to accept the ex-combatants, they want to give up arms.

My job, in my team, was to go evaluate that the camp is up to standard, that they have beds, they have water, they have food, they have medication, if those guys come in. The pre-deployment for Congo is similar, but also, we have to take into account, what if you are sent to negotiate with a warlord? We had some mock-ups with officers who were there before. They came to play in the warlord role. For example, “I like your watch,” something like that, and how you react to that. Should you give him the watch maybe? You know there’s no negotiation, maybe they keep you hostage. But by giving him your watch you might set precedent and when the next guy come along he’s going to ask for the same thing.

It’s very, very difficult. So, we also, the PSTC, Peace Support Training Centre, brought in a Congolese-Canadian to give us the cultural [background] of what the Congolese would be like, when you go there, so you won’t get culture shock. We left Canada in the month of March, it was -10 [degrees Celsius] at that time in Ottawa. I arrived in Kinshasa, the capital, which was +38 [degrees Celsius]. You can see that the difference was almost 50 fifty degrees. So, of course, for the first week I could not work because it was too hot.

Then I flew with the UN plane to the east side, with the border of Rwanda, to a town called Goma. Luckily, Goma, it was maybe a higher altitude. In the daytime it is a low 20 and nighttime is mid-teens to high-teens [degrees Celsius], very comfortable. My entire six months I think I saw fewer than ten mosquitos, which is a plus. What stood out for me in Goma is the level of poverty. Goma is extremely poor. Average Congolese make about one dollar US a day — in heartbreaking labour, too. When a soldier goes to the front line, the family go along with them. The wife and the kids, I had never seen that. The soldier goes to the front, they take the whole family. I see a truck of soldiers come by and the next few trucks with their wife and kids going to the front.

In 2012/2013 we repatriated over 4,000 - not just soldiers, but also family members. Their wives and kids, it could be one1 soldier plus three kids, or 4 four kids, or five kids, and a wife. The number kind of inflates a bit. My interaction with civilian Congolese is a very, very positive one.

I and my partner who is British, we go to the local orphanage, called World Orphan Kids, so W-O-K. Those kids ranging from five to 13 years old. Their parents were killed in the war. There were about 180 of them, 5 five to 13 years old. They eat, sleep, play in these three sheds about the size of a normal living room in Canada and about two basketball courts, with two outhouses. When you walk in there you see the kids so poor, and you just want to help. I brought some candy. I collected money from my colleagues and bought some candy for the kids. Also, buy some food for them. Basic food like corn, flour, salt, sugar and some of charcoal for them to cook because they have no electricity.

Congo used to be a colony of Belgium. So, Tintin is originally from Belgium and is very popular in Congo. I see my colleagues have the Tintin [doll] in different uniforms. I said there’s no Canadian uniform. So I sent the uniform that I had on myself to have one made. It was the first and only Tintin in a Canadian combat uniform. When it came back my colleagues all wanted one. No longer the only one but shall remain the first.