I decided to join the Army when I was about 10.

I announced I was going to be a Rock and Roll nurse. I really wanted to be a part of something that was bigger than myself and doing good things in the world.

I’m Captain Sarah Keller. I was born in Edmonton, Alberta and I serve with the Health Services branch of the Canadian Army.

I grew up watching the TV show M\*A\*S\*H. I’m actually a member of the Canadian version of the Mobile Army Surgical Hospital.

When I was really young two of my relatives were in the Reserves, so I heard about their stories. My mom wasn’t very impressed. I think the first time that I mentioned joining the Army, I don’t think she really took it seriously. Her exact words were probably “Over my dead body.” She raised her children to be strong and independent individuals. So, I think when I turned up with the application paperwork for the military she was horrified. She actually refused to sign the paperwork for me to join the Regular Force. I was underage, so I did need parental consent. She said she wouldn’t sign my life away for five years, but she would agree to me joining the Reserves because it was something that was perceived as less commitment. But I turned around and took a full-time job with the Reserves, so I won. I think by the time I moved over to the Regular Force, she knew more about what our mission was, what our role was, and she was really proud, and still is.

On the morning of 9/11, I came to work. I was a member of 1 Field Ambulance here in Edmonton, as a medical technician. I was just coming into the building and we have a canteen with a TV, usually tuned to the news. I think someone yelled for us to come that there was something on the news. I think it’s probably one of those moments that you’re never going to really forget where you were. It didn’t really seem real. When there’s a pivotal event like that, I think myself and my peers, you just think “this is it.” This is when we are going to do everything that we’ve always trained for. We are going to have the opportunity to do something on the world stage, to participate in that piece of something bigger than me and something that’s doing a good thing in the world. There’s this sense of urgency, but also the sense of excitement that you’re going to be able to contribute positively, possibly in a major way.

I was deployed with Third Battalion of Princess Patricia’s Canadian Light Infantry, as part of the Kandahar Provincial Reconstruction Team, or KPRT for short. We were really there to lay the groundwork for counter-insurgency operations, but also to help the local people and the government rebuild their country. I was on a rotation zero. So, the group that I went with was the first to go in that role and it was really a fast ball. So, we didn’t get as much training as future tours did. We had about five weeks and we learned about the country, the culture, the language, the people that we would be meeting, and we learned what sort of challenges we might face. It had been destroyed by decades of war. The Taliban had recently been removed from power and they needed to rebuild infrastructure, provide security and really support rule of law with the new government.

Brassards are worn by military personnel to indicate a little bit about what their job is.

We wear it on our shoulder and it has the crest of the Armed Forces of Canada and the Red Cross. So, this indicates that I am a medic. I was medical technician and I was tasked with an infantry section, as their patrol medic. When the infantry section goes out on a patrol, whenever medical aid was needed, I was the primary medic for them.

In the field the primary injuries that we would treat were related to blast injuries from improvised explosive devices. Enemy combatants will take munitions that have been discarded by previous engagements, anything they can find, and construct a device that will explode either on command and generally designed to injure or kill anyone who comes in contact with it. The main thing that we needed to look for as we were driving were signs of IEDs. That could be signs of recent roadwork that wasn’t planned or that we were tracking, like a pothole that had been filled. Anything to the side of the road — debris, garbage, even animal carcasses — they were known to be packed with explosives and set with detonation that they, as soon as your vehicle passed, they would hit the trigger and the carcass of a donkey would explode. Basically, anything that was trying too hard to look like it was supposed to be there. I actually brought a fragmentation piece from one of the sites I was at. I think this is probably a part of an old Soviet anti-personnel mine and this was a piece of shrapnel that came off an explosive. Thankfully, we didn’t have very many injuries on our tour. The second major IED strike did involve a Canadian diplomat who died, Mr. Glyn Barrie, and three of our soldiers were very seriously injured. It happened probably about half an hour after my patrol had done that exact same route. All the previous injuries had been relatively minor for our own troops. This was the first time that we had to treat our own soldiers with very, very serious injuries. That is what we trained to do. We hope for the best, but plan for the worst.

When we were out on patrol it was often sleeping in your sleeping bag underneath your vehicle because that was the safest place once the ground was proved - proved means to be cleared of any mines or explosives. The dust there is like talcum powder. As soon as you set your foot down in Kandahar the dust just kind of poofs up and gets everywhere. It’s a country that has a lot of contrast.

I remember first going out into Kandahar City and everything sort of seems like the same colour. It’s this, you know, colour of clay and then there’ll be bright spots of colour and clothing or in things that are for sale at the stalls and shops.

These beautiful pieces are made by local children. We held a competition. It was an arts and crafts competition. The primary art in this area was beading and embroidery. These pieces of jewelry and the embroidery on the scarf were made by young girls aged six to about 10 or 12. At the end we auctioned off all the items and the winners were presented with sewing machines, which would be a huge benefit to their family because then they would be able to make their own clothes easier. Perhaps help with finances in the family by making and selling items. But the craftsmanship in these items is just mind-blowing, for someone so young with limited resources. This was the winner, this piece here, it’s just a little a little beaded purse made by hand. I think she was probably about nine. Often, they don’t know how old they are, so we’re just sort of judging by their growth milestones. But just beautiful work. This one actually has the name of the girl that made it. Her name was Amina and she would have been probably about eight or nine years old as well.

Being in Afghanistan as a female and being on patrol was surprising for the local population. Most of the individuals that we came into contact with were male simply because of the way their culture functions. They always wanted to talk to me, to try and take pictures. Sometimes they would want, I think, to touch my face or my weapon to see if I was actually real, if I was actually female. Once we were able to talk with them, we always had an interpreter with us and they understood that, yes, I do the exact same job as all the other members of the section. They were actually pretty accepting. We had the opportunity to work with the Afghan police and bring in their first female section, along with our RCMP members that were deployed with us.

I think being in Afghanistan gave me a perspective on what poverty really is and what suffering really is. There’s no context for that in Canada. I primarily thought in terms of the children of Afghanistan, they often couldn’t go to school because the schools had been bombed or closed, or the teachers had been taken away, never to be seen again. They had no means of education, which meant that they had to go to work. When we would go on patrol, through some of the villages and cities where children as young as five and six years old would be working. That could be anything from picking up shell debris from a field to sell for scrap — and risking exposure to IEDs that were still in place or old ordinance that could explode — to weaving or cleaning shops. It was heartbreaking as a Canadian to see that because it’s so much different from how children are in Canada. I think that it gave me a new appreciation for how lucky we are and how other countries can use our support and benefit from the world showing them a different way.

My husband and I met when we were both in the military. I think that we had an understanding that we each joined the military before we met each other. We understood that commitment in one another. My husband, Bryce, was deployed on Task Force 01-06, he was in the infantry and their mission is to close with and destroy the enemy. They were there on a counter-insurgency mission to root out remaining Taliban and al-Qaeda fighters, to bring greater security to the people of Afghanistan. He was supposed to come back on August 11, 2006. When I was driving to work on the third of August, I heard on the radio that a very good friend had been killed. Corporal Chris Reid — we had served together in Yugoslavia a number of years before that. He was my husband’s driver in his light armored vehicle. I came into work and I wasn’t doing well. I went straight to my chain of command and said I need someone to find out where my husband is. It turned out while I was driving to work that the notification team — so, the people that come to tell you when a bad thing has happened — were on their way to my house. We passed on the highway. I found out that my husband wasn’t in Chris’s vehicle. If he was he would be here today. He had been killed attempting to provide cover for an injured member of his section. He didn’t come home.

Remembrance to me means taking some time to consider how lucky we are as Canadians. That freedom comes at a high cost. That a lot of men and women have served this country to keep it free and safe. When I announced at 10 that I wanted to be a Rock and Roll nurse in the Army, I’ve achieved the Army part and I have achieved the nurse part. Still working on the Rock and Roll.

I think when I first joined I was very idealistic and I saw myself going on UN missions and wearing a blue beret. In the end, I’ve done a lot of peace support operations and I’ve done a lot here in Canada. That’s what I’m most proud of. I have been deployed here in Canada, for Op REASSURANCE, the ice storms in 1998. I’ve done support to the fires in BC, security support to international conferences. I think despite some horrible things, it’s been a really good experience and there’s not much that I would change.