We are at the Canadian War Museum and down there you will see one of my vehicles that was in Croatia, a vehicle from my 2nd Battalion, Royal 22e Regiment platoon, which is a TOW (Tube-launched, Optically tracked, Wire-guided missile), a TOW under armour. So, it’s a TOW mounted on an armoured personnel carrier. And yes, it ended up in a museum.

I am Major (ret’d) Sandra Perron. I served with the Royal 22e Regiment, 2nd Battalion. When I joined up in 1984, women were not allowed in combat roles. I applied to become an infantry officer in 1989, as soon as the trade was opened to women, and I requested a transfer right away.

There were a lot of myths about women. A lot of prejudice. That women were not physically capable of taking on combat roles. That they would not be able to do the tasks, that they would undermine operations, and harm group cohesion. I made it through all the prejudices. Soldiers don’t care about gender, skin colour, if you are big, little, attractive or ugly. They want an officer who has the qualities of a leader. It’s where I learned that, yes, women can be in the Forces and we can have successful careers, and we contribute to operational effectiveness.

When I arrived in Bosnia, one the first things that I realized was that we were going to encounter decisions that involved moral dilemmas. In the sense that it is one thing to be trained as a soldier, but when you deploy for peacekeeping, you are faced with situations that you have no training for. In my camp, on one of the first days we were there, there was a little girl outside of the camp who wanted to exchange a grenade casing for candy. And now we have a dilemma on our hands. Do we give her candy, so we can get the grenade away from her and risk putting her life in danger because she will learn that finding shells or grenades means she gets candy in return? Or do we send her away and send her back to where she lives with her grenade? We faced dilemmas like that every day when we went on patrol, exchanged prisoners, escorted security convoys, and it was difficult for our troops, our soldiers, to make good decisions when there was no perfect response.

I spent a few days at a hospital in Fojnica. It was a hospital that had been abandoned by the [Bosnian] medical team due to the war. So, there were children who were a few months to a few years old – it was hard to tell how old they were – who all had disabilities. And there were also adults with disabilities who had been locked in their rooms when the staff team left. And our soldiers were assigned to secure the hospital. It still took us a few days to get there though and when they arrived, the children were in a pitiful state. They had not been fed in three days, or maybe more. Some of the babies had already died… And our soldiers had to take over everything related to these children’s survival and security. One of the little boys was severely disabled. He did not have a nose, he had two rows of teeth, he was jaundiced, and he was just in rough shape. He had been abandoned by his parents first and he had been abandoned again by the hospital staff team. This little guy, he didn’t have an easy life at all. And when I arrived, he just wanted me to hold him, to take him in my arms, and that’s what I did. It’s a period when I really felt the difference that we made in Bosnia. It was a difficult task for our soldiers and I got there a few days after our soldiers had already finished a lot of the work, clean up and feeding of the children. Even after a few days, it was hard to see the state the kids were in. It was also one the most remarkable moments of my career – to see what our soldiers did to save those children’s lives.

My second tour in the former Yugoslavia was very different from the first. I deployed as an antitank platoon commander with 42 men. The goal was to ensure the security of a demilitarized perimeter and to patrol every day to keep the zone secured between the Serbs and the Croats. On three occasions they hit landmines. The first time, we were very lucky because it only hit the front of the vehicle and no one was hurt. The second time, all the missiles inside the vehicle exploded, in addition to the landmine. People were injured, and one of the injuries was quite serious. So, after that we asked Ottawa to put additional armour on our vehicles because our vehicle with the TOW missiles was not equipped with extra armour, as it was too heavy in addition to the missiles. And eventually, Ottawa at least gave us permission to add ceramic plates to the outside of the vehicle. And the third landmine, we were very lucky because the plates saved our soldiers’ lives.

This is probably the most beloved souvenir I have from my tour in Croatia. It’s a certificate that was presented by displaced persons who lived in the Knin camp with General Forand. It’s a certificate that the refugees gave me for the work that my platoon had done to help them around security, hygiene, and things like that. They gave it to me in English and Serbo-Croatian, but what makes it so special to me is that it’s the only thing they had to give, and they still found the time to make a certificate to show their appreciation, to offer me their appreciation. And that really touched me at the time. It’s also one my most cherished memories because I saw our soldiers working very, very hard, and working together. And it is then and there that I saw we had developed a wonderful group cohesion, and morale was at its highest.

Coming home from Croatia was probably the hardest part of my entire career. Suddenly, I no longer had a sense of belonging, I no longer had a peacekeeping mission, I didn’t have my platoon anymore. I had a really hard time imagining moving forward in my career. It was toward the end of our time in Croatia that I decided I was going to leave the Forces. To be a woman in a battalion of men is hard enough, and I was going to be transferred to Gagetown, with a new set of challenges, in a place where women had not yet been in combat roles, and definitely not in the infantry. And I couldn’t see myself restarting the process of integration and proving that I had what it takes, like I had with my old battalion. That’s when I decided to leave the Forces. It was a very difficult decision for me to make because from the time that I was 14 years old, it’s all I dreamed of doing. I really didn’t have any desire to do anything else. I did not want to be a civilian, but I knew that I could not continue my career. It was sad.

I have kept all the memories, the good and the bad, from the Canadians Forces because we cannot love ourselves today without appreciating all that has shaped who we are. There is a special place in my heart for my memories of have from the Forces - especially those with my amazing soldiers. Above all at a time when working with women was brand new to them. Sometimes we were, them and me, awkward in our interactions and in developing our relationship. And I have a lot of good memories. It is important to remember the deployments and what we have done for other countries, as well as the relationships that we developed with other blue helmets who were there with us, because it makes our country richer and stronger, and more accommodating for other cultures.