I had a landmine detector. I was at the front and I had to make sure that the way was clear for the people in my section who were walking behind me in single file. My name is David Brodeur. I am a Lieutenant with the Canadian Grenadier Guards, an Infantry regiment in Montreal, [QC]. I was deployed with the Royal 22e Régiment in Afghanistan in 2010-2011. I was born on September 12, in Longueuil, [QC].

I am in the Infantry. The infantry’s role is to find and destroy the enemy, whatever the conditions. Every country in history with a professional army has infantry soldiers. The job of an infantry soldier is to destroy the enemy, but also to accomplish all related peripheral tasks. In Afghanistan, for example, that could mean visiting the locals, ensuring during mine-clearing, ensuring security for the personnel tasked with rebuilding infrastructure, and so on. I was the mine clearer, if you will, of my section. We work in sections; a section being made of approximately ten people. My job is mostly to operate the mine detector and look for anything out of the ordinary. Wires poking out of the ground, earth that had been moved and that wasn’t there the day before during patrol, or simply little things that were added, for example a flag on the corner of a street. It could be there as a marker for the Taliban to indicate where they left the explosive.

We were working with dog handlers who were generally hired by the United States to work with us, and who came from countries in the Balkans, like Bosnia, because they have a lot of experience there in mine-clearing. If I found something unusual, like metal in the ground or something like that, they would come, the dogs would do a second screening, since they could detect the smell of the chemicals used in explosives. If it was still positive, there was a high chance that there was an explosive in that spot. We would then cordon off the area and call in specialized engineers to come and take over the detonation of the explosive.

We had support from the artillery, we had support from the armoured section. We went on joint missions, and so on. A battle group exists as such so that we have a larger impact in the field, and to specifically undertake combat operations. A few times we had to engage in combat even if it was not out primary objective. The situation on the ground was linked closely to the counter-insurgency context. So that meant, in the field, the goal wasn’t as much to find and destroy the enemy as it was to work with local people to make sure that they, for one, wouldn’t turn against us, but also that they wouldn’t collaborate with the enemy.

On the ground, what made the enemy dangerous was they orchestrated ambushes. So, we had to work with the local population, with local forces, like the Afghan army and police, to make sure material needs were met. That means rebuilding the infrastructure, but also just being able to work with them. Having them provide us with names and locations of the weapons caches. Sometimes, we wouldn't know what was what or who was who, so it was really hard to find these things. The local population would sometimes collaborate with the enemy, either on their own accord, when they wanted to help the Taliban, or because they were being blackmailed. For example, the enemy would go see someone and tell that person, “If you don’t work for us, we will put a bomb over there,” or whatever, or “We will hurt your family.” These people didn't just become accomplices, they were actually victims as well.

In general, moral was excellent, especially for those who were in my company, in my platoon or in my section. Of course, just like with any deployment, the longer it went, the more tired people got, the more stress started to build up. And in our case, the fighting season over there is linked with the drug culture, the poppy, and so on. So, for us, the more we advanced, the more tired and stressed we got, and the more dangerous the situation became.

We had interpreters with us that helped us accomplish our tasks. A lot of them were doing it in a completely selfless way, since they were not only putting their own lives in danger, but also those of their family members, since the Taliban could always use that against them. It even happened once, during an operation, an interpreter decided to carry munitions, to help us during the fight by transporting things, and so on. He was going above and beyond his duties simply to help us because what we were doing was important to him. And that was - it showed that there were people over there that appreciated what we were doing.

There was only one person in my platoon that was seriously injured. He died of his injuries after Afghanistan. He was an older corporal. He served for more than 30 years in the Forces. The Army was his life. He was hit in the back by an RPG, a rocket. He was evacuated right away and left the country. Sadly, he died after leaving Afghanistan.

What did this experience bring to me? A lot of personal discipline, and it allowed me to understand my limits. Training is one thing, but eight and a half months in Afghanistan is easily the equivalent of two years of training. Of course, it’s nothing like what they went through in the Korean war, or First World War or Second World War, but it’s still an experience that at least allows someone to better understand what it is to be an infantry soldier. It also allowed me to create connections with people that will last for the rest of my life.

When I speak at school events, I try to get young people to understand that Remembrance doesn’t necessarily have to be a personal memory. It can also be a collective memory. It also doesn’t have to be linked to any specific emotion. The reason why I say this is that a lot of people who are pro-war - that they support the Canadian Armed Forces and their deployments - or anti-war, that their Remembrance Day will be very different. But it shouldn’t really be like that. Remembrance Day is a civic day, in the sense that we commemorate people who have accomplished extraordinary feats, whether we agree with what they did or not. People rarely join the army voluntarily with the goal of doing something evil. Nobody joins the army for that reason. People join because they have to, for example during conscription, or simply because they feel like it’s the right thing to do. I don’t think we should judge those people with our own emotional or moral lenses. We should judge them based on their accomplishments or on the fact that they devoted themselves to something they thought was just and important. One of these causes that any veteran will agree on is that once someone is on the ground, the politics around the mission are less important than doing one’s job to ensure that the comrade on one’s left and right come home. That’s what we do during combat. We don’t do that for ourselves, or for the mission, or for whatever else. We do that for our comrades. I don’t think anyone can be against the sacrifice made by someone to ensure the safety of his or her friends and comrades.