Why I’m here, why I’m wearing this uniform, comes out of what was done by those who came before me. I am Captain Hugues Canuel. I was born in Matane, Gaspésie, [QC]. Currently, I am a Naval Warfare Officer. So, I am an officer in the Royal Canadian Navy. Naval Warfare Officers take care of ship operations, they pilot the ships, they operate the weapons systems, and really, they are the sailors who command and coordinate military maritime operations.

Two reasons I decided to join the Canadian Forces: first, I absolutely did not want a 9 to 5 job in an office for the rest of my life, and second, I wanted to see the world. After weighing my options during high school, the Canadian Forces became quite appealing. And in the Canadian Forces, I quickly turned my attention toward the Royal Canadian Navy and its many activities.

On the day of September 11, 2001, I was an officer aboard HMCS Ville de Québec. I remember clearly when the second plane hit the second tower. I remember thinking, "Something is going on. We will be going somewhere after this attack." We don’t know who did it, but it’s certainly an act of terrorism, and of such significance that we all immediately realized it was going to change our lives dramatically. Ville de Québec did not deploy overseas and stayed back to maintain security in Canadian territorial waters. Given my qualifications, they chose to transfer me aboard HMCS Iroquois, which was the naval destroyer commanding the Canadian task group. The events took place on September 11; on October 10, 2001, the Canadian Government made the decision to send a naval task force to the area, and we left Halifax on October 17 - seven days later. By sending a Canadian naval group they were able to buy a bit of time to make decisions. Even though it was mid-October, there were still a lot of questions surrounding the kind of response Western allies were going to launch. Sending a naval group that took about three weeks to get there [Persian Gulf], gave them three weeks to think through what our mission would be and what contribution we would make when we arrived. So, the ships left Halifax, and high-ranking officers were immediately flown out to the headquarters on the ground to discuss what the Canadian Navy’s contribution would be with our allies. When we arrived in theatre, we were working with clear instructions, and we used those three weeks in transit to prepare ourselves for the mission.

The security situation in the [Persian] Gulf was a bit ambiguous. At first, it wasn’t clear who the enemy was. We knew, of course, that the number one enemy was the terrorist group al-Qaeda, and the second enemy was the Taliban regime, which was in power in Afghanistan and allowing al-Qaeda to operate in Afghan territory. So, it was rather hard at the beginning to study the situation, to try and figure out who was in the region, who was a threat, and in the case of the Navy, what ports we could use to refuel, do repairs, that type of thing. So, it was a slightly puzzling and ambiguous situation.

For me, Operation Apollo was the first operation where the use of violence was going to be necessary and unavoidable. At the beginning of November, the coalition was readying itself to send regular forces to the south of Afghanistan. Our first mission was a joint fleet operation to support the coalition’s ships’ defense, and their anti-aircraft defense in the case of the Iroquois. A few days later, the time came when the bulk of the American Forces were transferred on land and entered Afghanistan. It was a surprise operation, so it was kept secret, and it was executed very, very quickly. That night, on the radar, I had the opportunity to watch a constant parade of aircraft and commando carriers transporting the troops on land. That’s when I really realized the impact naval forces can have on land operations, and to what extent and how easily the Canadian Navy was able to integrate within American and coalition operations. I must admit that on that night, being a young sailor with little experience, that this was one of the most incredible things I had ever seen.

Ten years later, I was in Kabul, Afghanistan. I was participating in Operation Attention, Rotation Zero. What does Rotation Zero mean? It’s the first rotation to set up a mission. The objectives of Operation Attention reflected a strategy change within the coalition in Afghanistan, where the decision was made to transfer combat and security responsibilities to the Afghan Forces. Whereas the Coalition would stand back and provide support around training and equipment needed by the Afghan police and army. That is when the Canadian mission was set up in Kabul, as part of NATO’s training effort in the city. For me, this was my first on-land mission, if I can say that, so of course I wanted to make sure I was able to transfer my naval experience – to translate my existing skills to my new job as part of the training mission. Of course, as a sailor, I wasn’t there to teach them policing techniques or things like that, but I would help the chief of staff of the organization with establishing processes, planning techniques, budgeting, long term operations planning, staff policies, how to deal with salaries, holidays, religious diversity within the existing police force. Every day, eight hours a day, working face to face and hand in hand trying to help them improve the administrative side of their organization.

Kabul, summer 2011, was a city of contrasts. Everywhere people were walking around, businesses were open. A very dynamic city. However, a telltale sign of the on-going war was that in Kabul, the capital, the enemy conducted high profile attacks. Very few attacks, very swift ones, but with an incredible impact. They would send suicide bomber teams whose aim was to create a lot of victims, and that managed to slip through the city’s security services and would try to carry out something that would draw media attention and try to demonstrate the incompetence of the Afghan government, the weaknesses of the Coalition forces and the inefficacy of their adversaries in keeping the region secure.

On the Afghan side, morale was strained. Our contribution was very well received. They needed the training and the material support from the nations that contributed to this effort. They knew that their country needed improved security, better organized forces, and they could see that their contributions were going to make a difference. The working conditions, however, were very hard on them. As soon as their training was over, they were sent out, deployed, and they faced harsh and dangerous conditions every day. On one hand, that made their training very real and relevant, but on the other hand, we could see how apprehensive they were about deploying and facing the enemy.

On October 29, 2011, we lost Master Corporal Byron Greff, who died during a terrorist attack, when his bus was attacked by a suicide bomber. He died during our mission in Kabul and he was the last Canadian soldier to die in Afghanistan. His memory remains an example for all Canadian soldiers of the sacrifice that he made, and the sacrifices made by so many before him. Remembrance is crucial in defining where I came from, who I am, and where I am going.

The memory of the sacrifices that were made by those who died in past wars, the sacrifices that were made by those who dedicated themselves to peace, the sacrifices made by those who keep going day after day no matter the job, be it operational or support, keep propelling me, motivating me and convincing me to fulfill the mission at hand.