

Bosses don't always see value of service

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Tim Laidler's Remembrance Day began, as it so often has since his return from Afghanistan in 2008, with a media interview, followed up by a moment of silence for the friends and colleagues he lost to war.

At 26, Laidler has become something of a spokesman for combat veterans in British Columbia. His rocky transition back into a civilian career after an eight-month posting with the Canadian Forces in Kandahar serves as a cautionary tale to those who have more recently come home or are still overseas.

Laidler, a member of the army reserve in BC for 10 years, left university to join the Canadian military effort in Kandahar.

He believed his hard-won experience as a supply convoy gunner, driver and junior crew commander operating in one of the world's most dangerous countries gave him lessons in teamwork, leadership and grit that no degree or diploma could provide, and would count for something when he got back home.

"You work so hard over there. It is indescribable how much work you put in," he said.

Yet that's not what employers saw when he handed them his resume.

One Vancouver organization suggested he get his head checked with the company shrink "to make sure you're not crazy."

"Here I thought this [combat experience] was going to be an asset to me. Now, I'm hearing that it is something people are afraid of," Laidler said, the bitter sting of those words still fresh in his memory more than two years on.

About 20 to 30 per cent of Canada's brigade group in Afghanistan are reservists.

Like Laidler, they've put an education, or full-time career outside of the military, on hold to take part in a dangerous combat mission that has claimed the lives of 158 soldiers since 2002.

On average, they're gone for 12 to 14 months, sometimes longer depending on their role. Not everyone who serves is guaranteed their job will be waiting when they return. Legislation around when and for how long a reservist can leave his or her regular job to support the military is complicated, and varies from province to province.

With the exception of federal employees -Canada has declared the participation of reserve members in Afghanistan critical to the country's interests, giving staff extended leave to participate in training and deployment, as necessary -reservists must generally rely on the goodwill of their employers to allow them time off to serve.

In provinces that have a highly visible military population, such as Alberta or Ontario, companies are more likely to have extended-leave policies in place for reserve members, Natalie Condrashoff, a project manager who works with returning veterans at British Columbia Institute of Technology's School of business, wrote in an email.

In BC, policies vary with each employer. Telus, for instance, allows staff members who are also members of the reserve to take an open-ended leave of absence to serve the country.

During that leave, the company has agreed to bridge the soldier's benefits and seniority, and he or she can come back to work at the end of the tour without missing a beat.

At least one Telus employee in BC has taken a leave as long as 23 months to serve in Afghanistan.

Home Depot, the Vancouver police department and City of Victoria are among the list of employers who've crafted similar policies.

There are those, however, who will insist on a soldier's resignation.

"Sometimes military individuals just quit altogether, often because they think their jobs will not be there or they do not want to deal with administrative hassle," said Condrashoff.

Colin Terry, 37, said he was lucky with the timing of his overseas deployment.

A member of the reserves since 1993, Terry had just finished a full-time contract with the military in Vancouver when he was sent to Afghanistan in October 2009 to work as a combat medical technician and armoured ambulance crew commander at various outposts around Kandahar City. He was uneasy about his return home and re-integration into civilian life after nearly two years away.

Though he had two part-time jobs to come back to, including one as a paramedic with BC Ambulance Service, he worried the work wouldn't be enough to support his wife and two teenage children.

"That was one of the most stressful things for me," he said.

He has since signed on for another full-time contract at a military health clinic, while maintaining part-time work with the ambulance service until a permanent position becomes available.

But, he said, "I have friends over there [in Afghanistan] now who are going to come back and be unsettled.

They are going to finish their leave... and then they don't have a job, at least not a full-time job."

Peter Van Rienan, a 47-year-old clinical neurophysiology technologist at Vancouver General hospital, made sure his job would be secure before his deployment to Kandahar in October 2009 to work as a civilian-military liaison officer with the Provincial Reconstruction Team.

Van Rienan's union, the Health Sciences Association of BC, does not have a military-leave policy, but he found they were supportive of the deployment, extending him a leave of 18 months, and maintaining his seniority and holiday accrual.

Two weeks after returning home, Van Rienan walked back on the job as if nothing had changed.

"It was strange," he said of his return to work. "I'd forgotten all of the codes and passwords, but it all comes back to you."

It took Laidler nearly two years to get his life back on course following his return to Canada.

Part-time jobs with the police services and as a property manager helped pay the bills while completed his degree in political science and philosophy.

He toyed with the idea of going to law school or joining the police department, but nothing felt right.

The heightened sense of purpose he felt in Afghanistan was missing, rendering all other work seemingly unimportant, even mundane.

Employers, too, had difficulty understanding Laidler's military skills, and how they might translate to the private sector.

It took a friend's referral to the Veterans Transition Program at the University of BC to turn things around.

There, Laidler worked with other veterans to process his emotions and experiences, and take a deeper look at what he really wanted to do with his life and learn how to re-engage on a meaningful level.

Laidler has since been hired as executive director of the specialized UBC veterans' program, co-ordinating its transition to non-profit status.

At the same time, he is taking a master's degree in psychology.

His goal is to bring the lessons he learned as a veteran to help ease the emotional and social disconnect suffered by those involved in various hyper-masculine careers, from NHL hockey players to frontline emergency workers, police and soldiers.

"It is okay to be both strong and sensitive. It is something that I am proud of now," he said.

And then there is this informal role as spokesman that he's taken on, speaking out on behalf of military veterans.

Recently he shared his personal experiences with more than 130 executives, and didn't feel an ounce of anxiety.

"I think that is because my perspective has been blown wide open," he said of his newfound confidence. "No one is shooting at me, so it's not that bad."

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