

Rough Transcript
Sgt (Ret'd) David Dirom, 15 Fd Amb/British Army (19 July 2016)

Deployment(s): Cambodia, Northern Ireland (with British Army)

Interviewer & Transcriber: LCol M.C. Vernon

Note: *Quotations are not 100% verbatim*

Timecode	Content
0:30	British Army background? 1974-1982 with 2 Scots Guards, then Royal Corps of Transport (tank transporters in Sennelager, Germany). Joined for sense of adventure. Northern Ireland. "I'm going to join the military and take the fight to the other guy, to keep it from coming to Scotland... Got all the adventure I could want, and carry the scars to this day. For all my sins." Stationed in UK, Germany, Canada (BATUS), Central America for jungle warfare training. Buckingham Palace, Windsor Castle. When he released, he'd met his wife in Calgary already (1981) when he was there for a friend's wedding. They agreed to live in Calgary. Did two winter tours in Northern Ireland, Londonderry then Belfast. First was infantry, second was as a RCT driver. He was in Belfast when "the South Atlantic wargames kicked off." His old battalion was sent there. Both good tours. "I'm a field soldier, not a barracks guy. Not in the rear with the gear. Most comfortable, at home, in the field." Whether it's Germany, Belize, Cambodia.
4:25	Londonderry was an eyeopener. "The first place I was ever shot at. A new experience. We were lucky when we got hit that day. We all came home."
4:50	How did you join Canadian military? He was bored in 1983, working in the Amoco office. Saw an ad for the Calgary Highlanders. Very quickly signed up. It happened in just a couple of weeks.
5:40	Switch to medic? In 1987, Amoco was in the process of merging with Dome Petroleum. He anticipated being laid-off, seeking other avenues. Looking for a sense of purpose, adventure. He was interested in SAIT's paramedic training program, even while he was in the British Army. But then he wanted "to be the guy with the gun." Later, he attended SAIT's program and rejoined the military in 1989 with the medical section. He was a Highlander 1983, but a civilian shift change made it impossible to parade on weekends, so he got out in 1984. Then back in in 1989.
8:10	Cambodia? He came to Cambodia via Winnipeg. He regarded LCol Moffat [CO of Calgary Highlanders in early 1990s], who pushed him to deploy to Bosnia with 2 PPCLI. At an orders group in Winnipeg, he learned that two medics were needed back in Calgary for Op MARQUIS. He knew what it was and always wanted to go to SE Asia. He thought this task would be a good way to see it, while fulfilling a function. He

	was sent to Calgary and 1 Service Battalion, instead of to the Balkans.
10:00	Work up training for Cambodia? "It was more a lack of workup training. Based on my background with British Army, thought it was kind of lame." He'd followed the Vietnam War and its aftermath in the news. To him, Service Battalion didn't seem interested in preparing soldiers for possible hostilities. Several Strathconas he knew felt the same. "You guys should be doing real army stuff instead of driving trucks. Infantry training." They felt Dirom's infantry background would come in handy, that others would come to rely on his skills. "There was a lot of hurry up and wait. Lots of wasted time."
12:20	Saving grace was the French language still in use in Cambodia. They lacked Cambodian language training.
13:00	He watched Tucker's interview and agrees with his assessment of the training mentality back then. "No respect to the CF, but they hadn't done anything in a long, long time." Yeah, it's going to be like Cyprus. He's sceptical about what the recce party discovered. Or if they even went to Cambodia. They said there was nothing there, but on arrival they found markets, a 24-hour photography shop. "Don't know where they went. There was nothing positive from their initial recce."
14:40	His expectations? He was thinking of the six o'clock news during the Vietnam War, but not so dramatic. But Khmer Rouge were still active in the country. Maybe some action, maybe not. "You don't really want action, but maybe you do. I think that's what I am, an action junkie. That's why I transitioned so well from infantry to medic, seat of your pants calls."
16:15	When he first got to Cambodia, he didn't think it was going well. People sitting in the office all day, not going out. He wanted to do medical work, but was told that was not their task—even though their predecessors had done some. He still managed to get out and do some. Wanted to work with the locals. "I've always wanted to be a helper."
17:35	First impressions? A three day trip: Calgary-Hawaii-Guam-Pattaya [?]. The French air force flew them in the next morning. The camp was 10-15 minutes from the airport. [Where?] It was everything he expected, heat and humidity "and some of the nicest people you could meet. I've been in shitholes and the Cambodians were nothing like that." He found Cambodians and Vietnamese at the local level got along, in spite of reports to the contrary.
19:15	Their camp was a converted warehouse. Just threw some beds in. Overall layout was good. Most popular camp in Cambodia because they were the only ones with a pool, an above ground pool sent over from Canada. He was raring to go. The outgoing unit showed them around the area for a few days. They went with a convoy to drop some trucks off in a staging area for the election.
20:35	Always nice to get handover from people who know what's going on. "It was a natural thing for me but some of the guys were...'Ooooh, I

	<p>don't know...' " A week later, he was the guy giving the answers to newcomers. The soldiers were overwhelmed making the transition from the First World to the Third World. Fewer perks. Harder for them to get things done. They needed to focus more on what's important. "Mickey Mouse Syndrome." They were a mixed bunch: Service Battalion truckers, Strathconas, Highlanders, engineers, infantry from eastern Canada. It was handy later on when things started to go wrong in the field to have the infantry there, whereas the transport guys might not be as switched on. "Even though I wasn't one at the time, I was born to be an infantryman, right up until they put me in the box I came from."</p>
23:15	<p>Memorable day? Every day was an adventure. Won't name names, that would be bad form. Two incidents could have gone the wrong way. The first was after the elections, the night before they went back [to their main camp]. At a local restaurant, one of the senior ranks was involved in an incident when someone pulled a gun on them (they were unarmed). It went sideways later on at the hotel when "buddy showed up with half a dozen guys and all the AKs they could carry." But all the people who should have been in charge were "inebriated way beyond their comfort zone. Their attitude was 'fuck it, who cares?' Excuse me? This is Canada here." So the junior ranks wound up securing the situation, which involved Cambodian soldiers with itchy trigger fingers.</p>
26:00	<p>The men who came back from the restaurant had brought some girls with them to the gazebo. The armed men saw them. He and another corporal found themselves being the responsible ones "because the people in charge are drunk and they don't care. It's embarrassing to say, but you get your work done and some would just start drinking. That was their routine. It didn't leave a good taste in our mouths." They were in uniform at the time. They weren't allowed to have their weapons when they went into town; they were secured in their quarters. There were some changes in the command structure after they got back. The attitude had been: "What happens in the province, stays in the province." [This happened away from their camp] The men who'd been threatened in the gazebo refused to be silenced and made a report about the incident.</p>
29:00	<p>Second incident? In another province, with the new command structure in place. They were heading back, back at the ferry, and the UN attitude was to take priority on the boat. This time they were first in line, but only one of two ferries was operational. While waiting, a Cambodian artillery unit of 500 men showed up and tried to take priority, which resulted "in a pissing contest." The two commanders were poking each other in the chest. He became anxious, alert. "Kicked into infantry mode, hair standing up." He was concerned about soldiers on a hill setting up RPGs and RPKs "and they were all pointing at us." He advised section commanders, but they didn't share his concern. "It</p>

	<p>could have escalated into something worse. Yet again, the only ones who cared were me and a couple Reserve guys." The man in charge wore Malayan DPM uniform, playing with a grenade. "Really? We're going to do this? Shit." He put the grenade back and walked away. Eventually, the artillery went first, and they got the briefing, "What happened over there, stays over there. And it did. I was the only one who gave a toss. Hyper-vigilant. People think I'm a nut job when I go into a restaurant and select a seat in the back." The guy in the Malayan uniform gave him "the Cambodian finger" as they pulled away. It was stupid stuff. They've got more men and guns. Let them go. Is there an urgent reason to push it?</p>
34:30	<p>How stressful was it working in Cambodia, given all the factors? It wasn't, except for the incidents he described. "It was like a big vacation trip for me. In the field, doing my job. Some responsibility. They finally took into account I did have some experience. Give me a couple of guys on a task and I'd be the guy." When he deploys, his head switches to deployment mode. He doesn't think about his wife and kids. Focuses on the job. "It was probably the best time ever to go to Cambodia. I don't hear many good things today. Especially after UN pulled out."</p>
36:40	<p>When did things go downhill? He was referring to the incidents, plus some personality conflicts between some Regulars and Reservists. Many were great guys. But the command structure... they very seldom left the camp. He saw them once in the field. "And that was a real shock to everybody." After the election.</p>
38:00	<p>Medical outreach? In Vietnam, they'd done CAPs—combat aid patrols? They had two hospitals in Phnom Penh. "But it was like they didn't want anyone going off the base to do other stuff." He was "hardcore UN." But he never went to Cyprus. This was his first, and he became disillusioned with it administratively. "I lost all respect during the tour. I didn't know they had uniforms in that size. Must be a special tent. And they're horrible to the locals, the ones I say. I'm sure there were good ones... It soured me on the UN."</p>
40:30	<p>The state of the country? When Pol Pot and the KR moved people out of PP, he was expecting city to be overgrown and abandoned, but it was actually quite vibrant. Many people living in shacks. Their mess barman would be driven home at the end of his shift. He took him back one night, to a wooden slum shack leaning up against a wall. He invited them in. "Whoa, I've got it pretty good in Canada. I had it pretty good in Scotland, and I thought I lived in a slum in Scotland." But maybe he was doing better than someone else. They refused to go near the female barman's home, an apartment, even though she invited them up. They didn't want to damage her reputation with her neighbours. She made him the godfather of her daughter. "That was kind of weird. Me being a monster and all." He couldn't get enough of the people, in spite of the</p>

	language difficulties. Great people.
43:30	How satisfying? He had an excellent tour. He would have stayed but he had a wife and two kids. "I would have deserted." Others were offered jobs with the Cambodian military. His family was his priority. Not the first time he's had these thoughts. He felt the same on training in Belize, or when deployed to Northern Ireland. Very satisfying.
45:00	Family communications, stressors? His wife at the time wouldn't communicate hardship: "I don't want to bother you." He didn't find out how hard she'd had it in his absence until he got home. They relied on snail mail, the odd phone call. She was having financial difficulties. "I was pretty pissed off about that." The UN money went into a post office account in Cambodia and he brought it back, to see that his family were eating poorly. That wasn't the first time she'd done that. She did it while he was in the British Army, toughing it out. "We're Scottish, we're stubborn. Don't like asking for handouts. Suck it up."
47:20	Homecoming? Their trip out was a VC/DC-10 that was old and needed a rest, hence the three day trip. They returned via Air Canada from Bangkok, and arrived at Harvey Barracks in Calgary. Family met them. A bit of confusion about what to do next. Went home and did a few days with Service Battalion. They returned 25 October and had a contract (mostly leave) until the end of December.
49:20	Prior to leaving, there was an accident between a car and motorcycle outside the front gate. A woman suffered a traumatic amputation. There was only one pair of gloves at the gate. He dove in to help. Realized later he had a few small lacerations, which raised HIV/AIDS concerns. Going back for checkups in Canada as a reservist "was a nightmare". Due to his status, medics wouldn't see him. But the Base Surgeon overheard and helped him get the follow-up needed. He was OK. "I didn't want to come back. I was having too much fun."
51:15	Any regrets he didn't go with 2 PPCLI? The UMS sergeant was not his friend after he went back to Calgary. Reservists were trying out for positions. But unknown to Dirom, he was the sergeant's first choice. He got the evil eye, but he didn't know why. He was upset that Dirom wanted to go to Cambodia instead. Overall, he had a friend who went with the battalion, at the Medak Pocket, "and he was never right after that." For him, it would have been a follow-on to Northern Ireland. "You have not control, guys who want to kill you. Not afraid of dying. More concerned about being incapacitated, like guys wounded in Afghanistan. People call me a 'veteran', but those guys are veterans. I did my stuff in the British Army but it wasn't as mean and nasty as that Afghanistan stuff was. Same scenarios, bombings, but it's more intense over there."
54:45	How did tours change him? His first British deployment "woke me right up." He'd been in army cadets, in charge, "but you never know until that first deployment how you're going to be. I'm pretty sure the word

	<p>'immature' has my name written right beside it." His head was not in the game. Right up until the first bombing, first issue at the checkpoint, the first ambush at the beginning of 1977. That turned him into a more serious, focused individual. "I've never recovered from that. Never been easygoing. Brains always switched on since then. What's that guy doing over there?" He wonders if the unrest in the US will cross the border into Canada, refugee issues. "I'm just not right in the head. That's probably why they call me Shrek."</p>
57:10	<p>Compare British and Canadian militaries? First thing he noticed about the Canadian military is, "You've got officers that talk to you? How quaint! Because in the British Army back in those days... We've got officers? Seen them? With the class system, didn't talk to them." When he was a radio operator for an officer, "he was a nut job." He felt Canadian system was "brilliant... Canadians are easygoing, great country, great people. Nice to be able to like officers. There, it was find the guy you like. Here, find the guy you don't like. Great bunch of guys in the Calgary Highlanders: Waterhouse, Moffat, Spaan." It was a great experience to enjoy the Canadian Forces, the more relaxed and easygoing attitude. Even in British Army, he can see it's now more relaxed. "Iraq and Afghanistan probably taught them to be more cohesive."</p>
1:00:15	<p>Final thoughts? He's never regretted any deployment. Tried to get the best out of them, in spite of some bad experiences. "I used to tell people there was no finer experience than having someone shooting at me. They'd be like: 'Rubber room. Get him out.' Special coats that zip up the back." He has no regrets. His big issue is the EMS work he did for Suffield, going on local calls that didn't work out—for the patient. Specifically the MP who got killed on the Terry Fox Run in 2003. "I believe he died for me because we got switched." Normally, the ambulance would be at the back, with plenty of lights, but the MP had only two lights on his ghost car that was rear-ended/hit by another vehicle. "For my sins, I live with that every day. I don't regret anything I've ever done, but for that incident. I let that boy down."</p>
1:02:50	<p>Details? The Terry Fox Run was conducted along the highway. They guy who was killed was on his first day on the job after a week's orientation. The truck driver who hit him had apparently dropped his pen, according to the RCMP, leaned over to pick it up and the whole truck hit the MP. Dirom saw it all in his rearview mirror, truck swerving, flames. The MP's job was to pick up stragglers. They didn't know if there were others in the vehicle. Driver was dead, but they fought hard to get him out. He blew his shoulder out. He didn't want to send the boy home in a closed coffin. "Here we are, 13 years later, and I'm still paying for it. Day by day."</p>
1:05:00	<p>"I've got lots of dead bodies running around in my head." But that boy... he was dead when they arrived. They fought really hard to get</p>

	him out. The worst thing: Normally you finish a call and go back to base and restock, do your paperwork. But they were held at the scene, looking at the dead man. The coroner was late, so nobody would move the body. "There's no reason for us to be here. That compounded everything, even with the stress debrief."
1:07:15	He encouraged the young guys to talk about what had happened during their debrief. He'd done it before and found it helpful. But in the end, it only helped him for a few weeks. "Once they start showing up here [indicates his head]..."
1:07:50	Why did he leave military? He has three skeletal injuries, his head/brain [mental health]. He was released 2009. Survived on civvy street for three years until Veterans' Affairs took him out and began providing him support. Now on a permanent disability. "All the monsters are coming out now. They all want to play. That's why I go to Calgary every month." He has a great therapist there. He doesn't want to give her up for someone else in Medicine Hat.
1:09:20	He used to lie to his therapist in Medicine Hat. But after the MP's death, things are unclear. He couldn't talk. "I'd just tell them how great it was, even though I just wanted to go across the room and kill them because they were pissing me off."
1:10:20	Who are the monsters, military or civilian? They dealt with a large number of medical calls around Suffield. "Most of my monsters are related to working at the firehall or base hospital." He was on Class B contracts at the time, for 12 years. It was a good situation for a long time. "And then the monsters started showing up. I call them monsters because they're working in my head. Normal, everyday human beings who didn't make it. It's easier to describe it this way. Monsters. Instead of nice dead people running in my head, chastising me because I didn't give 130%. We have lovely conversations at night. Sometimes."
1:12:45	"Thanks for the opportunity. Hopefully you'll be able to use about five minutes of that."
	Additional details?