Days of Glory that never end – A jumper from Canadian Airborne Regiment making big difference in subSaharan Africa

Does anyone remember the TV and newspaper stories about the Canadian Airborne Regiment - Régiment aéroporté canadien, when it was disbanded in 1995 by personal order of Prime Minister Jean Chretien, allegedly for being a bunch of renegade no gooders.
Yes, the Prime Minister was tacitly disparaging of them on TV and his office and others and even some in DND let the notion drift that the very competent, elite unit was being *disbanded in disgrace!*

It was an utter untruth, for the Regiment was properly retired and her colours placed in keeping respectfully.

Further, it was in an era when the national government was slashing military spending and when the Regiment, supposed to be a quick strike light brigade that could be deployed to world hot spots where needed, had dwindled to a little less than battalion size.

The Canadian government at the time wanted to continue downsizing the Canadian Forces and recklessly and callously hacked the Regiment from the order of battle.

Below you will see a photo of one of those besmirched veterans and yes, he wears his Regiment’s T-shirt proudly.

And while he looks tough and he *is* physically tough, he has a heart of gold and in fact is a sensitive poet whose work has been published in many countries over and over again. He also is selfless and *morally* strong!

Sergeant Billy Willbond is the president and CEO of ICROSS Canada (International Community for the Relief of Suffering and Starvation).

He has made nine journeys to nations in subSaharan Africa to do good work for the poor and the suffering and his leadership and great compassion undoubtedly has saved many lives there, and brought sight and some comfort and nourishment and improved hygiene to the children of the afflicted.
No, Billy is not ripping off a toy store, he is packing bags of knitted Boomer hats for newborn babies and Izzy dolls for sick and suffering, starving subSaharan African children – something he has done for the past 14 years, since first setting foot in the Belgian Congo and seeing the plight of the people and particularly of their children. The Boomer Caps are named in memory of Andrew “Boomer” Eykelenboom, a front line medic who was killed in action in Afghanistan. The Izzy African Comfort Dolls are named in memory of Mark “Izzy” Isfield, a combat engineer who was killed by a mine in Yugoslavia.

Yeah, he’s just one of those roughhouse guys whose own Prime Minister referenced in less than respectful words and tone and with utter lack of pride or acknowledgment for the young Regiment’s achievements and the caliber and mettle of its soldiers.

The Canadian Airborne Regiment was composed of crack volunteer soldiers in special companies drawn from Canada’s three active infantry Regiments – The Royal Canadian Regiment, Princess Patricia’s Canadian Light Infantry and the Royal 22e Regiment, and from the Royal Regiment of Canadian Artillery and specialists from all of the supporting corps.

It had been led by a succession of outstanding officers, including (then) Brigadier Herbert C. Pitts, MC, a decorated Korean War Veteran who had gone right to the front in Korea after graduating from the Royal Military College of Canada. He eventually became a major general and is known throughout North America for his leadership role in Scouts Canada and other philanthropic works.

The Regiment’s soldier body was phenomenal. A scant few rotten apples in later years, yes, but before there was trouble and before less competent leaders took the place of the outstanding commanders, Canada could not help but be proud of such soldiers.

There was Claude Petit, for instance, who had been wounded in the Korean War a few weeks after his 16th birthday! When Claude left the Canadian Forces after more than a decade of service he went into the sporting goods business.

He founded native Canadian hockey leagues and youth boxing associations and coached hundreds of Aboriginal youths through the years who might otherwise have gone astray.
Claude Petit (right) meets his healer in Vancouver half a century after Sergeant William “Newt” Newton, treated his wounds when he was hit with mortar shrapnel on the Hook position in Korea in November, 1952. Claude is wearing the Order of Canada. Bill Newton wears a Mentioned in Despatches decoration as well as the Queen’s Coronation Medal, which he was awarded in lieu of a second Mention in Despatches. He is also a tough and ready parachutist – who saved the lives of dozens of Canadian soldiers in Korea, treating them under fire in the Battle of the Hook and after that as casualty clearing post officer when C Company of the 3rd Battalion, The Royal Canadian Regiment was hit very hard and overrun on Hill 187. During that action he had four helicopters in the air at the same time evacuating the wounded. The late Charles Pond, of the 3rd Battalion Princess Patricias owed Bill Newton his life. Severely wounded by a direct mortar hit that shredded and shattered all bones in both of his legs, Pond lay helpless and bleeding to death. Newton rushed to him, stemmed the flow of blood with his hands and with tourniquets, lashed the legs together to prevent further damage. At the medical aid post behind the lines the surgeon treating
Chuck Pond avowed that if he had lost a few more drops of blood he would have been dead. Newton had made the difference. Chuck Pond lost both legs. He died just a few years ago. The two never met again since that day in Korea.

Because of Claude Petit's selfless work and dedication, more than 1,000 youth hockey teams help young men how to compete and persevere and seek their future with hope and with pride. This Canadian Airborne Regiment veteran was awarded the Order of Canada for his selfless philanthropic work, and also is invested in the Saskatchewan Order of Merit.

In one deployment to Cyprus, the Regiment kept the peace – under fire – and lost two of its own and had wounded and was credited with keeping Turk and Cypriot forces from destroying each other and Cypriot villages and civilians as well, but that is forgotten.

In its last overseas assignment in Somalia, not a peacekeeping mission but one with armed combat rules of engagement, there were two demoralizing, shameful incidents – but they involved only a half dozen of the Regiment’s 700 deployed soldiers. But for those two incidents the work of the Regiment in Somalia was praised by all other involved nations – except Canada.
Billy Willbond, operations sergeant, Canadian Airborne Regiment

At the post office where Billy lives in Saanichton, British Columbia, a few days ago somebody told him they had seen a bunch of “Hell’s Angels” on motorcycles gather at his house.

Billy corrected the individual. “They were Heaven’s Angels,” he said.

They were members of the 3 Canadian Army Veterans Motorcycle Unit. They include some of the Canadian Airborne Regiment Veterans, some Navy veterans, regular army veterans, RCMP veterans, police and others.

Among them were Glenn Avon, Genevieve Primeau, Adele Jenkins, Mily Avon, Pete Norton, Steve Thomas, Lori Bridges, Pierre Ouellet and Stewart Herbert.

They had gathered to form a work detail and headed to the ICROSS Canada storage lockers where they processed and bagged 45,000 Boomer caps and Izzy dolls, ready for shipment.
Billy Willbond (left, in airborne shirt) and Major Murray Edwards (right, in yellow shirt) form bookends for volunteers from the 3rd Canadian Army Veteran Cyclists Unit, a national cyclist organization made up of veterans. In between Billy and Murray are Glenn Avon, Genevieve Primeau, the little girl is Adele Jenkins, Mily Avon, Pete Norton, Steve Thomas, Lori Bridges, Pierre Ouellet and Stewart Herbert.

In command of the work party that day was a grand gentleman and veteran warrior, Major Murray Edwards, who served in World War Two, the Korean War and on United Nations assignments abroad. In Korea he served in the Battle of Kapyong with the Princess Patricia’s Canadian Light Infantry.
This honourable gentleman, Major Murray Edwards, is the Victoria CEO of ICROSS Canada. Murray, now in his 90’s, served his country in uniform for decades. After service in World War Two he joined 2nd Battalion of the Princess Patricia’s Canadian Light Infantry at the start of the Korean War. He led an infantry platoon in Korea and then was promoted to captain and appointed the battalion’s field quartermaster. He served with the Patricias in the Battle of Kapyong. Murray was officer commanding Billy's team of Heaven’s Angels when they packed up hundreds of Izzy Dolls and Boomer hats for suffering Third World children.

If Billy is correct, Murray Edwards turns 93 this year. He is the Victoria area CEO of ICROSS Canada.

(About Murray Edwards and “Peacekeepers”)

During his basic training days as a young 17-year old recruit, Billy Willbond had trained under many Korean War veterans. So he knew many of the soldiers who had served in Korea with Major Edwards.

When Billy was serving in military intelligence as a China expert he was sent to the University of Victoria to improve his Chinese language skills. He took classes half a day and spent half a day as chief training clerk for the Cadet Training Division of MARPAC, where Murray Edwards was the senior administrative officer.

They became close friends and have remained so through the past quarter century. Murray’s wife, Maury gave Billy the nickname “Soldier Poet,” by which he is widely known in Canada and the U.S. Murray knows all of the Wilmont family and joins them often for Christmas dinner.

Billy recalls that Major Edwards had joined the Queen’s Own Rifles of Canada as a rifleman in World War Two and was later commissioned. After service in Korea Murray was a jump company commander with the Princess Patricia’s 2nd Battalion. He later instructed at the Royal Canadian School of Infantry in Camp Borden, Ontario and commanded a company on NATO service in Germany.
He was the first Canadian officer to serve in Cyprus during the 1964 war between Greek Cypriots and Turks. He also served in Damascus, the Golan Heights and in Jerusalem on UN missions.

Murray was a very good friend of the late Lieutenant Colonel George Flint, who had commanded a company of Patricias in Korea during the war. Lieutenant Colonel Flint was the Canadian chairman of the UN Palestine Truce Supervision Organization.

He had held that post from 1956 until his death while trying to evacuate wounded in an action between Jordanian and Israeli troops in the demilitarized zone of Mount Scopus.

This fine Canadian soldier is buried in the Moascar Military Cemetery at Ismailiya, Egypt.
Also affiliated with ICROSS Canada as Patron is Major General Lew MacKenzie, the very well known leader of Canadian peacekeeping missions who headed the Canadian group is Bosnia.

General MacKenzie has just contributed funds his team collected to acquire a shower bath for the women and children of a shamba in Kajiado, Kenya. The bath is for hygiene and sanitation purposes.

When Billy visited the shamba and announced that it was coming the women and children all cheered. One of the women told him they can use water from a newly dug well for the showers and use the water expelled from the showers to irrigate their banana crop.

So, do these Izzy dolls and Boomer hats make a difference in Africa?

Billy said you would have to see a small girl, dying from the ravages of Aids, light up from her despair and hug the little doll, and then you would know what they mean.

The dolls and hats quite often are used as padding for large freight container shipments of medicines, surgical equipment, hospital beds, X-Ray systems, all donated to ICROSS and collected by volunteers.

While most of the shipments are focused on Africa, not all are. As Billy says, they go “to the poorest of the suffering poor in the global village of our battered and bleeding wee planet.” That means Kenya, Sudan, Ethiopia, Somalia, Congo, Malawi, India and South America.
Throughout his 14 years of service in this selfless work, Billy has been to Africa nine times.

His first trip there was in 1997 when he went to visit his brother, Bob Willbond. Bob was in charge of the Health Partners International Canada (HPIC) aid program.

Billy had taken wreaths with him from his local branch of the Royal Canadian Legion, to place on the graves of Peacekeepers who had fallen in the Congo in operations during the 1960’s.

There he became aware of the plight of the orphans whose parents had died from Aids. He has been trying to help them ever since – albeit never alone. Such work could never possibly be done by a lone wolf.

As well as delivering medicines, surgical equipment, hospital beds, X-Ray systems, sanitary equipment and supplies, packed with the Boomer hats and Izzy dolls, ICROSS Canada also acquires and donates implant lenses for the children who must undergo eye surgery because of AIDs infections and various other rampant diseases.
Billy’s ICROSS Canada team helps restore and save sight of children in Tanzania, he explained. This photo shows orphans after they underwent eye surgery to implant artificial lenses and correct other anomalies caused by inherited AIDS infections and other diseases. Surgeries are done by specialists who work with SEMA Canada, of Vancouver. ICROSS Canada purchases the implantable lenses from India with funds contributed from the 3rd CAV (Canadian Army Veterans) unit.

Billy Willbond is not a blower of his own horn and not a glory seeker. He supports his philanthropic work with the income from his 20-year military pension and one from the Saanich Police Department, where he also spent 20 years.

He also does not imply he does the work alone. To the contrary, he credits any of its success to the work of others.

“Thousands of the Boomer hats and Izzy dolls are sent via the compassionate ministries,” Bill says. “Mike Comeau, the Ontario director of ICROSS CANADA also sends them, as does Shirley O’Connell, the ‘Izzy Doll Momma’ in Perth, Ontario.”
Billy Willbond at age 17, on the day that he enlisted in the Canadian Army.
One of the 3rd CAV’s youngest volunteers, Adele Jenkins, helps put Izzy dolls into waterproof bags, ready for shipment.

“We have been doing this work for 14 years and it is not slowing down,” he says. “I thank God that I get help from the Canadian Peacekeeping vets and the CAV members all across this great Nation.”

Billy says there are volunteers all over Canada knitting the hats and dolls.
“We have about 1,000 regulars at any one time from all across Canada,” he explains. “I have given out 1,200 certificates of appreciation to knitters in the past 14 years.

“Mike Comeau and Shirley O’Connell have sent hundreds of thousands of Izzy dolls to Afghanistan through Health Partners International Canada and other Charities.

“Mollie Colson still runs knitting groups in the Gulf Islands and I have Church groups all over the Maritimes knitting on a constant basis. The hats and dolls come in at the Post Office and at the Greyhound bus depot on a regular basis.”

How many of the hats and dolls have been distributed to the suffering children thus far?

More than one million, Billy says, and the number grows by the tens of thousands month after month.
Volunteer’s jacket tells much. He belongs to the philanthropic 3rd Canadian Army Veterans organization, he has been a supporter for the Highway of Heroes processional when servicemen killed in action in Afghanistan are brought home to a centre in Toronto, Ontario and he wears a memorial patch commemorating somebody who fell in 2008, over the wish, “Ride Free Brother.”
So that’s a view of a veteran of the retired Canadian Airborne Regiment that might conflict with the imagery left by the besmirching it underwent by Canada’s own governmental leaders 16 years ago.

Billy Willbond is an ideal Canadian, even though not officially ideal. He \textit{is} bilingual, but doesn't speak both of his Country’s official languages. However, he does speak Canada’s second most prevalent language after English – Mandarin. He took the language training in the army.

He speaks some French, but mostly it is a blend of the now dead French and English mix once spoken where he grew up. But when he had to go to school in Ottawa the fierce teachers of the day went to war with the young Billy.

They fought him hard to rid his mind of the unique words which blended the culture of two worlds with that of his own hard life in Quebec,

They didn't knock it all out, though. Today he is the living conservator, in his poetry, of the old \textit{Patois Hinglish} once spoken by the shanty men of the Pontiac, Maniwaki and Gatineau hills of western Quebec, which has virtually disappeared and given way to proper French and English. That's where his roots are.

In Korea the government would proclaim such an individual a living cultural treasure and assign him a number indicating his worth among the nation's other cultural assets.

Billy Willbond lives by the creed of his ICROSS Canada organization and its undertakings:

\textit{The needy will not be forgotten, nor the hopes of the afflicted perish} - \textit{Psalms 9-19}. 
Billy Willbond, a proud young corporal in the Queen’s Own Rifles of Canada, before joining the Canadian Airborne Regiment.
Family of Compassion, Duty

Billy also gets help from his wife, Mary Lynne, a registered nurse geriatric specialist who has a degree in business administration. He is utterly proud of her for her compassion to others and her tireless dedication to the aged and the afflicted.

Mary Lynne still works in geriatric nursing because of the shortage of nurses in the Victoria region.

She received the Governor General’s Caring Canadian Award in a ceremony held by both the Governor General and the Lieutenant Governor of British Columbia, for her work to help ease suffering among the Aids orphans in Africa.

Compassion and duty are endemic in the family of Billy and Mary Lynne Willbond.

One daughter, Dr. Bridget Veronica Stirling, also is a registered nurse, with a graduate degree in public health and a PhD degree. She is an epidemiologist and public health specialist who runs a huge nursing training program for 800 Muslim registered nurses in Libya.

Because of the war in Libya, Dr. Stirling currently is at the University of Victoria, teaching at Camosun College. She plans to return to Libya after the war.

The Willbond’s twin daughters, Mary Mavretic and Paula Lynne Littlejohn, both are registered nurses. They both served as army medics while they were in high school and university before becoming RNs.

The twins served in the Canadian Militia as medics through high school and university leading up to becoming registered nurses. They took training in summers at Camp Borden and also treated soldiers from Canada and the United Kingdom on summer deployments to Camp Wainwright and Camp Shilo.

Billy says that by the time they became registered nurses they had treated hundreds of soldiers for broken bones, sicknesses and had enormous practical experience in the field.

Both Mary and Paula hold graduate degrees and both teach in the RN program at the University of Victoria’s Camosun College.

Their oldest daughter, Sandra Anne Bast has a commerce degree. She has worked in Canadian news media with the Regina Leader and other publications.
Their father, Billy Willbond, because of circumstances of the times, left school after Grade 8.

The Willbonds have nine grandchildren.

*If a huge oil rendition of a member of the Canadian Airborne Regiment must be displayed in the Canadian War Museum in Ottawa to show the public what the men of the Regiment were really like - and still are - then it should be of Billy Willbond!*
Billy Willbond at age 17, on the day that he enlisted in the Canadian Army.