

'I kept it hidden': Retired soldier opens up about PTSD



Charles North, left, and David Byers share a laugh together while on the ground in Afghanistan in 2006. PHOTO: SUBMITTED

Two soldiers, two battles with post-traumatic stress

exclusive

SARAH SEELEY
TIMES & TRANSCRIPT

Charles North and Léo Bertrand had a lot in common.

Both from small towns, they each enlisted in the military following high school and were roommates while they trained together at CFB Shilo.

Deployed together to Afghanistan in 2006, they would each return changed by what they saw, and scarred by the death of a friend killed by a suicide bomber.

Both would later be diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder.

Their paths would split in 2008.

North, of Morden, Man., says he left the military after almost hitting a commanding officer.

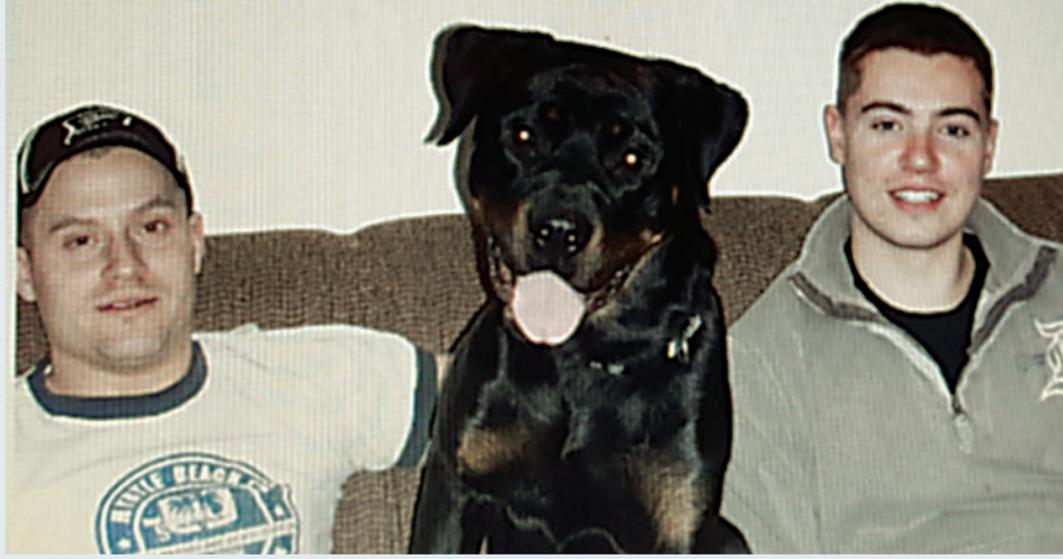
"That was horrible for me," he says when recalling the training exercise. But the incident pushed him to seek the help he needed to deal with his PTSD. Today, he is a civilian, the father of two and uses counselling to manage his PTSD.

Bertrand, from Memramcook, southeast of Moncton, lost his battle with PTSD earlier this year. He died of a suspected overdose in August. He was 33.

Jackie Fisher, Bertrand's sister, says she knew little about post-traumatic stress when her younger brother was diagnosed.

"If I would have known more, I would have done more," she says.

Bertrand's family shared his story to encourage others with PTSD to



Léo Bertrand, left, and his friend, Charles North with Léo's dog, Brennus. PHOTO: SUBMITTED

get help.

"We just don't want his death to be in vain," his mother Lynn Bertrand says. "We want the military to do more for their active soldiers and veterans who live with the scars of PTSD."

She says her son's behaviour changed dramatically following his two tours of duty in Afghanistan as he battled depression, suicidal thoughts and alcoholism.

Later diagnosed with PTSD, Léo would write about how he self-medicated to cope in a letter appealing his discharge from the military.

"I did not understand this disorder

or how to deal with it. I felt frightened and disconnected," he wrote. "As each day passed, I continued to suffer."

North says he and Bertrand bonded over travelling, long runs and parties.

"He was an adventurer," says North of his fellow infantryman.

In 2006, they climbed on their motorcycles and rode from Shilo, Man. to Las Vegas. On furlough, their plan was to experience all the U.S. open roads had to offer before they headed to Afghanistan for active duty.

On their road trip, they took in

the sights of the Grand Canyon and Yellowstone National Park in what North calls "a pretty crazy adventure."

Today, North no longer gets a rush when he takes his motorcycle out for a spin. PTSD has stolen his zest for life, he says.

"You lose a joy for things you used to like in life," he says.

Upon his return from Afghanistan, North says he was plagued by anxiety. He avoided crowded places and battled persistent nightmares.

He says he was "always looking for

3 bear spray incidents in 1 month in Moncton

MICHELLE BARTLEMAN
TIMES & TRANSCRIPT

In the wake of three bear spray incidents in Moncton in as many weeks, police say they have no reason to suspect any connection but can't rule it out.

"We can't ignore it, but we can't also think that they are," said Staff Sgt. Mario Fortin, of the Codiac RCMP detachment. "We just have to investigate each one of those incidents on its own, and then at the end, let the evidence show if they are related or not."

All three events occurred in the northwest area of the city, in the vicinity of Mountain Road and Mapleton Road.

The first was late on Oct. 14, when a 20-year-old Moncton man was allegedly sprayed while riding his bike around 11 p.m. on Gagne Crescent. Fortin said they are still trying to get more information, including whether any interaction occurred between the two parties before.

The following week, one street over, a group of five people, including three children between the ages of 12 and 17, were treated for minor injuries resulting when a home on Norton Crescent was sprayed around 9 p.m. on Oct. 24. Fortin said in this instance, "somebody walked by and sprayed through a window."

The latest occurrence was on Halloween evening last week, when five trick-or-treaters aged 13 to 17 were targeted at Birchmount School on Ayer Street, just south of Mountain Road. In this case, the group was out trick-or-treating, and took shelter at the school when it started to rain around 7 p.m. Fortin said two people approached the group, some words were exchanged, although they do not believe there was an altercation. At that point, one of the two deployed what RCMP believe to be bear spray, then fled.

In all three cases, the perpetrator sprayed a substance and then left the scene, meaning RCMP are unable to confirm that bear spray was used. But Fortin confirmed that none of the incidents were considered an accident.

"If it is bear spray, it was discharged intentionally," he said.

Fortin said that all three incidents

PLEASE SEE → SPRAY, A4

today

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'I kept it hidden': Retired soldier opens up about post-traumatic stress

PTSD →A1

threats, always looking for ways to stay safe."

Still serving in the military at the time, he says he was reluctant to tell anyone about what he was wrestling with inside.

North says he kept his PTSD hidden because he believed it wasn't good for his career.

"I looked down on having it and I think Léo was the same way," he says.

Bertrand returned to Afghanistan for a second tour in 2008 while North remained at the base in Shilo undergoing leadership training in preparation for a second mission.

It was during that training that he reached his breaking point, North says, and almost hit a sergeant while taking part in a multiple casualties exercise. He made the difficult decision to seek counselling from a psychologist shortly after that.

In 2009, North and his girlfriend found out they were expecting their first child.

The good news made North think of his friend and comrade Pte. David Byers, who was killed in a suicide bombing in Afghanistan in 2006. He died before seeing his baby daughter born.

Byers, who served with North and Bertrand, was one of four Canadian soldiers killed when a suicide bomber riding a bicycle detonated explosives near troops on foot patrol in the Panjwayi district of Kandahar.

"Everyone was impacted by it," North says of Byers' death.

The fallen soldier left behind his pregnant fiancée, Chantal Dionne.

Jane Byers, David's mother, says her son was looking forward to being a dad. Before he went overseas, he used to read stories to Dionne's stomach every night, she says.

His daughter, Layla, is now 10 years old and very much like her dad, she says. "She's very spunky and matter-of-fact and lots of fun."

Byers never got the chance to meet his child. North says he couldn't bear the thought of the same ending to his story: "I wanted my daughter to have a dad," he says.

North served two three-year contracts with the Canadian Armed Forces and was granted a voluntary release in 2009, he says. He then took a civilian job on the base, before moving on to work at a grain elevator.

His transition to civilian life was smoother than many, North says. While he still struggles with depression and anxiety stemming from PTSD, he uses the Veterans Affairs Operational Stress Injury clinic near his workplace and phones his counsellor when he needs to talk. He also participated in a veterans support group.

Alexandra Heber, a Veterans Affairs psychiatrist, says a peer-based support system is beneficial for military personnel with PTSD.

"They've walked the walk.... They're the best ambassadors for mental health care," she says, speaking generally.

The Canadian Armed Forces declined comment on what counselling services North received, saying "the mental health services that were possibly offered and received by the members are protected under privacy laws."

In 2013, Statistics Canada conducted a



Léo Bertrand, left, and Charles North had many adventures together as members of the Canadian Armed Forces. Before heading overseas to Afghanistan in 2006, they took their motorcycles on a trip through the United States. PHOTO: SUBMITTED

Canadian Forces Mental Health Survey to estimate the presence of PTSD in serving personnel. The data collection organization interviewed 8,200 CAF members, assessing symptoms of current and past PTSD. The survey included those who sought care and those who did not.

Of those surveyed, 11.1 per cent met criteria for PTSD at some point in their lives and 5.3 per cent met the diagnostic criteria at the time of the survey or over the previous year.

The questionnaire was developed by Statistics Canada in collaboration with the Department of National Defence to collect information about the mental health status and the need for mental health services in the Canadian Forces.

The margin of error was estimated to be no more than 0.7 per cent for regular members and reservists and 1.0 per cent for non-deployed regular members, says Scott Perrie, chief of the Special Surveys Division for Stats Canada.

Symptoms of PTSD, according to Veterans Affairs Canada, include distressing memories or images of an incident, nightmares and flashbacks, anger and irritability, avoiding talk of the event, distance from loved ones, sleep disturbance and constant alertness.

Scott Maxwell, executive director of Wounded Warriors, a veterans service organization offering programs for wounded veterans, military personnel and first responders, says soldiers are still hesitant to seek help even though the stigma around PTSD within the military is lifting.

"The problem with mental health injuries and illnesses is it often leads to isolation and depression and anxiety," he says. Those are all factors that can keep people from getting help, Maxwell says.

He stresses the importance of military

personnel asking for help.

"We can't get to them if they don't reach out," he says.

North says he has been on and off medication for his PTSD but, for him, talking to a counsellor is the best coping mechanism when he gets overwhelmed by depression or suicidal thoughts.

"That's when you have to ramp up the counselling and the effort to deal with PTSD instead of always putting it on the backburner and letting things build up," he says.

North says he didn't have to be put on a waiting list to get counselling, although he did wait several months to get a place in a peer support group.

Now a father of two, North says keeping a busy schedule and caring for his children motivate him to continue counselling.

"They hold me accountable for my actions," he says. "That's the important thing for me - being a good father."

Bertrand left the military in September 2009 after a second tour of Afghanistan, but missed being a soldier, his family says. He re-enrolled at CFB Galetown in May 2010 and was posted to the Infantry School Combat Training Centre.

First diagnosed with PTSD in 2010, that diagnosis would be updated to severe PTSD in 2014, according to a military document detailing medical advice for Bertrand. The document shows he was also diagnosed with depression and alcohol dependence.

The Department of National Defence's website states that while some personnel with PTSD remain in the armed forces with modified duties, "in cases where symptoms persist, when the medical follow-up requirements preclude certain deployments, or when there is significant risk of recurrence if re-exposed to military-related stressors, a medical release is likely."

Fisher, Bertrand's sister, says her brother used alcohol to numb the pain of flashbacks, depression and suicidal thoughts. He was haunted by memories of bloodied children and gunfire, she says.

Following his second impaired driving charge and the assault of a neighbour, both of which court documents show he pleaded guilty to, Bertrand served jail time, was deemed "unfit for service" by the military and discharged.

Bertrand would appeal that dismissal, asking that it be converted to a medical discharge, documents show.

His second appeal, his mother, Lynn, says, was processed in the spring of this year before his jail sentence.

Bertrand's family believes he died of an accidental overdose. His mother says they were told at the hospital he had "street drugs" in his system, but his parents say they have yet to learn the official cause of their son's death. It could be up to six months before autopsy results are released.

North was devastated by the news of Bertrand's death.

He says the reality of Léo's death hit him as he flew to New Brunswick to be a pallbearer for the funeral.

"I was depressed. Léo was the guy I was closest with and he was a great friend," he says.

In his letter appealing his discharge, Bertrand recounted his struggle to get counselling for his PTSD and alcoholism. While he received in-patient treatment for both disorders, he wrote that upon his release, the wait to see a military addictions counsellor on base was upwards of four months.

"In addition to this timeframe, currently 8 months later, I still have not been

Supports and services

Léo Bertrand's family shared his struggle with post traumatic stress disorder in the hopes that others fighting a similar battle would get the help they need.

Cpt. Evelynne Lemire, a spokeswoman for the Canadian Armed Forces, provided a list of programs and services available to military members and veterans as part of the Surgeon General's mental health strategy, launched in 2013.

- Road to Mental Readiness, psycho-education and mental resiliency training.

- Canadian Forces Member Assistance Program, a 24/7 toll-free telephone advisory and referral service for all CAF personnel and their families. The service can provide short-term, confidential, external counselling. 1-800-268-7708. Veterans Affairs Assistance Service 1-800-268-7708.

- Operational Stress Injury Social Support, a peer-based support program for CAF members, veterans and their families who are coping with an operational stress injury 1-800-883-6094.

- PTSD Coach Canada, which is a free mobile app that can help individuals and their families manage the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder.

- Spiritual counselling and support with military chaplains. The chaplains are on-call 24 hours a day to support members in need and provide support and advice to the chain of command and care providers 1-866-502-2203.

offered an opportunity to go on an addictions program through the CF to assist in my recovery," he wrote.

"I am not putting sole blame on the Canadian Forces as I have made the choice to self-medicate," he wrote, adding he doesn't believe the military has enough addictions counsellors, psychologists and psychiatrists to deal with soldiers' issues.

Speaking generally, Jennifer Eckersley, a spokeswoman for the Canadian Armed Forces Health Services, says they work with external providers throughout New Brunswick and P.E.I. to minimize the wait times. She confirmed there are staff shortages for mental health services in Galetown, especially bilingual positions and those that require trauma processing.

North says his counselling was done in English. Lynn Bertrand says her son was trying to get counselling in French.

Maxwell says Wounded Warriors services are complementary to those of the armed forces and Veterans Affairs, and fill the gaps in the military's mental health-care system while military personnel are waiting to see a counsellor or medical professional.

"There are gaps in the system that can drive people away and leave them to get really frustrated and feeling isolated and alone," he says.

Heber, the Veterans Affairs psychiatrist, says there are also delays for veterans seeking medical and mental health services after they leave the military. She says the paperwork can be confusing for military personnel and can deter people from accessing benefits and services.

The policy division of Veterans Affairs is looking at wait times and simplifying the paperwork, she says.

On Oct. 5, the federal government announced the Joint Personnel Suicide

Prevention Strategy which pledges to improve the services and support available to military personnel and veterans in hopes of reducing the number of suicides among those who have served in uniform.

A new Canadian Armed Forces Transition Group will also be established to assist all members with the transition to post-military life, according to the "Strong, Secure, Engaged" defence policy announced in June.

Heber suggests military members wanting to access services consult with Veterans Affairs and start filling out paperwork before leaving their post.

"That way the paperwork is done and the assessment's already done," she says.

Veterans Affairs offers several mental-health services for members leaving the military, including a 24/7 helpline for veterans and their families and peer support service groups.

At her brother's funeral, Fisher was told about service dogs provided to veterans to help them cope with the symptoms of PTSD.

She wishes her brother, a life-long dog lover, had been paired with one of the specially trained canines. "That is something that would have helped him so much," she says.

The dogs are a companion for veterans who feel isolated, says Maxwell.

"Dogs bring people together," he says.

Medric Cousineau says he was one of the first Canadian military members with PTSD to receive a service dog.

The former Royal Canadian Air Force captain from Nova Scotia says he volunteered to be lowered out of a helicopter to rescue injured American fishermen off the coast of Newfoundland during a raging storm in 1986. He was awarded the Star of Courage for his bravery during that rescue, according to the Mental Health Association of Nova Scotia website.

Cousineau says he developed PTSD in the wake of that incident, and had night terrors about the rescue at 4:30 a.m. every day.

With the help of the Caen Branch of the Royal Canadian Legion in Eastern Passage, N.S., he was paired with Thai, a yellow Lab service dog.

PTSD dogs stay by their owner's side and are trained to sense anxiety and anger. They signal their owner when they detect stress to prevent them from having panic attacks and flashbacks.

"She's my early warning mechanism for a lot of things," Cousineau says.

With Thai around, Cousineau's night terrors became less frequent, he says.

Before he got Thai, Cousineau says he spent most of his time in a wood shed, isolated from his friends and family. His service dog helped him venture into crowded places and return to activities he enjoyed like hiking and fishing.

"I've been able to get back outside and get immersed in the outdoors again," he says. "You get to reconnect with your family and your community."

But there is a waiting list for the animals because of the high demand and the cost to train the dogs - about \$15,000 and approximately two years of training, Maxwell says, noting Labs are a common breed for service dogs.

Cousineau helped to found Paws For Thought, an organization that raises money to pair service dogs with veterans and first responders.

"I really don't care what a service dog costs," he says. "The people who need them have already paid the price."

This is the second in a two-part series.



Former RCAF Captain Medic Cousineau and Thai, his PTSD service dog.

PHOTO: SUBMITTED