

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, good evening.

First my congratulations to Mr. Southam for winning the Vimy award.

As well, I'd like to tip my hat to Chris Wattie, of the National Post, who received an honourable mention this year. I had the pleasure of sailing with Chris to the Gulf of Mexico on HMCS Toronto in September for the Hurricane Katrina relief effort. One day, the crew let us join in the small arms drill on the flightdeck. Chris and I were standing side-by-side, each holding a loaded MP5 sub machinegun. If ever there was a front line of the Toronto newspaper wars, that was it. But we both survived and I'd happily go abroad with Chris again.

Thank you to the Conference of Defence Associations and the Canadian Defence and Foreign Affairs Institute for this award. It is a great honour and a delightful surprise. As a journalist who covers Canada's military, it is humbling to receive an award named after Ross Munro, a wartime journalist who set the high bar in the field.

I wouldn't be up here without the help of a great many people, starting with my wife Lori. Fortunately, there haven't been any six-month deployments. But there have been enough late nights, last-minute trips and cancelled vacations to test anyone's patience. So to her, my son David and daughter Alison, thank you.

Thank you to Susan Delacourt, the Ottawa bureau chief of the Toronto Star, for letting me take a break from covering the politics of the Hill to go off and wander military bases. I sometimes feel like I'm playing hooky. And thank you to the Toronto Star for understanding that the work of Canada's military is an important story at many levels, and for devoting people and money to cover it.

Thank you to the public affairs officers in the Canadian Forces for answering my endless questions. They are in many ways, unsung heroes. I don't think the other military men and women realize how hard these people work to get the message out.

During my time on the beat, I've been able to tap the expertise of many academics and former military leaders who have always been happy to explain the ins and outs of the armed forces. Their knowledge

has helped immensely and I thank them all for taking time to chat, people like Alain Pellerin, Richard Gimblett, Lewis MacKenzie, Martin Shadwick.

Looking back, I've had some wonderful opportunities on the beat this year.

The highlight has to be a journey to The Netherlands in the spring, accompanying veterans who were going back for the 60th anniversary of VE-Day. Staring out across the Canadian War Cemetery in Groesbeek on a drizzly May morning, where I saw only tombstones, they saw old friends, colleagues, buddies. For me, the trip put the tremendous sacrifices of their generation in perspective.

At other points during the year, I had the chance to crawl in the dirt at Petawawa, sail on the navy ships to Louisiana, kick the tires on Hercules transports in Trenton. Not too hard, since the planes are 40 years old.

Along the way, I was reminded about the many great stories there are to be told about the Canadian Forces, the work it does, the people who serve.

I'd like to leave the senior leadership with one thought. I encourage you to let these stories be told. For all the stories we did tell this year, inevitably, there were others you didn't get to read, because of red tape or lingering mistrust of the media.

I'll wrap up with just one example of where things went right this year. I owe a special thanks to Commander Stuart Moors, commander of HMCS Toronto. He welcomed Chris and I onboard his frigate in September for a trip to the Gulf of Mexico. He gave us free run of the ship and set a tone of cooperation that was embraced by the sailors and officers, and made our job easy.

The forces have made good progress when it comes to openness and transparency. I think it's critical that trend continue in the year ahead, to ensure that Canadians are informed about the work of the military as it takes on a greater profile in Canada's foreign policy and as troops take on a more dangerous role in Afghanistan.

Thank you very much.