

Storozuk patrols 31-year border of conflict

In one of the hottest military zones in the world, Cpl. Jana Storozuk's job is to keep things cool.

Born and raised in La Ronge, Storozuk joined the Canadian military six years ago. She is currently halfway through a six-month deployment, her first one overseas, in the Golan Heights region along the border of Syria and Israel. Storozuk and nearly 1,000 peacekeepers — Canadian, Austrian, Polish, Slovak and Japanese — are assigned to the area as part of the United Nations' Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF), with the task of maintaining a 31-year-old ceasefire between the two nations. She is assigned to Camp Ziouani, on the Israeli side of the 5-km long, 1- to 1.5 km wide zone called the "Area of Separation".

Aside from her duties protecting border security, Storozuk also serves in a professional capacity as a refrigeration mechanical systems technician. In Canada, her work involves temperature and humidity control for base kitchens, ice rinks, server/telecom rooms and the like; overseas, she said last week during a short trip home to La Ronge, her services are even more in demand.

"We're one of the highly sought after trades, because you get over to the Middle East and it's hot there," Storozuk said. "Everybody wants air conditioning, whether it be comfort cooling or mandatory for equipment."

Storozuk is the only woman in the Canadian military working in this trade — a fact that no doubt caught the attention of one Edward Rice, a fellow officer and refrigeration technician. Rice and Storozuk met two years ago during a professional training session, and soon fell in love. Although he was posted in Ontario and she in Cold Lake, Alberta, the couple maintained a long-distance relationship that resulted in their wedding Feb. 17. Rice, who had taken leave from his posting at Camp Ziouani to get married, headed out again Feb. 18. His new bride followed him Feb. 28 — her 27th birthday — leaving her 10-year-old



Photos courtesy of Jana Storozuk

Jana Storozuk is stationed on the border between Israel and Syria along with peacekeepers from Japan, Poland, Slovakia and Australia. She has found the experience to be an eye-opener. "That was shocking to me," Storozuk said. "You think at six years old or three years old, they're young and innocent, but they're not."

daughter Mallory in La Ronge with family.

Although the newlyweds had to stay in separate quarters (just 20 ft. apart), they were able to rely on one another not only professionally but also for moral and emotional support. Since Rice is now back in Canada, having finished his deployment, Storozuk will face the pressures of being entirely separated from family members as she serves out the remainder of her deployment.

She regrets missing out on parts of her daughter's life, like her birthday in March, and although she has taught Mallory well about coping with separation, it hurts to hear words like "I'm getting used to you leaving anyway" coming from her daughter's lips. Although she is signed up for a 20-year contract with the army, she's still not sure if she'll be able to get all the way through it.

Working along the Israel-Syria border has been tough, Storozuk acknowledges. "It is a great thing to get out there and actually see and experience (these cultures), but it's also hard to understand why they do some of the things they do."

She doesn't like the way women are considered second-class in Muslim-dominated Syria, for example, and during stops in Israel would sometimes find herself longing for a cheeseburger — decidedly non-kosher food, and thus not served at the McDonald's in Jerusalem, the city where she and Rice honeymooned in March.

She also finds it difficult to understand the racial hatred between the two countries. Growing up in La Ronge, Storozuk recalls once being approached by a native classmate. "She told me how I killed her buffalo and took her land... and I'm like, 'I did what?!'" While the two girls are friends even now, Storozuk feels that racial messages like this are passed on from parent to child, and she has seen the extremes of this in Israel and Syria.

"Thirty years this (border conflict) has been going on, and there's a lot of people that grow up not knowing any different but all the hatred between the two," she said. Even little kids have absorbed this hostility. While she was in Jerusalem, an Arab toddler began following the U.N. vehicle, crying. The

group stopped, and while the tour guide was talking to the toddler, a six-year-old Jewish girl walked by and said, "Oh, it doesn't matter, just let her die. She's Arab anyway."

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Storozuk has also been disturbed by the economic contrasts between the two countries — third-world Syria, where homes are built of rock and sheet metal, children herd sheep down the streets and a blowing garbage bag is sarcastically referred to as "the national flower"; and Israel, with its fast food restaurants, cellphones and fancy cars. The peacekeepers are taught to stay neutral and impartial, but it's tough to turn a blind eye to a little Syrian begging for water, and sometimes a bottle or two does end up passing out of Storozuk's hands into that of a child.

"I've got to turn my mind off and try not to relate it to my child, because once I start doing that, emotions will get the best of you, and it's not a

place you want to be breaking down emotionally," she said. Instead, like her daughter, Storozuk finds ways of coping: a hard run, a phone call, music in her headphones, a commitment to doing her job, and the knowledge that she's making a difference. Plus, in three months, she will be going home.

And when she does, her husband, daughter and parents will be waiting to welcome her back. "There's definitely a certain amount of pride (in what she's doing)," said Storozuk's mom Karen.

Even so, she worries. "When you hear of things happening in Israel... you take it to heart, because your child is there," she said. "No matter how old they get, they're still your baby."

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