

The 'KAF Mom'

When the plane took off from Kandahar Airfield (KAF) en route to Kabul on July 7, 2011, Rana Picone breathed a sigh of relief. On board were some of Canada's top-ranking civilians in Afghanistan, who were leaving from KAF for the final time. With its departure, Picone and a handful of other staff boarded their own flight, bound for Dubai and beyond.

It had been an exhausting, emotional time for the last Canadian whole-of-government team finishing a one-year posting in Kandahar. But the experience was made all the more bearable—even pleasant—with Picone among them.

As the mission's "common services officer," Picone supported some 70 Canadian civilians stationed at and visiting Kandahar. Her administrative duties at KAF included looking after their accommodations, protective equipment, ID cards and meal passes.

Unofficially, there were the morale-boosting doughnuts and birthday cakes she regularly sent by convoy to the Kandahar Provincial Reconstruction Team (KPRT) forward operating base; her relationship advice and stern pep-talks; and her networking with the Canadian Forces to secure supplementary rations.

The military base, with a population of 30,000, was noisy, hot and disorienting for even the most seasoned on the team, recalls David Foxall, who was director of the development program for CIDA. "Yet Rana would pick us up, dust us off, and, most important, she would listen to us," he says.

Normally, at such a stressful post, a number of people would have cut their time in the mission short—but no one did at the Kandahar Airfield. Foxall attributes this largely to Picone's compassion and concern, an influence he calls "the Rana factor." To other members of the mission, she was known as the "KAF mom."

Picone, 42, a non-rotational administrative assistant (AS) who applied for a secondment to the Kandahar position "because I love challenges," found many at KAF.

"You're away from your family, you're in a hardship environment, there's lots of changes, demands, long hours—you need to be in a place where you feel safe," says Picone, who fled her native Lebanon for

Canada amid the civil war in 1990 and joined DFAIT four years ago. "At KAF, I just did what needed to be done," she says. "I did my job."

Nonetheless, "small gestures" and having "ears to listen" were important. "We had to bond as a family to survive it," explains Picone, now an AS at Canada's mission in Colombo, Sri Lanka, where she's been joined by her husband and two teenaged sons.

Shelley Whiting, who served as a senior civilian advisor at KAF and is now deputy head of Canada's mission in Kabul, says that while Picone "has a great heart," she was also a tough advocate in the active war zone. "She does not shy away from speaking truth to power."

Whiting says that when Tim Martin, Representative of Canada in Kandahar, suggested recognizing the final group's efforts, Picone seized the idea of making commemorative plaques, which were given out during a ceremony at the KPRT. "It was a great Canadian group hug."

The plaques were well deserved, Foxall reflects, adding that the "stress was extreme" in the last rotation. "We were at the endgame; we had to deliver on all the benchmarks and promises."

Picone remembers that the days were "jam-packed" until the transfer of authority to the local government on July 7. She was thankful to see the Kabul flight leaving with Martin and Bill Crosbie, then-ambassador to Afghanistan, safely aboard. "I thought, 'Thank God, now we can go.'"

Some Canadian civilians remain in Kandahar, she notes, with duties including monitoring the Dahla Dam and irrigation system, which Canada helped rehabilitate.

"We still have family there," she adds. "I worry about them all the time."



Rana Picone driving a taxi in Kabul - photo: Joumana Hanna/DFAIT