NEVER-ENDING LEARNING

MAJOR SAMSON YOUNG

Major Samson Young is a first-generation Canadian who immigrated to Canada as one of those thousands of refugees from South-East Asia. He is a signals officer (RCCS) who joined the Canadian Armed Forces in 1990 and has been to two peacekeeping missions and two taskings (one in Canada and one at SHAPE (NATO)): 2006 in Bosnia, 2013 in D.R. Congo, 2014 in North West Territories and 2016 in Belgium. He has lived in three countries in three different political systems, from monarchy to communist in Laos, to monarchy in Thailand and now in a democratic system in Canada.

GROWING UP IN LAOS

The American foreign policy began soon after WWII ended and lasted until the early 1970s with an attempt to contain the Communist expansion into South-East Asian nations, namely, Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam. The American involvement in the civil war in Vietnam that lasted 30 years is also known as "The Ten Thousand Day War."

During the civil war, and before I was even born, my family moved frequently over the 1950s and 1960s, whenever the civil wars in Cambodia and Laos were approaching close to where they lived. I was the second youngest of seven siblings and was born in Laos. Due to poverty, my parents could only afford to send my sister, along with my younger brother and me, to a local school at a much older age than most of our classmates. At one point, my parents sent me far away to live with a Laotian family so I could attend a Laotian public school because it cost less. Only after my parents' financial situation had slightly improved could they afford to send me back to the same Chinese language school that I had attended a couple of years prior.

Although we lived only a few kilometres away from Paksé, a town situated on a shore of the Mekong River in Southern Laos, our house had no electricity or running water. At a very young age, one of my after-school chores was to fetch water from a nearby stream and transport about 200 litres to

the house. I would then water a small vegetable and herb garden we had at the back of our house. It was also my job to feed the chickens, ducks, swans, pigs, rabbits my parents raised as well as our pet dogs and cats. After supper I would do my homework under a gas lantern and sometimes just under flickering candlelight, while at the same time fighting off mosquitos, which were a constant nuisance. We were only able to enjoy electricity and running water when my parents later moved into town in my early teenage years. I recall I had a very normal and happy childhood though life was hard. I could hear the government aircraft and artillery round explosions day and night some 50 km. away and I saw soldiers marching past our house toward the battle areas daily.



Octorber 1969 in Paksé. Samson is the tallest boy, with his young brother, his nephew and three of his four elder sisters.

Laos came under Communist rule in 1975.

LIVING AS A REFUGEE IN A LAO REFUGEE CAMP IN THE TOWN OF UBON RATCHATHANI, THAILAND

After one of my elder sisters was released from a "re-education" camp and because we were burdened with food shortages and many other difficulties, my parents decided it was time for us to move again. On this occasion, we left the country for good, with much uncertainty for our future and constant worry of what would become of us in a new county.

To increase the chances of our family's survival, my parents decided that we should go in separate groups. My third elder sister and I were the first to flee with a paid guide, right after midnight. We walked barefoot to minimize the noise we made, under a clear autumn sky that was windy and cold. Dogs were barking along our path as we were led toward the shore where a small fishing boat awaited us. We crossed the Mekong River in that tiny fishing boat with almost 30 people riding in it. Some were carrying their newborn babies who were drugged to prevent them from crying if they suddenly woke up, since that could result in us being arrested by the border guards and being sent to a concentration camp. In this tiny fishing boat, we held our breath and headed for the shores of Thailand.

Fortunately, a few months later, the rest of the



January 1979 in the Ubon Lao Refugee Camp. Samson is the boy in red.

family members arrived safely, and we were together again and lived in a Lao Refugee Camp (LRC) just outside the town of Ubon Ratchathani, situated in the North-East of Thailand.

Life in the Ubon L.R.C. was tough, as we could not really work legally. Despite this, many of us did find work in the town and had to return to the camp before 6 p.m. each day. Although I was too young to realize or share the burden with my parents, they always worried about our future (they were not sure if we would be able to go to any other country to start a new life, or be allowed to remain and live in Thailand, or worse, be sent back to Laos). We lived in this refugee camp for two and half years before we were interviewed, medically screened and accepted to immigrate to Canada, among thousands of others, including refugees from Vietnam, who were known widely as the "boat people."

We arrived and settled in Ottawa in September of 1980. It was the first time we saw and experienced the beautiful autumn colours. Since that moment, every year when the autumn season arrives, I am transported through time and space to that very moment when we were looking through the glass windows of the Voyageur bus leaving the military base of Longue-Pointe Québec for our new hometown in Ottawa.



April 1984. First family photo in Canada. Samson in blue.

SECOND CHANCE FOR LIFE IN CANADA

From the moment we arrived in Ottawa and lived in our rental apartment and later in a house, my parents and older sisters sighed a breath of relief that we were legally settling in Canada, this time

for good. After a year or less of schooling in the ESL (English as Second Language) classes, both my sisters started working as seamstresses, making women's undergarments in a local company. I decided to attend a local high school (Fisher Park), starting at grade 10 but with very little English fluency. I said to myself that I would progress faster if I was immersed and studying among other Canadian students. In retrospect, I made the right decision.

After ten years of schooling (high school then Computer Engineering Technologist studies at Algonquin College), I started working as a computer programmer in a small company for several months and came to the realization that I wanted something more in life than just working a 9 – 5 job. I wanted a life that would push me out of my comfort zone, that would allow me to do something challenging, something none of my friends or family members thought was a wise idea – joining the CAF (Canadian Armed Forces)!

LIFE IN THE CANADIAN ARMED FORCES

On Dec. 18, 1990, I was officially sworn in to be one of the Queen's soldiers to serve my newly adopted country. I would start my basic military training at the CFOCS (Canadian Forces Officer Candidate School) at the CFB (Canadian Forces Base) Chilliwack in British Columbia on Jan. 5, 1991. After passing my 13 long weeks of basic training, I was sent to Canadian Forces Language School in St.-Jean-sur-Richelieu, QC for a seven-month-long French language training course.

I finished by military Communications trade training to become one of the signals officers at C.F.B. Kingston in 1994 and started my first job as a junior troop commander at the 1CDHSR (1st Canadian Division Headquarters and Signals Regiment) in 1995.



January 1991. Basic Military Training Chilliwack, BC. Samson in front row, second from the left.

Through the almost 30 years of my military career, I have done many things that I could never have imagined before my life in Canada and in the CAF. In 1995, I led a team on the Nijmegen March in the Netherlands, in which we carried 10 kg of weight in our rucksacks and walked 40 km per day for four consecutive days. I loved the challenge so much I did the march again in 1999. In 1998, at 37 years old, I was the oldest among 50 plus soldiers to jump from a military aircraft and thereby earned my jump wings as a basic parachutist. With the parachutist training serving as a confidence booster, I learned to snowboard at the age of 39 years old. A year later, I became a CASI (Canadian Association of Snowboard Instructors) certified Level 1 snowboard instructor and have been teaching this winter outdoor sport ever since. From 1999 to 2003, I designed the first logos for

Canadian Army, Navy and Air Force sportswear (t-shirts, sweatshirts, pants shorts, jackets, baseball caps, etc.), which were sold in Canex stores on all military bases across Canada. These designs helped influence what Canex stores sell today, with a huge selection of various logos/designs on CAF-themed merchandise. In 2003, I was very fortunate to be selected as one of the 29 members to take part in the military adventure exercise as part of the centennial celebration[1], and we cycled from Victoria, B.C., to St. John's, NL, with a total distance of more than 8,000 km in 59 days.

In 2006, I went on to my first six-month-long peacekeeping mission under EUFOR (European Union Forces) in Bosnia and Hercegovina. In 2008, I was one among more than 30 Canadian volunteers to assist our athletes, their family members and friends during the Summer Olympic Games in Beijing, China. In 2012, because I could speak Mandarin fluently, I was chosen to accompany the CDS (Chief of the Defence Staff) at the time, General Walter Natynczyk, during the CDS Delegation's visit to China military bases. In 2013, I went on to my second peacekeeping mission, this time with the UN (United Nations), to the Democratic Republic of Congo. I was also very happy to be part of the operation NANOOK, Canadian cross-departmental exercise, in the North where I had an opportunity to see and appreciate the amazing Northern Lights in Yellowknife, NT. In 2016, I was very proud to be selected to work as one of the three staff officers at the NMR (National Military Representative) office at SHAPE (Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe) for six months. SHAPE is the operational arms as NATO is the political entity. Both are located in Belgium.



June 2003 on Signals Hill, NL. After having cycled 8,000 kms with 29 military signalers from Victoria, BC.

"Being brought up in one culture and growing up in another has allowed me to combine the eastern and western ways of thinking, and they have served as guides for me."

I believe that the military has given me a sense of purpose and the confidence to pursue anything I set my mind to. At my current age, I am still learning new things, gaining new experience and new

1 Regarding the founding of the Military Communications Branch, the Canadian military was at that time the first in the British Empire to have an independent Military Communications Branch. It was connected to the military engineer trade.

perspectives at each and every opportunity that presents itself to me. I leant to ride a motorcycle in 2014 and I rode it across Canada and camped along the way, from Ottawa to Fort McMurray, AB then to Vancouver, BC and back to Ottawa. In 2017 and again in 2018, I rode out from Ottawa once again, crossing all five Eastern provinces to the Viking historic site near the town of L'Anse aux Meadows, NL.

WHAT THE FUTURE MAY HOLD

My goal in life is to learn at least one new skill or do at least one new activity each year. I plan to learn to fly and obtain a single engine pilot license; learn to speak ten languages (including the six official languages of the UN), aiming to achieve a functional level in each; play musical drums; fly an airplane and/or walk across Canada. Whether I will be able to achieve all this or not will depend on how good my health remains and how long I live. For all these opportunities in the past, the present and the future I owe a profound gratitude to Canada.

Being brought up in one culture and growing up in another has allowed me to combine the eastern and western ways of thinking, and they have served as guides for me: A Chinese proverb I learned many decades ago states: "Continue learning into one's old age." As Henry Ford once said: "Whether you think you can, or you think you can't – you're right."