

No need to 'soldier on': supports for military families

by Jennine Wilson



Each year, on November 11th, I spend the day thinking about my father and my uncle Ted. I never met Ted, he was killed in action during World War II. My father survived, though he was seriously wounded.

In my childhood home, my father had a wall of memories: the picture of his regiment, a picture of Ted in uniform, portraits of military leaders, and his shovel. He never spoke about his experiences, but every D-Day, he called his surviving comrades – his military family, the people he could share his thoughts and feelings with.

My father relied on his military family for connection and understanding. When he returned home from the war, he received some support services. However, he did not seek any other form of support when he got diagnosed and died of cancer at home. I believe he was a 'soldier on' kind of man, someone who believed those services weren't meant for him.

A story from the Summit

This year, before November 11th, I attended a session on Military and Veteran Caregiving at the CCCE Caregiver Summit. One story in particular made me think of my dad.

Retired colonel Russell Munn, one of five panellists, spoke about becoming a caregiver for his wife, Lucie, through 11 months of intensive chemotherapy. At the time, he was in service for 25 years, during which his family moved 20 times, before posting in Winnipeg. Far away from either home: his family was on the East coast, hers – in Montreal. Disconnected from traditional social network, they leaned on the military family, who stepped up with compassion. They changed his role, so he wasn't on the road the usual 200 days of the year, and continuously supported both him and his wife. Lucie ultimately entered remission, and stood up from the audience, strong and smiling, at the end of the speech.

Specifics of military caregiving

Many military families find themselves in a similar position to the Munns. Moving a lot, which limits the social circle to the military family. Often placed in remote locations, miles away from another town. Dealing with high levels of stress, as risk is a daily part of being in the military. In many cases, being both caregivers and care recipients, living with PTSD and/or service-related disabilities.

One of the panellists shared that "spouses are assumed to become caregivers," often without training. While military life relies on an economy of care – with family caregivers at its core – supports were not always designed with the caregiver in mind.

Thankfully, that is starting to change.

Resources for military and veteran families

Across Canada, [Military Family Services](#) offer a range of support for families, including resources on employment, parenting, health and education.

Their 24/7 [Family Information line \(1-800-866-4546\)](#), connects caregivers to compassionate counsellors, who help families navigate whatever military life brings.

[Veterans Affairs Canada \(VAC\)](#) offers programs that many families don't hear about early enough:

- [Veterans Independence Program](#), helping veterans age safely at home,
- [VAC Assistance Line \(1-800-268-7708\)](#) for mental health support,
- [OSIS peer support](#) for both veterans and families,
- [DVA caregiver benefits](#) that acknowledge the often unseen labour so many provide.

Tools like [My VAC Account](#) make it easier to find and apply for these services, though many caregivers still need help navigating them.

[The Royal Canadian Legion Service](#) officers can provide that help.

Military and veteran families are strong, resilient and resourceful. But strength doesn't mean we need to 'soldier on' alone.

I hope we continue to move towards recognizing those who walk beside the uniform as the key to the large military family's wellbeing.

And I hope more caregivers access the support that is in place.