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NEWS STORY
By Paul Heinbecker

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Berry Knew Diplomacy Has Its Risks*

The tragic death of Glyn Berry while on a mission to help some of the most destitute people on earth is a heartbreaking reminder that a career in the Foreign Service can be anything but routine. Glyn could and did succeed at desk jobs in Ottawa and in diplomatic assignments in Washington and at the Canadian Permanent Mission to the United Nations in New York, as I witnessed first-hand. His were important tasks in those places and they had direct consequences for Canadian interests, not the least for the reform of international peace-keeping and peace-building that he promoted at the UN. But Glyn understood better than most that there is more to the Foreign Service career than conferences, board rooms and interdepartmental meetings, where the risks run are rarely more serious than a sneer from an overwrought political staffer or a scowl from an overworked senior official. His admirable qualities of compassion, commitment and courage drew him beyond the routine and the safe, to places where the job of advancing Canadian interests and representing Canadian values was more challenging and, as his untimely death showed, more dangerous.

Not every Foreign Service assignment is so risky, of course, but few are nine-to-five in character, either, and all go well beyond the cocktails and canapés cartoon that some Ottawa critics and cynics have drawn. To be sure, there really are diplomatic dinners to be endured and long-winded toasts to be tolerated but for most Foreign Service officers these are means not ends. The Foreign Service tries to represent what is best about our country to the world, to befriend or at least to get to know those who can affect Canadian interests, to shape attitudes towards Canada, to provide Ottawa with a Canadian perspective of the issues and dynamics at play in a given country, and to advise on how to respond. In places like Afghanistan and Pakistan, where Glyn was in his element, there is no substitute for getting out of the office and meeting with village elders, regional authorities, municipal politicians and local people if you want to understand and affect what is happening. Just as predictions of the demise of nation states is proving wildly premature, so is the dispensability of professional Foreign Services and the role they play

While the objectives of Canada's Foreign Service have remained relatively constant over the years, the means have not. The job is changing in an age of international business and NGO networks, of web-based collaboration and Blackberries, of satellite television and discount travel. The idea of Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRT) in Afghanistan, in which Glyn was engaged, is a case in point. The PRT utilizes military personnel, development officials and Foreign Service officers to bring security, economic assistance

* Title chosen by editors

and rebuilding to the farther reaches of Afghanistan where the writ of the Kabul government scarcely runs.

In a region of warlords, drug barons and religious extremists, the PRT attempts to blend military operations, humanitarian relief, institutional development and economic activity. The team's work is as crucial for alleviating the suffering of Afghans as it is dangerous for its members.

Effectiveness in such extraordinary circumstances demands extraordinary people with commensurate professional qualifications and personal qualities. (Glyn Berry, himself, had a Ph.D. and had passed the challenging Foreign Service entry exam that every year thousands write, but just scores pass.) It takes strength of character to forsake the familiar for the unknown. It takes considerable adaptability to play the "Ottawa game" one day, and to function effectively in the back of beyond the next. It takes courage to run the risks of a dangerous assignment, of which there are many in these days of fragile and failed states. It takes refined judgement and cultural sensitivity to give sound advice. It takes very supportive and sacrificing spouses, who can make lives far from parents, friends and day-care centres, more often than not at the sacrifice of their own careers and, frequently, of the financial security of more normal two-salary households. To be sure there are psychic returns from a Foreign Service life in the form of cultures learned, of adventures experienced, of people helped and, to paraphrase Glyn's own words, of having a hell of a good story to tell at the end of it.

None of this is to say that it is on Foreign Service personnel alone that Providence has bestowed such admirable qualities. Nor is it to suggest that the Foreign Service officers be issued pedestals the easier for others to admire them on. It is to say that the work our Foreign Service is doing on our behalf is important and difficult, the sacrifices they are making are genuine and significant, and the dangers some are running, as the terrible loss of Glyn Berry personifies, are all too real. They deserve our gratitude and our support.

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