

LOCAL NEWS

Thursday, September 17, 2015 **Peter Epp** — Managing Editor • 519-344-3641, ext. 502269 • peter.epp@sunmedia.ca

■ **LABOUR:** Program helps veterans find civilian careers

Trading helmets for hardhats

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The Observer

Sarnia's Ted Collins went right to work on building a good career as a boilermaker when he left the army, thanks to Helmets to Hardhats.

The not-for-profit organization works with trade unions and employers to help Canadians who served in the military make the transition to civilian careers.

Born and raised in Sarnia, Collins attended St. Patrick's High School and Northern Collegiate, and in 1994 joined the army.

He trained as a vehicle technician and repaired military vehicles, from jeeps to tanks, at posts across the country. His 13 years in the military also included overseas postings in Bosnia and, in 2003, with a theatre activation team sent to Afghanistan.

"We were the first Canadians on the ground in Kandahar," Collins said about the small team sent over for several weeks to begin building the military post there.

Collins said they were on high alert, but it was a good experience.

"You had limited supplies, and limited equipment and you just kind of had to tape things together and use improvisation skills."

He left the army in 2007 and was applying to work with Canada Border Services when a conversation changed everything.

"I never even knew what a boilermaker was until a friend of mine said, 'I'm a boilermaker and they have a program called Helmets to Hardhats. Are you interested?'"

Collins said he went to the Boilermakers' union hall in Sarnia, signed up as an apprentice, "and, away I went."

After 13 years of fixing vehicles in the military, Collins said he wanted to do something else and, once he learned what boilermakers do, thought it sounded like interesting work.

That turned out to be the case, and more.

"Being a boilermaker and a tradesman has awarded me so much," Collins said.

"I've got this great life I can give my family. I appreciate it, and they appreciate it."

After working for the first few years in Sarnia, Collins put his name on a list for work in Toronto.

"I've been busy pretty much ever since," he said.

Collins said there's a "real brotherhood" in the military, and he discovered something similar in the trades.

"It's a tight-knit group," he said. "We all know that we have to look after each other."

Sarnia is still home for Collins and his family, but he spends his work weeks in Pickering these days.

Being able to stay home, close to family, was something Collins was looking forward to in civilian life.

"I've been away more, I think, travelling as a boilermaker than I ever was in the army," he said.

So now, he and his family are thinking about moving to the Toronto area.

Collins said he doesn't believe



HANDOUT/SARNIA OBSERVER

Greg Matte, left, executive director of Helmets to Hardhats, speaks with Ted Collins, a Sarnia veteran who took advantage of the non-profit program to become a boilermaker.

he would have found his way into the trade without Helmets to Hardhats and the work that it does with unions and the Ontario College of Trades.

"I know I'd be working, because I'm a hard-working guy, but I know it wouldn't be in the same industry," he said.

"And, I'd be working a lot harder for a lot less, that's for sure."

Recently, Collins appeared in a video made for the college of trades to promote the work it's doing with

Helmets to Hardhats.

David Tsubouchi, registrar with the College of Trades, said they were asked by Greg Matte, a retired brigadier general who is executive director of Helmets to Hardhats, about getting involved.

Working with the organization, the college has identified nine military trades matching up with civilian trades where veterans can qualify to write a certificate of qualification exam, eliminating the need to go through an apprenticeship.

Tsubouchi said the college is also working to get the message out about Helmets to Hardhats to encourage more employers to consider veterans then they're hiring.

"We can look at ways to make this transition easier," he said.

Collins said he has had nothing but good experiences with his own transition from military to civilian life.

"Everybody has been receptive, and they show their appreciation for my service," he said.

"Sometimes, it's quite humbling." Collins said that included a time when he spoke at a Helmets to Hardhats gala, and the audience stood and applauded.

"You could feel the appreciation from the folks," he said.

"It's kind of overwhelming, sometimes."

The video Collins appears in can be found at www.collegeoftrades.ca/veterans.

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