

Izzy Dolls

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We tend to think of our soldiers as being tough, dedicated and highly trained to serve and fight for peace to protect Canada and to help protect all the innocent victims of war around the world. Little do we think about the humanitarian side of each and every soldier who puts his or her life on the line every day in the service of peace. This is only one story of a Canadian unit, the 1 Combat Engineer Regiment – which lost one of their own, MCpl Mark Isfeld “Izzy” on peacekeeping operations in Croatia in 1994.

In 1993, while on tour in Croatia with his regiment, Isfeld drove into a village and noticed something on a pile of rubble by a destroyed house. Although it looked like a small child, it was actually a life-size doll. He took a photo and, on his next leave home to Courtney, BC, he showed it to his parents, Brian and Carol Isfeld. Mark said, “Look, Mom, a little child has lost her doll and a doll has lost her little child.” Remembering his happy upbringing in Canada, he added, “These kids don’t have a childhood.” Carol was moved by the photo and felt the need to do something to help her son cope with the daily challenges he faced on duty. Giving a gift of a doll to the children of war, to bring a little happiness into their lives would also bring joy to Mark as he gave them out. So, Carol began crocheting little dolls – girls with yellow pigtails and boys with blue berets. She sent them to her son and, as Mark gave out the dolls, he became known as the soldier who collected little smiles, little handshakes and little hearts.



After Mark’s tragic death a year later, his troop continued giving out Izzy dolls to the children in his honour. Over the years, the Izzy doll has become a symbol of peace, showing the humanitarian side of all Canadian soldiers. Nationwide, knitters and crocheters joined Carol’s cause to bring smiles to the children of war. Their candid comments expressed the joy they felt in helping the children. Many of the elderly crafters lived through war and the Great Depression. They said they knew what it was like to have nothing and that creating an Izzy doll for a child who had nothing was something they just had to do.

To relieve suffering in the world, Vancouver resident and Canadian veteran Billy Willbond and his wife Lynne started ICROSS Canada (International Community for the Relief of Suffering and Starvation.) Since its inception in 1998, ICROSS Canada has repurposed and distributed millions of dollars' worth of medical equipment to suffering Third World villages and sent medical aid and much more. Billy sought and received 94 permission from Carol Isfeld to use the Izzy doll for, as Billy put it: "the poorest of the poor on the plane". Carol Isfeld suggested the knitters and crocheters use darker colours for skin tones, making the dolls more real for these children. It would be called the Izzy African Comfort Doll and even more crafters were excited to volunteer.

Although Billy's death in 2014 left an unmistakable void, many veterans across Canada – including Maj Gen Lewis MacKenzie (Ret'd,) the patron of ICROSS Canada – continue to collect used hospital equipment, Izzy dolls, African comfort dolls and medicines for shipment to all countries needing assistance. Much has happened in the years following Mark's death. More than 1.5 million Izzy dolls have brought comfort, peace and love not only to the innocent victims of war but also to children suffering globally because of natural disasters, starvation, displacement and trauma. Many Canadian charities, doctors, health care workers, students and others also take thousands of Izzy dolls with them each year to distribute to children in South America and Third World countries.

In 2007, following the death of Carol Isfeld, I (Shirley, the author of this story,) became the new Izzy Doll Mama. "I'm fortunate to be working in partnership with the Canadian Military Engineers, other Canadian Armed Forces personnel and, in particular, with former Canadian Military Engineer Association president LCol Ken Holmes (ret'd) who is my Military Advisor." Phyllis Wheaton has written a book *In the Mood for Peace: The Story of the Izzy Doll*, which taught me the true meaning of a humanitarian – the giving of time, talent and love shown for the suffering children of the world.

The Izzy Doll project has also captured the interest of the youth. Through a program called "Encounters with Canada" that is sponsored by Veterans Affairs Canada, selected students from across Canada arrive in Ottawa to participate in a week where they discover their country through each other, learn about Canadian institutions, meet famous and accomplished Canadians, explore exciting career options, develop their civic leadership skills and live an extraordinary bilingual experience. For the past five years, students attending an Izzy Doll workshop during Remembrance Week have finished making an Izzy doll that will find its way to a crisis zone or trouble spot.