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# Izzy's Story

The legacy of a Canadian soldier and the power of love *by Shirley O'Connell, Perth, Ont.*

**W**e 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 know, think or hear about the humani-

tarian 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 (ICER)—which lost one of their own, MCpl. Mark (Izzy) Isfeld, on peacekeeping

operations in Croatia in 1994.

In 1993, while on tour in Croatia with his regiment, MCpl. Isfeld

**Top: Izzy dolls being given out by Col. Pierre Huet at the Tuluzeni Centre's orphanage in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Inset: MCpl. Mark 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, B.C., he showed it to his parents, Brian and

## IN THE MOOD FOR PEACE

*In 2011, singer, songwriter and author Phyllis Wheaton published the book In the Mood for Peace: The Story of the Izzy Doll. Here's an excerpt:*

**"(1 Combat Engineer Regiment members)...were witness to Izzy's beaming smile while packing homemade knitted dolls in his uniform pockets—they even teased him about it in the beginning. But as they, too, began to give out dolls (following his death), they could attest to the joy of the children, hands outstretched to receive these gifts. It was a good feeling, a momentary pleasure that indeed lifted the spirits of the giver and receiver even in the midst of the most forsaken circumstances. It was at this point that Mark's troop named the dolls the Izzy doll, after their friend and brother. Carol said she was overjoyed at 1CER's benevolence that would ensure the children of war were not forgotten, and that her son would be remembered through this legacy project. It was at this moment that the Izzy doll began to take on its stature as a phenomenon—not yet in numbers, but in direction. No longer a mother and son project, the 1CER had given the Izzy doll wings that would take this homemade toy to the farthest reaches of the earth, cheering hundreds of thousands of children in the years to come."**

*Ms. Wheaton has posted a link to a free E-book that can be downloaded at the following website: [www.inthemoodforpeace.com](http://www.inthemoodforpeace.com).*



Carol Isfeld. Mark said, "Look, Mom: A little child has lost her doll and a doll 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.

Tragically, the following year, Mark was killed by an exploding land mine on June 21, 1994, in Croatia. After his death, Mark's troop named the doll after Izzy and 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 had lived through wartime 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.

### ICROSS JOINS IN

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



**Mark's mother, Carol Isfeld, seen here on Peacekeeper Day at Peacekeeper Park, Calgary. In 2007, after Carol passed away, Shirley became the official "Izzy Doll Mama."**

of dollars' worth of medical equipment to suffering Third World villages, and sent medical aid and much more. Billy sought and received permission from Carol Isfeld to use the Izzy doll for, as Billy put it: "for the poorest of the poor on the planet." Carol Isfeld suggested the knitters and crocheters use darker colours for the 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 has 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 Third World countries and countries needing assistance.

### **1.5 MILLION**

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 became the "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 Lt.-Col. Ken Holmes (Ret'd), who is my military adviser.

As well as those mentioned above, the Isfeld family and the multi-talented Phyllis Wheaton, whose book *In the Mood for Peace: The Story of the Izzy Doll* was published in

2011, have taught me the true meaning of "humanitarian." The giving of time, talent and love that Canadians across the country have shown for the suffering children of the world through the Canadian Military Engineering Izzy Doll Project continues to be a journey of love. ■



*To learn more, visit [www.izzydoll.ca](http://www.izzydoll.ca).*