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THE STRAIT AREA NEWS

Cpl. Desmond's sister describes scene of triple murder-suicide

by **Drake Lowthers** *The Reporter*
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PORT HAWKESBURY: Chantel Desmond went to go pick up her niece on Jan. 3, 2017, at her brother's house in Upper Big Tracadie, but rather than finding her niece ready to go to an after-school program, she discovered a gruesome crime scene.

Specific information from what she described as to be a "normal evening" is etched in her memory; the house completely lit up, the truck sitting in the driveway with four flat tires, the keys still in the door, the smells of cooking onions, curried chicken and then blood.

From the window she could see a lifeless foot and blood.

"I still smell the blood, when I explain the story I still smell the blood, the smell of what they're cooking in the house," Chantel testified on Feb. 17 at the Desmond Fatality Inquiry. "I have flashbacks thinking about this, having to come up here and talk about it… It's something I'll never get over, but I'm trying to work with it and (the inquiry) is a step in my healing."

Chantel was the first person to discover the bodies of her brother, retired Cpl. Lionel Desmond, and his wife, Shanna, after the veteran who was suffering from severe post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) killed his wife, mother and 10-year-old daughter, Aaliyah, before taking his own life.

"I walk in and I see Shanna, she was lying on her side, she had a white tank top on and pajama bottoms, and there was blood underneath her," Chantel told the inquiry. "I look over and I can see my brother's boots; Dunlop's, and I immediately went into shock because I remember seeing a hole in his face."

When she discovered the bodies of Desmond and his wife, Chantel had no clue the bodies of her mother and niece were inside as well.

"I called my mom," she said. "But I didn't know she was in there."

The night before, Chantel was at bingo with her mother, sister-in-law and niece. She recalled she felt something was off. She told her mother "don't get caught in the crossfire."

Chantel provided her testimony from inside a vulnerable witness room at the

Albert MacLellan

Port Hawkesbury courthouse, having only the audio version of her testimony to the inquiry.

She explained as a result of the tragedy, she herself is now dealing with PTSD, something that provides her with somewhat of an understanding of her brother's near decade-long fight with the same mental illness.

"That man that was in that house that night was not my brother," Chantel said.

She described her mother as the family matriarch who was a tomboy with a twin sister, who developed a passion for flagwork in construction, someone who loved bingo and was very religious.

Her voice quivered when she was asked about her niece, Aaliyah, someone who loved animals, especially her dog and cat, enjoyed horseback riding and wanted to be a veterinarian when she grew up.

"She loved to eat, so that's why we got along," Chantel said with a laugh. "She was a great kid."

Sharing a special bond with her niece, Chantel said she just wanted Aaliyah to be a child, despite all the turmoil in the home. On occasion, Shanna would open up to Chantel about her personal experiences.

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Photo by Jake Boudrot
Canadian Tire Strait Pirates public address announcer Bruce Lee sits next to an empty chair set aside in tribute to the late Dave Hudson, a tireless volunteer and longtime supporter of the Pirates organization who passed away in January. For more on the tribute, see page 14.

More patients lose doctor access after departure from clinic

by **Jake Boudrot** *Editor*
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ARICHAT: A major change at a medical clinic here will affect patients already without a doctor, while others will be losing theirs.

On Feb. 18, the Arichat Medical Clinic issued a press release that Dr. Steven DeRoche will be leaving as of March 1, and as a result, remaining doctors Laurie and Scott MacNeil will only see rostered patients and no longer accept walk-in patients.

Since the remaining doctors can no longer absorb DeRoche's entire patient load, this will leave some without a physician, the release said. The doctors said they will to retain as many "high need" patients as possible.

"Both (of us) currently have patient rosters well above average and simply cannot absorb another 1,000-plus patients while continuing to provide timely, quality care," Scott MacNeil told *The Reporter*. "There are many patients who have seen one or both Dr. MacNeils for one reason or another over the years but those affected will be the ones whose primary physician was Dr. DeRoche. There is no reliable way to define this cut-off, so if you are unsure of your status, please contact the clinic and we can review your file."

This will impact Monday evening and Saturday afternoon clinics, the release said, noting the days will be treated as regular clinic hours in which patients will need to book an appointment.

"As our Monday evening and Saturday afternoon clinics had been open to anyone, we would see patients from anywhere whether they had another family doctor or not," Scott MacNeil explained. "So we would often see patients whose regular family doctor was away or if there was a long wait to be seen at their usual clinic."

Since it is first come first served basis, the clinic recommends that affected patients call 811 or register online at needafamilypractice.nshealth.ca to be on the Need a Family Practice list.

"Many of those who access the walk-in clinic may already be on this list, however we recommend that they ensure their information is up to date by calling 811," said Nova Scotia Health Authority (NSHA) spokesperson Brendan Elliot.

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Cpl. Desmond's life was owned by the Canadian Armed Forces, sister says

by **Drake Lowthers** *The Reporter*
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PORT HAWKESBURY: The two families who have been affected the most by, and find themselves at the centre of, the Desmond Fatality Inquiry began testifying as the inquiry resumed on Feb. 16.

The inquiry is looking into a triple murder-suicide that rocked the small, tight-knit Black community of Upper Big Tracadie.

On Jan. 3, 2017, retired Cpl. Lionel Desmond purchased a Soviet-era SKS 7.62 semi-automatic carbine that he would then use hours later to kill his 52-year-old mother, Brenda, 31-year-old wife, Shanna, and their 10-year-old daughter, Aaliyah, in the family's home before turning the gun on himself.

Following an 11-month adjournment caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and a change in venue, the inquiry's second session is expected to hear witness testimony from the people who knew Desmond best.

Opening the second session of the inquiry was Desmond's sister, Cassandra Desmond. She talked about her knowledge of the support, or lack thereof, her brother and his family received from the Canadian Armed Forces transitioning back into normal, everyday civilian life.

Cassandra highlighted her brother's pride in joining the military, how he hung his oath of allegiance on his grandmother's wall crooked, and how the family had nearly a dozen family members serving in previous generations.

"You signed up to protect Canada… My brother signed an oath to be a protector, to fight with patriotism for his country, along with his brothers and sisters," she said. "Lionel was owned by the Canadian Armed Forces… Not everyone has that bravery or courage."

Originally, Cassandra indicated she was very mad at her brother for doing what he did whenever she thought about her mother, but those feelings eventually changed as she began to understand that he wasn't her brother the night of the tragedy.

"I didn't lose my mom to a natural health cause," she said. "I lost my mom (at 25) because my mom died at the hands of my brother."

She described her brother as the comedian of the family who always was willing to lend a helping hand to whoever needed it.

"After Afghanistan, that pride in everything you could see it just slowly deteriorating. You knew something happened; when he came back from Afghanistan every bit of pride that that man wore all those years just was gone,"

Cassandra Desmond

Cassandra said. "You could just tell that something deep and dark was on his mind; his silence of Afghanistan and him not sharing was enough to say that Afghanistan done a lot to that man… It was almost like his soul was lost."

Recounting the phone calls she received on the night of Jan. 3, 2017, she remembers a scream coming out of her twin sister she's never heard before telling her she found the bodies of Lionel and Shanna.

"The phone dropped. The first thing I did was call my mother. I called my mom three times and left three voicemails," Cassandra said of then finding out her mother and niece were gone too. "My whole world paused, my whole world just went numb and my whole world stopped, the life came out of me, I just couldn't move."

After the tragedy, Cassandra recounted it took her two weeks to be able to build up the strength to face her five-year-old daughter to tell her her Nanny Bren, Uncle Lionel, aunt and cousin were now angels.

"My nine-year-old, she became my anchor at the age of five."

The inquiry has previously learned when Desmond was released from the military in 2015; the former infantryman was suffering from severe post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) along with a potential traumatic brain injury.

Cassandra said her brother always loved music and dancing but after returning home from the war in Afghanistan, even something as simple as the whizzing of a fan brought the veteran back to being inside a helicopter.

"Noise was not good for Lionel after Afghanistan," she said. "Noise became an enemy… It triggered him."

Reading from a handwritten letter to Veterans Affairs Canada that was included in her brother's medical discharge, Cassandra described a situation in which he became frustrated about a back to work program. He said the government should have provided better work integration and should have better solutions.

"There's no support in place," Desmond wrote. "I feel like you're thrown to the wolves and the rest is for the seagulls."

Cassandra doesn't understand how her brother couldn't get the necessary help for his PTSD he was desperately seeking.

"A person doesn't go to 10 different departments and six different doctors with the same story, telling you, 'I need help, I don't feel right, I feel like my brain is broken' if they were getting the proper help that they needed," she said. "Why is it that they're being shifted through so many different doctors in so many different departments and provinces, but yet still nobody is able to give this man the proper help that he's crying out for?"

The first session of the inquiry, which concluded March 2, 2020, exposed evidence that Judge Warren Zimmer said made it clear Veterans Affairs allowed Desmond "to fall through the cracks."

"How is this man going to walk into a treatment facility, being a man crying for help wanting to be normal but yet walk out those doors feeling the same way?" Cassandra asked. "I was hopeful. They said they were going to take him for six months and I assumed he was coming home early, because he responded well to the treatment."

The inquiry also learned Desmond, desperate to find help, travelled to St. Martha's Regional Hospital in Antigonish on at least two separate occasions because he felt he was in crisis.

A movement to launch the inquiry was led by Desmond's twin sisters, Cassandra and Chantel.

"I was fighting provincial and federal governments by myself. I was flying to Ottawa on my own dime, trying to fight for what happened," Cassandra said. "Lionel was fighting to be normal."

Amongst other things, the inquiry is investigating whether Desmond and his family had access to the appropriate mental health and domestic violence intervention services and whether healthcare and social services providers who interacted with the Desmond family were trained to recognize the symptoms of occupational stress injuries or domestic violence.

Governments work together to remove abandoned vessels around Nova Scotia

by **Jake Boudrot** *Editor*
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HALIFAX: Federal funding is allowing the province to remove 14 vessels across Nova Scotia.

The federal Abandoned Boats Program is contributing $559,920 to remove damaged, unused or derelict vessels, with the provincial government adding another $33,700 for a total of $593,620.

According to the province, the vessels scheduled for removal include commercial and private vessels. Removals began in January and will continue throughout 2021, the province said, noting that requests for quotes to remove each of the 14 vessels are posted to the Nova Scotia government procurement website.

Abandoned vessel cleanup sites include Margaree Harbour in Inverness County; Ben's Cove, Antigonish County; Drum Head, Guysborough County; and Lennox Passage in Richmond County.

Nova Scotia Lands Inc. spokesperson Trish Smith said in Margaree Harbour, a tender valued at $25,000 is out to remove a commercial fishing boat that "has been there for many years."

In Ben's Cove, Smith said a steel commercial barge has washed ashore, but no tender has been issued yet.

An old steel boiler is all that remains from a steel commercial vessel in Drum Head, Smith said, noting no tender is out.

In Lennox Passage, Smith said they are looking to remove a commercial fishing boat that can be found "just above the high water mark," but this project has not been tendered.

Smith recalled that Department of Lands and Forestry staff engaged Nova Scotia Lands to help manage an abandoned vessels list they compiled over a number of years, then a federal program was launched to assess and potentially remove abandoned and/or derelict vessels.

"The vessels being assessed had to meet criteria set out by the Abandoned Boats Program through Transport Canada," Smith explained. "The assessment process looked at the potential risk to the shoreline and community, as well as their unsightliness in the natural environment."

While they establish the priority list, Smith said the province awarded four contracts that will address five vessels. She said the intention is to complete the list by the end of the year.

"We were very happy to receive the funding from the Abandoned Boats Program to do this work and clean up vessels around Nova Scotia," said Nova Scotia Lands president Stephen MacIsaac. "This work will stop the environmental impacts these abandoned vessels have on the shoreline and communities."

Seaboard buys Armour Transportation

HALIFAX: Seaboard Transportation Group announced it will acquire Armour Transportation Systems.

In a press release issued on Feb. 19 by Seaboard Transport Group, owner Joe Shannon said the purchase of Armour operations represents an "excellent opportunity" to grow operations.

"We have shared Canada's roadways for 50 years," Shannon said in the press release. "We have come to admire and appreciate the Armour family's work ethic and reputation. We look forward to continuing their tradition of excellence as a member of the Seaboard group."

Port Hawkesbury-based Seaboard said in the release that Armour will continue to operate under the Armour Transportation Systems brand name with the bulk of its operations remaining in Moncton.

The family-owned Seaboard Transport Group owns transport brands across Canada and the United States, in the bulk truckload industry, as well as rail terminal transload services, with options for the bulk storage of dry and liquid products, the press release stated.

Also family-owned, Armour Transportation Systems has over 2,000 employees, 24 terminals and more than 4,000 pieces of equipment, the press release noted. With its affiliated companies – including Armour Courier Services, Armour Logistics Services, Diamond's Transfer Ltd., Hillman's Transfer Limited, Pole Star Transport, RJS Terminals, Triple B Trucking, and Way's Transport Ltd. – the company serves local, national, and international markets.

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Cpl. Desmond was destroyed by realities of war; Borden family forgives him

by **Drake Lowthers** *The Reporter*
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PORT HAWKESBURY: A former platoon member of retired Cpl. Lionel Desmond says the intensity of the gunfights and the grim duties of war took their toll on the then 24-year-old infantryman.

Testifying on Feb. 18 at the Desmond Fatality Inquiry, retired Cpl. Orlando Trotter said Desmond was one of eight soldiers within his unit of the 2nd Battalion Royal Canadian Regiment who committed suicide since returning home from Afghanistan in 2007.

Like family members, Trotter again described his best friend as projecting a well-established goofy sense of humour, which made him well-liked among his military peers.

"He was a good morale booster," said Trotter, who shared a similar sense of humour and naturally bonded with Desmond. "We were almost like brothers."

Having first met in 2005 in Gagetown during a year-long training excursion to prepare the battalion for physical combat, Trotter explained the group of about 400 soldiers didn't receive any preparations for the psychological combat they would endure.

The battalion arrived following Operation Medusa, which saw 12 Canadian casualties. He said their directions weren't for peacekeeping, as over a seven-month period they were engaged on a daily basis in firefights with the Taliban.

"It was just going after the enemy at this point… We'd go out at midnight and patrol (on foot) for about four hours," Trotter indicated. "And (once) the enemy had their morning prayers, it was just bullets. Boom, boom, boom. Just constant fighting."

He suggested despite showing strong physical capabilities and being at peak fitness, Desmond was simply not cut out for combat mentally. He could see that in the heat of battle, Desmond was alone, needed his help and was struggling.

"You take somebody like him and put him in a war zone and say, 'Take this rifle and that guy over there? Shoot him.' I would say it destroyed him," Trotter said. "You have to have a certain type of personality to go into battle, and he just wasn't one of those guys."

He explained a countless amount of soldiers out of the battalion's 2007 tour returned home with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Sheldon Borden

"That tour, that was a bad tour. It was a terrible tour, it was like going to hell," Trotter said. "That's why so many people are struggling right now."

He testified it's crucial to improve preparations for the realities of war, including the realistic necessity of shooting another human being.

"I remember when we were first in Afghanistan, the warrant officer, he's like, 'See this guy,' there were three dead bodies there," Trotter said. "And he said, 'Look at them, look what the bullets do. This is what you have to do.' Nowhere in my training were we prepared for something like that."

The inquiry heard that Desmond had suffered three head injuries while serving in the military, ultimately being diagnosed with severe PTSD in 2011.

Trotter told the inquiry the military's Joint Personnel Support Unit (JPSU) did an awful job of helping their soldiers with PTSD.

"When you're in JPSU, you are very alone," he said. "It's once a week for two or three hours. Then you have six and a half days of, 'What do I do now?"'

Desmond's older sister, Diane, said her brother went from the jolly person the family knew to having to be on their tiptoes around him.

"You think him coming home, he would have been smiling and all happy, but he just wasn't Lionel," Diane testified. "I know my brother, and it wasn't hard to pick up something was wrong."

Keeping to himself, Desmond didn't speak openly about his mental health or his deployment to Afghanistan.

"There were certain people he would talk to, he would confide in," Diane said. "But there were not many."

On Feb. 19, it was the first time the inquiry heard from members of the Borden family.

Shanna's parents, Thelma and Ricky Borden, each provided their testimony through written affidavits, while her younger brother, Sheldon, took the stand. They all forgave Desmond and didn't want to demonize him for what he did.

Ricky's affidavit explained Desmond had "frequent outbursts" and had "not responded well" to the psychiatric treatment he received prior to the tragedy.

According to Thelma's testimony, in a three-way call between Lionel, Shanna and herself the night before the shootings, she said Lionel told her Shanna was trying to keep him in the hospital.

"I'm not going to stay in the hospital," he told them. "They're going to find me in a body bag."

Thelma recounted how Lionel expressed that there was something wrong with him as he could hear the sounds of guns and the explosions of bombs in his head.

"Every time he closed his eyes, he saw dead people, or was walking over dead people," Thelma testified. "Many of his (platoon members) in Afghanistan were killed alongside him. He had to pick up the bodies."

Thelma also highlighted an intense flashback Desmond had one night in which the former infantryman choked her daughter as she slept. When he snapped back to reality, he didn't know what he was doing as he believed he was back in Afghanistan.

Shanna's younger brother, Sheldon, who himself served with the Royal Canadian Navy and the Royal Canadian Air Force for 11 years, said his parents still live in the house where the tragedy took place.

"It's hard enough to come home and them to be in the house," he said. "It's almost like you've got to ignore every feeling in yourself because you're worried about seeing your mom and dad happy."

Sheldon, like his mother, also shared vivid personal details on the time Desmond strangled Shanna as she slept; as he was there when it happened.

"I remember hearing in the room a very low 'Lionel,' and I remember hearing again 'Lionel,' and then it was pretty much yelling 'Lionel,'" he said. "Somewhere along the lines, he connected the dots that this was reality and he was not somewhere else, and (when) he woke up, I could see he had tears in his eyes."

Sheldon expressed the fact he personally felt guilty he was not able to help the person he viewed as his big brother; the person that was the influential reason he joined the military.

"I never had a brother, so with him coming around, he embraced me as, you know, his little brother and I embraced him as my big brother," he said. "I'm only a kid, I didn't have the tools or resources to help him in a way that a professional could have."

As for the Bordens, Sheldon said his parents haven't been able to find a buyer for the house and still struggle everyday living within the four walls that act as the constant reminder of the tragedy that took away three generations of one family.

"I don't want them to be in the home, most people would want their parents be able to live," he said. "I wouldn't call it living at this point, it's just trapped."

Following a week of emotional testimony from those who knew Desmond best, the fatality inquiry is now set to hear from the military medical professionals who provided care to Desmond while he was still serving in the Canadian Armed Forces.

Stabbing suspect faces numerous charges from other incidents

by **Drake Lowthers** *The Reporter*
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ANTIGONISH: The suspect charged with stabbing a man at a local business appeared briefly by video link in Antigonish Provincial Court on Feb.5.

At that time, the Crown consented to a conditional release; the 41-year-old accused had been remanded at the North East Nova Correctional Centre.

On Feb. 4 at approximately 12:30 p.m., Antigonish RCMP responded to a report of a stabbing and, when they arrived at the scene, located a victim who was suffering from a stab wound in the stomach following a confrontation with another man in the parking lot.

The RCMP's Antigonish Street Crime Enforcement Unit and North East Nova Traffic Unit assisted investigators and located Trevor Burns on West Street and arrested him without incident.

Burns' next scheduled appearance is March 3 in Antigonish for election and plea to driving while disqualified, possession of a weapon, two counts of breach of probation, failure to comply with an undertaking and assault with a weapon.

He is also scheduled to appear in Port Hawkesbury Provincial Court two weeks later, on March 17, for sentencing on a number of unrelated charges including theft under $5,000, possession of stolen property under $5,000, breach of probation, operating a vehicle while prohibited to do so and failure to comply with an undertaking.

Additionally, Burns is scheduled to go to trial in Antigonish Provincial Court on Sept. 13, 2021, on more charges of assault and breach of probation.