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INSIDE THE CFL

On a once-in-a-lifetime trip to Afghanistan — and how often have those words been juxtaposed — it figured Sean Whyte and Joey Giampersa would hit it off, even if their time together was brief.

You see, it's not often the Alouettes' kicker, charitably listed at 5 feet 9 and 175 pounds, can look another adult in the eyes.

Giampersa, from Quebec City, is a Canadian soldier, one of approximately 950 currently deployed as part of our nation's International Security Assistance Force. At the 2012 NATO Summit, Prime Minister Stephen Harper announced an undisclosed number of Canadian soldiers would remain in Afghanistan, helping train and mentor the Afghan National Army until 2014 — although Canadian troops ended their combat role there in 2011.

More importantly, Giampersa, a big Als fan, immediately recognized Whyte, part of a contingent of current and former athletes who went to Afghanistan for six days in late April. Accompanying Whyte were centre Luc Brodeur-Jourdain, long-snapper Martin Bédard and four of the team's cheerleaders, former NHL players Chris Nilan and Karl Dykhuis, along with Brian Burke, who served as general manager at Anaheim, Vancouver and Toronto.

"It was a great opportunity to say thank you to those troops, personally," Whyte said during an interview this week, following a practice at Stade Hébert. "It was a great eye-opening experience. You realize how blessed we are here.

"A lot of those guys thanked me for coming, telling me it took them out of

their routine. They had nothing but smiles on their faces. If it wasn't for those guys, I wouldn't be able to live my dream of being a professional athlete. It's awesome to say that."

When Giampersa saw Whyte with his game-worn jersey, he asked the kicker what would be required to acquire possession, the two arranging a trade. Giampersa ran to his bunk, getting one of his khaki-coloured security force shirts, still unworn. Knowing he still required his original sweater for the Together at School program he participated in last winter, Whyte promised he would send another jersey to Giampersa from training camp in June.

Giampersa's uniform now hangs, quite prominently, on a wall of Whyte's Laval condo, an obvious conversation starter.

"I might not ever get the opportunity to do that again," said the 27-year-old native of White Rock, B.C., who came to the Als in a May 2011 trade, Montreal relinquishing a first-round draft choice to the Lions.

At the time, general manager Jim Popp undoubtedly never believed he had traded a coveted first-round selection for a kicker who, two years later, would come precipitously close to being blown to smithereens in Afghanistan. Eight hours after leaving Kuwait — the beginning and end of the trip with a four-day stop in Kabul in between — Whyte and the travelling party were advised a bomb had been launched at the spot they had visited, six people ultimately losing their lives.

"To be honest, I was expecting one while I was there," Whyte quipped, displaying a somewhat cavalier attitude. "We had been warned that it's common. But they don't have guidance systems on these missiles. They



JOHN KENNEY/THE GAZETTE

Sean Whyte, at a team practice this week, wears a shirt he received from Joey Giampersa, a member of NATO's International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan.

just lob them over the mountain and hope for the best.

"I was ready for one. When it didn't happen, I was surprised. It happened eight hours after we left so, I guess, lucky me."

The Als undoubtedly were aware, and signed-off, on this junket, arranged and orchestrated by the Department of National Defence. Indeed, it marked Brodeur-Jourdain's

wouldn't arrive until January and February of 2002. Canada assumed a larger role in the battle four years later, with the deployment of about 2,500 Canadian Forces personnel, almost half of which comprised the combat battle group.

At this time, the Canadian Forces' participation is limited to NATO's training mission in Afghanistan. The

Burke, along with two security force personnel. Whyte said he never felt threatened or insecure.

"National Security emphasized we were well taken care of," Whyte said. "If we were considered a high-risk target, we were treated very well, protected at all times and on a time schedule. Never once did I feel that I was not safe. The trips between bases was fairly quick.

"We were told the Taliban doesn't want to mess with Canadians or the Americans. They go after the Afghanistan troops. They're still learning the logistics of war.

"It was a blast and I wanted to do it," Whyte admitted. "I was curious ... and wanted to see what it's all about. I know not a lot of people get the opportunity to do it. Some people thought I was crazy. It's naive of me to say, but I want to go see some adventure, maybe some trouble. Who knows? I'm 27. I've got nothing holding me back.

Do it now, while I'm young. It was totally worth it and I'd do it again."

Whether Whyte spends a second consecutive winter in Montreal remains to be determined. He's scheduled to become a free agent next February, fully intent on playing out his option and potentially testing the market.

But he's glad, for one winter at least, to have participated in the Als' outreach program. Whyte, who can laugh at himself and clearly is comfortable in his own skin, was himself a troubled child growing up.

He admits suffering from a learning disability, never properly diagnosed, although he believes it to be Attention Deficit Disorder. To this day, Whyte remains overwhelmed by math and, in his school days, was placed in a learning-assistance program.

"It brought me down. I felt like I wasn't smart enough," he said. "I was a little slower with some subjects."

While playing in British Columbia, Whyte avoided public-speaking engagements, his natural shyness striking trepidation. But he wanted to overcome that fear and shortcoming last winter and believed, for many reasons, the children to whom he was speaking would be able to relate — while looking him in the eye.

"The kids were awesome," said Whyte, who visited approximately 20 schools throughout the province. "I struggled in school because of my own decisions that I made. They look at me as a role model and listen. I'm just another voice to them.

"I know I'm not going to get through to everybody. But, in every visit, I know I got to one kid. It's good to bring comfort to kids. They wonder whether it's ever going to get better."

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SEAN WHYTE, ALOUETTES KICKER

second visit there.

The Afghan Civil War began in 2001, followed in rapid fashion by the intervention by the United States, and its allies, following the terrorist attacks of September 2001 by Taliban-led extremists.

Canada's role began later that year, although the first contingents of regular troops

international effort was designed to assist the Afghan National Security Forces as they transition to full responsibility for security throughout Afghanistan in 2014.

Security was tight, Whyte admitted, the visitors under a tight and closely monitored schedule. Whyte's convoy consisted of himself and