

Bruce Cockburn sings for troops in Afghanistan, gets rocket launcher

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KANDAHAR, Afghanistan — Bruce Cockburn got his rocket launcher – briefly, in Afghanistan.

The singer-songwriter was among a group of entertainers visiting Canadian troops serving in the war-torn country.

He drew wild applause when he sang one of his hits, “If I Had a Rocket Launcher,” which prompted the commander of Task Force Kandahar, Gen. Jonathan Vance, to very temporarily present him with one.

“I was kind of hoping he would let me keep it. Can you see Canada Customs? I don’t think so,” Cockburn said, laughing.

After 30 albums and countless hits, Cockburn is known as much for his political activism around the world as he is for his music.

He wrote “If I Had a Rocket Launcher” after he visited Guatemalan refugee camps in Mexico that were attacked before and after his visit by Guatemalan military helicopters.

This week, Cockburn visited another war zone, Afghanistan, with a conflict that involves Canadians in general and a member of his own family as well. His brother, Capt. John Cockburn, is a doctor serving with the Canadian Forces at Kandahar Airfield.

“I was very curious. I have my own reasons aside from national pride and the love I feel for these people,” said Cockburn, 64. “The older I get, the more I see these young faces doing what they are doing and the chances they are taking – they feel like my kids.”

Cockburn has travelled to many countries, including Iraq and Mozambique, and written songs on political subjects ranging from the International Monetary Fund to landmines.

Arriving in a land that is rife with landmines, and with Canada in the middle of a war and with soldiers dying here, has given him pause to think.

“It’s a long discussion on whether we should be in Afghanistan – whether anyone should be in Afghanistan,” he said thoughtfully.

“But since we are, and since we’ve gone this far, I don’t think it’s appropriate to leave at this stage.”

“Certainly I have not had the idea that anyone I have talked to among these soldiers is

hiding anything or been trying to slant things to a particular point of view,” he said. “They believe in what they do and are witnesses to what they are doing, and I have to accept the truth in what they’re telling me.”

Cockburn spent some time visiting with his younger brother John, 57, who joined the Canadian military two years ago.

Capt. John Cockburn is a former national ski coach and was looking for something new to do. “I had done a stint volunteering in Rwanda and it was the first time I really got a sense of the military and their medical role,” he said. “I thought I would be too old to join but I wasn’t, and I was interested in coming here and it all kind of worked.”

Big brother Bruce was supportive about his decision to join the military, said Capt. Cockburn.

“He was jealous,” he said with a laugh. “He has always been interested, even as a kid, in military issues and hardware and explosions.”

“I think that’s just remained and, with all the various exposures he’s had to conflict zones, I think he’s accepted the reality that the military is necessary, like it or not.”

Bruce Cockburn, along with the other entertainers – including the group Finger Eleven and sports celebrities such as Guy Lafleur and Patrice Brisebois – got a rare look “outside the wire” of the main base in Kandahar when they were flown into a number of forward operating bases in the Panjwaii district.

The reality of war hit home as the Canadian military responded after a suicide bomber blew himself up near a police vehicle in a bazaar in the nearby village of Bazar-e-Panjwaii. Six police officers and three civilians were injured in the attack.

The experience was an eye opener for the members of “Team Canada” visiting Afghanistan.

As for the rocket launcher, it wasn’t the first time Cockburn was presented with one.

He said he was approached by a fan, in a Washington state parking lot several years ago, who opened his trunk and wanted to give him three rocket launchers.

“It just smelled like entrapment but I just said ‘We’re crossing the border and I don’t think Canada Customs would approve’.”

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