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Canadian Forces at the 22nd NATO Military Chess Tournaments

by Cpl Stephen Stone, The Loyal Edmonton Regiment Band



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I have to say, Lithuania is not the first place I would have imagined finding myself travelling in the world. But, given that it was a NATO military event, it seemed strangely fitting. The 22nd annual Military NATO Chess tournament was held August 8th to 12th in Kaunas, Lithuania. It involved 15 NATO countries and 88 players. I was proud to represent the Loyal Edmonton Regiment on the part of the Canadian Forces team.



(LtoR) O Cdt Landry, Gelani Ghiacy, Maj Régis Belemare and Cpl Stephan Stone.

With its vicinity to larger, more powerful neighbours, there is perhaps no other country that would value NATO membership more (Lithuania is a newer member, as of 2002). In 1991 Lithuania was the first country to throw off communism and declare independence from the USSR. And at the first opportunity Lithuania became a member of NATO (2002) and currently participates in NATO missions in Afghanistan, Iraq, Kosovo, Bosnia/Herzegovina and Georgia.

This year more than others was a challenge for the Canadian team. The time of the year and the cost involved to fly to Lithuania did not make it easy to gather players. But, thanks to Fairley Erker

Advisory Group of Edmonton and the Running Room (who sponsored my flight), SNC Lavalin (sponsor for teammate Gelani Ghiacy) as well as work on part of all of our units, we were able to have a the minimum 4 players needed for a full representation (6 players may represent a team, and then the top 4 scores from those 6 count towards the country's overall score). And this year we threw ourselves into competition even more fierce than the last.

It was in 2008 that I first met Major Régis Bellemare, a logistics officer who had just been transferred to Edmonton. Whether by chance or by fate, I was Major Bellemare's first opponent in a blitz (fast-paced) tournament for his first game of chess in Edmonton. Perhaps an equally notable coincidence beyond our army connections (we learned in post-game discussion) was that we had both founded chess clubs at approximately the same time.

In 2007 while I was starting the current University of Alberta Chess Club, Major Bellemare was creating a club for both forces and civilians in Kandahar. Major Bellemare quickly discovered that Afghans were very passionate about chess and were very aggressive players. As it turned out, chess had long been repressed in Afghanistan. During Taliban rule, the game was banned and chess boards were burned. Beyond allowing for positive international interaction, it could be said that chess in Afghanistan is symbolic of the freedoms being fought for in that part of the world. Four years after its creation, KAF chess club is still alive and well, under the management of (CF NATO team-mate) Gelani Ghiacy. It continues to hold weekly meetings and tournaments for both military and civilians of all nations working at KAF.

In our post-blitz-discussion, I also learned about the yearly NATO Chess Championship and the Major's role as the Canadian Forces organizer.

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Competitors in the tournament hall.

At 8am every day the games begin. Gifts from home countries are given to opponents (a sign of friendship) as a pre-game ritual. This is followed by a handshake and a wishing of "good luck". Niceties out of the way, the battles over the board can commence. Forty moves with 2 hours on the clock each and another 30 minutes given to both players after 40 moves (games being potentially a 5 hour gruelling ordeal, a test of focus and endurance).

The lower rated players at the NATO tournament tend to start at international chess ratings of about 1950. On the top end of this year's tournament, Turkey brought Grandmaster Haznedoroglu Kivanc at a rating of 2444. For the uninitiated, these numbers are quite large and could make even seasoned tournament chess players quiver in their seats.

Though not performing quite as strongly as last year, my personal highlight came from beating the person of highest military rank in the tournament: General Hendrik Steffers of Holland, head of the International Military Chess Committee. Through a long, gruelling and hard fought battle,

a small tactical victory was transformed into enough of a material advantage that- in an elimination of forces- became unstoppable by the end game. The General was apparently was none too happy about the result, though quite gracious in our post-game analysis (he did however exact his revenge by beating both teammates Maj Bellemare and OC Landry). Members of the LER Band have suggested to me that perhaps beating a General should lead to my demotion. Joking aside, such games illustrate a curious and unique aspect

of the tournament, where armed forces members of different countries and vastly different ranks are able to sit down and interact with each other on equal footing.

First place at the tournament was taken by Turkey, second by Poland and third by Denmark. I was quite happy for Turkey, having become good friends with some of the members of the team the previous year. In the face of steep competition, every member of our CF team still managed to perform well and special commendation must be given to Team Leader Major Régis Bellemare, of 1 Service Battalion Edmonton. Major Bellemare earned the best Canadian performance, scoring 2 points in the standard length games and 5 points on Friday's blitz tournament (also the best blitz performance for a Canadian since Canada came back to the NATO Championship 4 years ago).

It was both wonderful to see a bit of Lithuania (while not playing chess) and perhaps tragic to learn of some of the scars of its past. And while we could not all speak the same language at the tournament, we could all find common ground



over the chess board. The next NATO Chess tournaments will be taking place in France in 2012, in Poland in 2013 and in 2014 it will be coming to Canada to celebrate the 25th anniversary of this Championship.

Cpl Stephen Stone is a musician with the Loyal Edmonton Regiment Band and Drum Line and also teaches chess in Edmonton elementary schools through *The Roving Chess Nuts* (<http://www.rovingchessnuts.com>). Major Régis Bellemare coordinates chess events within the Canadian Forces. If you serve in the forces, are a civilian working for the forces or would like to become involved with military chess, send an email to Major Bellemare via CFchess@chess.com. In addition to the NATO tournament, there is a yearly Canadian Military Chess Championship in Kingston (usually in May) at the Royal Military College. More information about the NATO Chess Championship can be found at <http://www.natochess.com>.

Photo credits: Fabrice Wantiez



Cpl Stone considering early game options in round 5.

CO MAKES TWO PRESENTATIONS

Story by LCol Michael J Prendergast

On Wednesday night, 23 May, the CO had the pleasure to make two presentations in front of the Regiment to LCol Mike Prendergast and Capt (ret) Chris Atkin.

LCol Chris Chodan presented LCol Mike Prendergast on behalf of the City of Edmonton his Commanding Officers cane or walking stick. This is a tradition that goes back 95 + years and was recognition by the City of Edmonton for the link between the City and its namesake Regiment.



L Col Mike Prendergast (c) receives his cane from the Honorary Colonel Dennis Erker (l) and current CO L Col Chris Chodan

LCol Chris Chodan also presented Capt (ret) Chris Atkin with the Alberta Centennial Medal. Some of you are probably wondering why Capt Atkin would be presented his medal seven years after the Alberta Centennial in 2005. Well like many oddities in life there is a story behind it.

At the beginning of May 2012 LCol Prendergast received an email from the 41 CBG G1 informing him that during a "spring cleaning" at the HQ an Alberta Centennial medal and certificate had been found in the drawer of a little used filing cabinet. How it got there, who placed it there and why will

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most likely remain a mystery for many years to come.

Later that week the medal and certificate was retrieved by LCol Prendergast when he attended the Honorary Colonels conference in Calgary. Arrangements were made with the CO for a suitable presentation of the medal to Capt Atkin. Capt Atkin was grateful for the medal and for those of us who have known him for a few years quite speechless!

For those of you who do not know Capt Atkin, he started out his military career in The Loyal Edmonton Regiment 1809 Cadet Corps and is a former RSM of the Regiment who was commissioned to Captain after his tenure. He did a tour in Bosnia with SFOR in 2003. He was also past President of the 49th Battalion Association having been involved with the Regimental Association for many years.

What Capt Atkin is most well known for is being the driving force behind the establishment of The Loyal Edmonton Regiment Museum. He took on this daunting task starting in 1985. He established a Museum Foundation, started fund raising, negotiated with the City of Edmonton for space at The Prince of Wales Armoury (five years of negotiations), and sought advice from the Provincial Museum regarding the display of artefacts. As a result of his efforts, the Regimental



Left to right L Col Mike Prendergast, the CO L Col Chris Chodan, Capt (Ret'd) Chris Atkin holding his newly awarded Alberta Centennial Medal and the Hon Col Dennis Erker.

Museum was opened in 1996 at its current location. In recognition of his steadfast dedication to the Regiment and his efforts at starting the museum LCol Grant Mclean, CO 1996-1998, nominated him for the Order of Military Merit which was presented to him in 1998 by the then Governor General, The Right Honourable Edward Schreyer.

In 2005 the Edmonton Historical Board at their 31st Annual Awards Ceremony recognized his efforts for founding The Loyal Edmonton Regiment Museum. The Awards were presented on November 3rd 2005, most fittingly, at the Prince of Wales Armouries Heritage Centre.

This years Edmonton Historical Boards Recognition Awards, the 31st annual, salute four individuals and two organizations for their contribution to building the city and helping its citizens appreciate our precious heritage. This years recipients include a military museum pioneer, an Old Strathcona Foundation leader, a community league builder and a keeper of natural and human history.

In 1985, Atkin established the Loyal Edmonton Regiment Museum Foundation to start a museum for the collection. He worked hard to secure a permanent home for the Museum in the Prince of Wales Armouries Heritage Centre. Under his leadership, the museum has grown and now ranks as one of the finest military museums in the country. In addition to his OMM, the Alberta Centennial Medal and SFOR Medal, Capt Atkin is also the recipient of the Golden Jubilee Medal and the Canadian Forces Decoration with one clasp.

