



Pens for Peacekeepers

The gift of a handwritten letter shows appreciation for Canadian forces.

About two years ago I was selling some of my woodworking and pens at a craft show. After the show, I had several pens left and remembered reading about a project started by Keith Outten, wood forum host for Sawmill Creek (sawmillcreek.com) called Freedom Pens (freedompens.org), which sends handcrafted pens to American servicemen and women who serve in dangerous areas of the world.

I was inspired by the project

and I spoke with Outten about how he was able to organize his project and establish public support. I sent Freedom Pens a few of my remaining pens and included a handwritten letter with each one. It's then when the gears started to turn for me; I began to wonder

how I could start something similar for the Canadian Armed Forces. I wanted a project that said thank you to the men and women of the Canadian Forces, one person at a time. I know that we seldom celebrate what our Canadian soldiers do, and that Canadians

by Jim Shaver

Jim is a 13th-generation Canadian (and yes, he plays hockey). A self-taught woodworker, he now demonstrates woodworking at a Lee Valley store and for his woodworking clubs. He's a founding member of the Halton Furniture Makers Society and has recently been named a forum host at woodcentral.com.

Dear Canadian Peacekeeper,
My name is Jim Shaver and I made this pen that I want you to have. Woodworking is one of my hobbies and I thought that I would reach out and tell you as a fellow Canadian how PROUD I am of the work you do and what your commitment and courage mean to us.

Photo by Al Parrish

are a patriotic people, but we don't usually show it in an outward fashion. I want to change that.

I soon found just the right person to help with the project: Shirley Penny of the Canadian Armed Forces.

A Gift of a Letter

I made 12 pens and sent them to Shirley, who sent them to the peacekeeping forces located in Afghanistan, in December 2004. Within a few weeks I was receiving letters and e-mails from the recipients. It was a very moving moment when the first one came in, and it affirmed the idea that I needed to develop and engage other people in the project. It also became clear



Photos courtesy of Canadian Armed Forces

to me from the responses in the letters that the significance of the pen was deeply appreciated but that the accompanying letter was the real gift. In my letters, I tell members of the Canadian Armed Forces how much I appreciate their efforts in keeping the peace and fostering relations in difficult parts of the world, and that I realize the sacrifices they are making by being away from friends and family.

The letters were being passed around among the soldiers; some of those I received were coming from soldiers who did not receive a pen but who wanted to pass along their thoughts after reading the letters. My next thought was how

to grow this project and so I gave it a name: Pens for Canadian Peacekeepers (to reflect the best-known global role of our forces).

As many of you know, the woodworking community on the Internet is a very diverse and supportive group. If you have frequented any of the woodworking forums then you also know there is a plethora of information and expertise out there in many areas of interest. I sought some support for logistical help with web site creation from one such person, Mark Goodall in Peachtree, Ga. Together, we created PensForCanadianPeacekeepers.com, so others could more easily read about and get involved in the project.

One feature on the site is the publication of some of the letters that come back. The words are very moving and often express deep appreciation and support of the project's effects on the troops. Letters from privates to brigadier generals have been received and posted.

"Nothing touches the heart like a personal gift such as yours," wrote a peacekeeper in Sierra Leone. "The pen will remain in my pocket each and every day as a reminder that not only am I proud to be a peacekeeper, but that there are Canadians out there who are proud of what we do as well."

One sergeant wrote about the reactions of his soldiers when they received the gift: "The softening of their faces and for some, the tears that welled in their eyes when they read your letter, gave me a real sense of pride for the job these young soldiers were doing over here," he wrote. "To know someone out there, besides our families, are so proud of the Canadian soldiers and appreciate what we do, makes us walk taller and prouder ourselves."

To date, more than 30 people from across Canada and the

United States have donated hand-made pens; more than 350 have been sent. There is no timeline or target number of pens to send. The project has no end, so as time passes along so does the path and events that guide the project.

This project has also developed many positive stories. One involves some special walnut I was given last fall. This wood was originally destined to become rifle stocks in a factory in Toronto during World War II. At the end of the war, some of the leftover wood was salvaged by a factory worker who was also a woodworker. Through a series of events and time, some of the remaining wood was donated to me to support the project. I have since turned many pens from this walnut and I have included its story in each accompanying pen letter so the soldiers receiving them know that they have become pens rather than gun stock from days gone by. (The pictured pen is from this storied stock.)

Shirley Penny continues to be the eyes and ears for the project within the forces. With each batch of pens and letters, Shirley and I discuss where we might direct each shipment. Pens have been sent to many places where the Canadian Armed Forces are on duty, including Afghanistan, the Sudan, Sierra Leone, Haiti and Egypt.

This project was inspired to say thank you to the many Canadian Armed Forces men and women around the world who wear the Maple Leaf not only on their shoulders, but also in their hearts. What I was not prepared for was the incredible level of gratitude and positive feelings that this project has given back to so many people; it truly is wide reaching. It is proof positive that to give is to receive!

To find out more and learn how you can help, visit PensForCanadianPeacekeepers.com. **PW**