

Brothers and Sisters Know No Borders

By Correctional Officer Ryan Lelonde, Pacific Institution

Simon Turner and I attended the funeral of a United States border patrol agent in Bellingham, Washington. While we were crossing into the United States at Huntingdon, we were met by a US customs officer who asked about our business in Washington. She was curious because we were dressed in our ceremonial uniforms.

We explained that we were attending the funeral for her co-worker in Bellingham. At this point, she started to cry and expressed her gratitude that we were willing to travel such a long distance to attend. We told her that we were proud to go there to honour her co-worker and friend. She wished us well. "Be safe," she said, and waved us through.

When we arrived, we lined up outside the church. The motorcade pulled up with the hearse and stopped directly in front of the church. We all saluted as the fallen agent's casket was unloaded and carried inside.

Our Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) Guard of Honour was at the front of the crowd and we could have almost reached out and touched the pallbearers and casket as they passed by. It was a great honour to know that we were "right there" representing CSC and probably seen on every Washington news network.

We marched into the church and lined up facing the dais at the front. At this point the colour guard entered bearing the US flag and directly behind that was the flag of Canada, followed by flags of various American policing agencies.

During the funeral they struck up the US national anthem followed by the Canadian anthem, in honour of our presence. It was a great feeling to know that they would play our anthem just because we were there. This shows that incidents like these know no borders. Even though we are from a foreign country, we are all brothers and sisters trying to reach the same goals and working as a team to achieve them.

After the ceremony, we rushed to our vehicles in the honour guard parking area and then departed as part of the convoy. Our goal was to reach the gravesite and set up for the next ceremony before the hearse and family arrived. We were escorted with lights and sirens blaring through the city of Bellingham and along the I-5 highway all the way to the cemetery. Motorcycle police officers darted ahead to clear the way and block intersections, allowing us to proceed unhindered.

Upon our arrival at the cemetery we quickly set up. The casket was carried from the hearse by two lines of officers to the agent's final resting place. Everyone saluted.

After the priest finished the ceremony, there was a fly-over by two border patrol helicopters along with a fixed wing aircraft, then a 21-gun salute by the border patrol. Then came an announcement by the border patrol over the two-way radios in their cars and patched through to an external speaker for all to hear. "35-49-80, 35-49-80, 35-49-80," it said, "Gone but not forgotten." This was the agent's badge number repeated over and over, and was definitely the most emotional part of the ceremony. We all tried to choke back tears. In fact, I am trying to fight them with great difficulty as I write this.

We received a special thank you from the Bellingham and Seattle police departments, who organized the ceremonies and were very grateful that we travelled so far to attend. We also met some Washington State corrections officers – a great opportunity to share our various ways of doing business.

After all was said and done, we performed for nine hours, including practice and actual ceremonies, plus travel time from Abbotsford to Bellingham and back. It was a long day but worth every minute.

Thanks to everyone who made it possible. ■