

Fans rise early to watch Grey Cup in Kandahar

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KANDAHAR, Afghanistan — It wouldn't be correct to say that there was a case of football fever making the rounds among Canada's troops in Afghanistan. It would be more accurate to call it a simple case of the Grey Cup sniffles.

A half dozen football fans stumbled out of bed and into Canada House, the recreational facility for troops at Kandahar Airfield at 3 a.m. local time Monday to watch the Saskatchewan Roughriders take on the Winnipeg Blue Bombers.

Despite being 11,000 kilometres away from home soldiers like Master Corporal Sandy Sanduliak, 45, of Winnipeg, turned out to take part in a Canadian tradition.

"I'm really happy they made it to the final. I missed a lot of games since I came here but it means a lot being here this morning," he said as he sat in front of a giant plasma screen TV with bags of chips, a box of Tim Hortons donuts and non-alcoholic beer on the table.

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"It's a taste of home. There's a lot of things going on over here and you don't get much but what you do get you really appreciate and stuff like this. It's good that Winnipeg is in it this year — it's made it even better."

Sanduliak and another native Winnipegger from the Lord Strathcona's Light Horse Regiment, Lieut. Jack Nguyen, 23, were worried about what would happen if Winnipeg were to lose.

"It would kill us because it's against the Riders and we've got a big thing going in our squadron - it's an anti-Rider movement," Nguyen laughed. "Our second in command is a huge Rider's fan and we can't let that happen."

Bets may have been made but disclosing them would "breach operational security".

Those that did turn out were a bit disappointed at the turnout but understand the problems.

"It is 3 in the morning and people do have jobs to do and their jobs are very important," noted Nguyen.

The provincial flag of Saskatchewan was hanging over the door entering Canada House but inside only Cynthia Wagner of Macklin, Sask., was cheering for the Riders.

"I know everybody back home was really excited and I had about three Facebook invites to Rider parties so I thought I would at least get up ridiculously early and come out and see," said Wagner, sporting a green jersey with the number six and who had painted 'S's on each cheek. Wagner is married to a soldier serving in Kandahar and works in a civilian agency. She said her husband, who is from New Brunswick, unfortunately doesn't understand Rider pride.

"I have 1989 etched in my brain. I remember watching them last time. It's our province's only professional team so it's a really big deal and it's completely commonplace for people drive six hours to go to a Rider's game," she explained. "It's just sort of a cultural phenomenon that just isn't shared in a lot of places."

Wagner came close to gaining the support of at least one of the soldiers in cheering for Saskatchewan. But in the end, Master Corporal Sean Korponay decided to cheer for the Bombers.

"My parents live in Winnipeg, my wife is from Saskatchewan and I was born in Red Deer. I guess I'll cheer for the Bombers," he finally decided.

For Korponay and Pte. Stephen Ostash, 28, of Winnipeg, the Grey Cup also marked a bit of a going away party. Both men are finishing

their tours in Afghanistan and head home Wednesday.

"Every weekend when the games are on I wake up and watch them," said Ostash. "I'm just glad we're in one spot where we can watch this game and not be getting ready to move equipment or anything."

For Ostash, watching the Grey Cup was a reminder of home.

"Being from the Prairies and Winnipeg, especially after the Jets left, there's not exactly a lot to do on the Prairies," he said. "Football and the Grey Cup most of the time would get the family together. We'd sit and watch in the basement and so I'm just happy to watch the game."