# The Story of the Izzy Dolls Continues to Grow after 30 Years

17 April 2024

On 21 June 2024, we mark the anniversary of the death of Master Corporal Mark "Izzy" Isfeld, who, along with his late mother Carol, inspired the Izzy Doll. After 30 years of distributing these small hand-knitted dolls to children in areas of conflict and natural disasters in different parts of the world, the Izzy Doll's legacy continues strong.

It all started when MCpl Isfeld was on his first peacekeeping mission to Croatia. On one occasion, he had noticed a child's doll lying on a pile of rubble from a bombed house. He thought of the joy a doll can bring and the need to reconnect a child with a doll. After discussing this with his mother, she crocheted some small dolls, and Mark distributed them to the children he encountered during his duties. On his next tour with 1 Combat Engineer Regiment, Mark was killed in a mine detonation on 21 June 1994. After his death, his unit gave the name "Izzy" to this little doll and continued Mark's mission of distributing them.

After her son's death, Carol kept knitting the dolls for over a decade. Several friends and other mothers across the country learned of the initiative and helped with the knitting while Canadian Soldiers distributed them during their missions.

The Order of the Eastern Star supported the project and established a network of knitters across Canada and a means to collect the dolls. The Canadian Military Engineers Association helped with arrangements to distribute Izzy Dolls to our deployed Canadian Forces personnel. With the death of Carol and Brian Isfeld in 2006 and 2007, respectively, the Isfeld family asked Shirley O'Connell to provide the leadership for the continuation of Mark Isfeld's legacy. We now call her the "Izzy Doll Mama."

Over the years, the Izzy Dolls have been delivered to areas around the globe, including Nepal after the earthquakes and Haiti after the hurricane. Jamaica, Uganda, Guatemala, and Ecuador have been recipients, as has Afghanistan. Izzy Dolls were provided to Syrian refugee families upon their arrival in Canada. Dolls were also sent to Fort McMurray to families displaced by the wildfires. The dolls have been distributed widely across Africa through ICROSS (International Community for the Relief of Starvation and Suffering Canada). Various Canadian charities and Canadian doctors on medical missions have also distributed the Izzy dolls.

The network of participants involved in knitting the dolls has also grown as the awareness of the project has grown. Izzy Dolls have been knitted and crocheted by individual women working in their homes in Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia. Volunteers include church groups and other community-minded groups. High school students have also been involved.

Opportunities have been seized to increase the awareness of the Izzy Dolls. Author/singer/songwriter Phyllis Wheaton published her book "In the Mood for Peace: The Story of the Izzy Doll" and a CD, "In Harm's Way."

The Izzy Doll project has also captured the interest of our youth. The Veterans Affairs Canada program "Encounters with Canada" selected students from across Canada to visit Ottawa during Remembrance Week to discover their country and develop their civic leadership skills. For a decade, students attending this program participated in an Izzy Doll workshop where they learned the history of the Izzy Doll and made a doll that eventually joined other dolls to find its way to some trouble spot.

The Izzy Doll is displayed in the Canadian War Museum. It is now also part of the Canadian Museum of History's" History Box," the teacher's travelling educational kits that help teachers impart Canadian history. The Izzy Doll package is reported to be one of the more popular topics among the students.

Public awareness of the Izzy Doll has increased through articles in the Royal Canadian Legion magazine, the Readers Digest magazine "Our Canada," and "PK75," which features stories of Canada's involvement in peacekeeping.

Most recently, the Juno Beach Centre added the Izzy Doll to the permanent display in their "Faces of Canada" Room. This room reflects significant changes in the culture of remembrance in Canada since the Second World War. It invites visitors to discover topics such as Canadians' military commitment, immigration and diversity, volunteering, and the activism that forges Canadian society.

During the COVID shutdown, knitters across Canada continued to make Izzy Dolls, which were sent to Health Partners International Canada (HIPC). When the shutdown was lifted, HPIC sent 17,000 Izzy Dolls to Ukraine for distribution to the children who were the victims of the war in Ukraine.

The United Nations Association in Canada recently requested Izzy Dolls for a special Gala event in Toronto. Following the Gala, the dolls were distributed to children in Ukraine.

Over the past 30 years, Izzy Dolls have comforted nearly two million children worldwide suffering from the consequences of war or natural disasters. The work to provide Izzy Dolls to these children continues in memory of Master Corporal Mark Isfeld.

For more information on the Izzy Doll, please contact IzzyDoll@cmea-agmc.ca