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Defence chief celebrates cadets
General urges Pictou County youth to work hard 'to learn and to lead'
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NEW GLASGOW — Gen. Walter Natynczyk lived up to his rank as he commanded the attention of a room full of cadets.

Natynczyk, Canada's chief of defence staff, spent Tuesday night with air, army and sea cadets from Pictou County and met with reservists. He was visiting to the area with Defence Minister Peter MacKay.

Natynczyk told the cadets he started out just like them. At age 12, he donned the light-blue air cadet uniform.

"The best decision I ever made was to become a cadet."

That decision was made on the basis of wanting to become involved with a group and wanting to contribute to his community.

Natynczyk talked about the importance of setting goals, working hard, taking advantage of opportunities and contributing to society.

"Push yourself. Push yourself to learn and to lead. You've got to look for those opportunities and grab them."

Beyond doing well in school and being involved with sports, Natynczyk stressed the importance of learning to be a leader, something that would serve the young people well no matter what field they choose in the future.

Although many high-ranking military officials got their start in cadets, so did many commercial airlines pilots and leaders in the business community, said the general.

"You're getting something right now that not a lot of people in Canada get and that is an understanding of how to be a leader, of how to solve problems, of how to stand in front of people and say, 'Here's what we're going to do,'" Natynczyk told the cadets.

"In 40 years from now, any one of you could be the chief of defence staff."

It was a message the resonated with many of the young people gathered at the New Glasgow Armoury, most of whom stayed after to pose for pictures, get autographs or just shake the hand of the man in charge of Canada's Armed Forces.

"It gives me a completely different perspective on where I can really go with the opportunities that I have," said Rylie Dean, 17, an army cadet from New Glasgow.

He called the chance to meet and talk with the general a "once in a lifetime experience."

Ryan Kiley, 17, a sea cadet from Stellarton, said that although he isn't sure what he would like to do in the future, it is motivating to know about Natynczyk's background and where cadets could lead him someday.

"He motivated us to be our best," said Kiley. "He wasn't always (chief of the defence staff). He started just like we did; he was one of us."

Natynczyk said in an interview after the event that talking to cadets is a chance to see first-hand the

importance of the commitment to the cadet program by the Defence Department and the Canadian Forces.

"When you see these young kids who are the future leaders of the country, you get that conviction that that huge investment is really worthwhile."

The impact stretches to every community with a cadets program, he said, and starts with something as simple as shining boots and pressing uniforms before each meeting. Meeting with reservists gives him the opportunity to see how policies developed in Ottawa play out on the ground and also to hear of any concerns.

In answering questions from the cadets, Natynczyk stressed that not everyone who joins the military does so because they want to go to war. Many are involved with helping at home, whether it is during the recent floods in Manitoba or as members of the Canadian Coast Guard who search for people missing at sea or in need of assistance.

As for Canada's present military involvement, MacKay said in an interview that Canada is making an "enormous" contribution in terms of size and leadership to the efforts in Libya, noting that the mission's overall commander is Canadian Lt.-Gen. Charlie Bouchard.

MacKay said the government is still trying to determine where things will go with the Libya mission. And while some of those questions may not yet have answers, the overall solution seems pretty clear, he said.

"(It) has to involve (Moammar) Gadhafi leaving," MacKay said of the Libyan leader. "How that will come about is yet to be determined."

The other question yet to be answered is what will happen when Gadhafi is gone. MacKay pointed to other countries in the region that have struggled with the issue of what to do once a government head is removed or steps down. MacKay said Canada's efforts are being calibrated with those of other countries and he expects the topic to dominate the upcoming G8 and NATO meetings.

"It's changing hourly, daily. It's a very fluid situation."

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