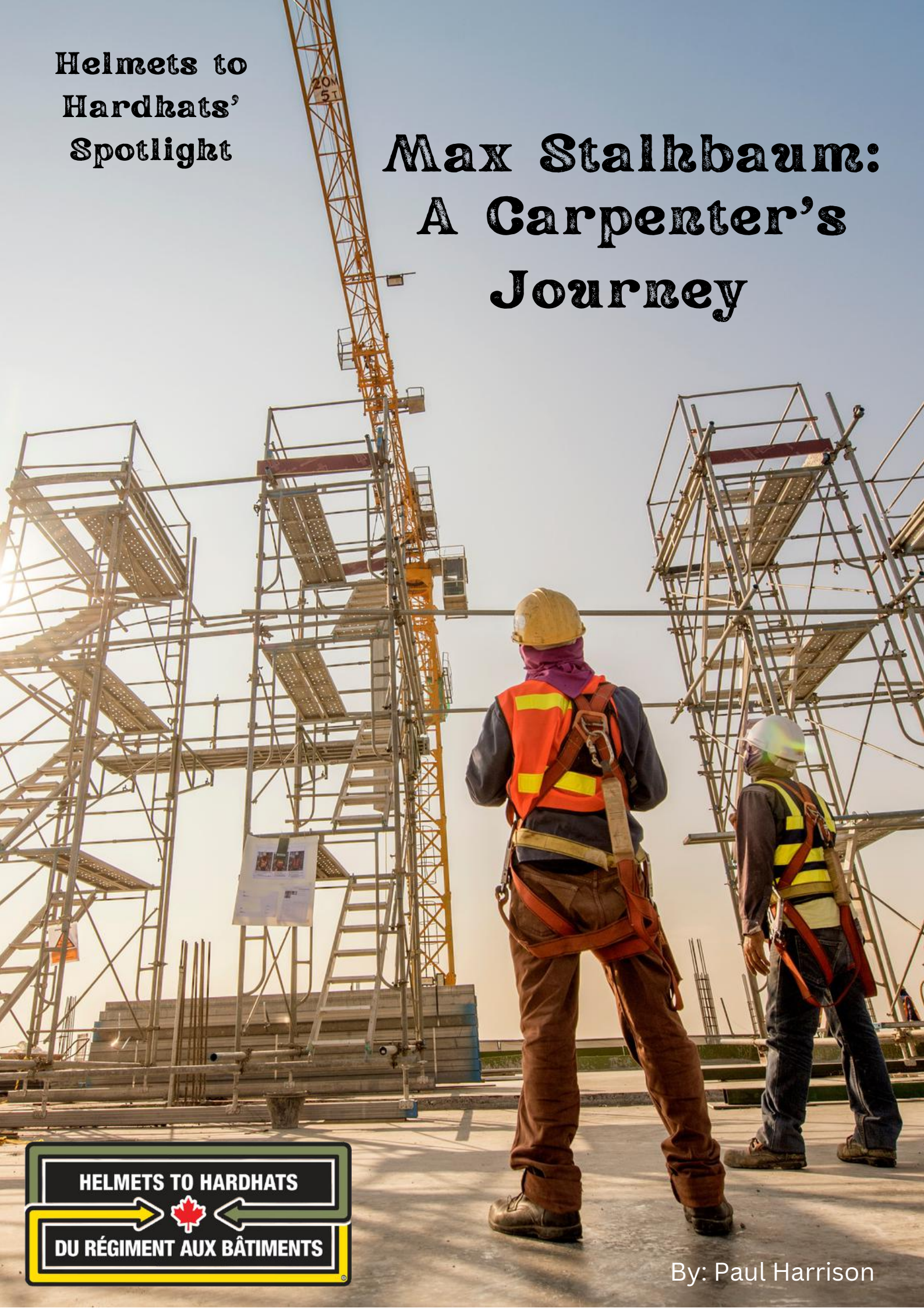


**Helmets to  
Hardhats'  
Spotlight**

# **Max Stalkbaum: A Carpenter's Journey**



**HELMETS TO HARDHATS**



**DU RÉGIMENT AUX BÂTIMENTS**

By: Paul Harrison



## Max Stalhbaum: A Carpenter's Journey

### The Early Years:

Our coverage of Helmets to Hardhats (H2H) would not be complete without at least one detailed spotlight on a Veteran who utilized the program to help him transition into a well-paying, unionized job in the construction industry. Max Stalhbaum sat down with us on Thanksgiving weekend of 2022, to share his unique story:

Growing up in Ajax, Ontario, Max had a regular life. As a teenager, Max would work at his grandfather's marina, repairing the boats housed there. With his grandfather's tutoring, Max learned carpentry skills, and came to love the work he was doing: "[My grandfather and I] did a lot of wood boat restorations. I really enjoyed working with wood and seeing the process of something that didn't look good transform into something beautiful when we were done with it. That's where I got the passion for working with wood."

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### Growing Up:

As Max reached adulthood, he used the skills he learned in his youth to find a career: "When I was 19 or 20, I started working for a builder, installing windows and doors. I did that for years. It was easy work, and I felt a sense of fulfillment doing it; you would start at the beginning of the day with something that didn't look too good and at the end of the day you'd be giving someone a completed house with new windows and new doors. It's a good feeling to be able to think 'look what I did for you. I hope you enjoy that.'" Eventually, Max moved into framing custom homes. "We built some really beautiful houses at that time." But despite the satisfaction Max was feeling from his work in carpentry, there was another calling echoing in his ears.

### Princess Patricia Beckons:

"I don't know exactly how I came to join the military. I had a passion for it since I was a little kid. I don't know if it was external influences that made me think that way or what. But I didn't have any family members who had been in the military. I was the first one in my family to join. My family was, at first, a little shocked but, at the same time, proud of me for doing it. I just wanted to pursue a dream I had had since I was a child and I made it happen." Max's decision to join the military was not typical in that he did not sign up at age 18. He explains: "the military seemed like it had a lot of structure, and I was very curious about that... but I did not join the military until I was 28. I'm 35 now so I've been out for 2.5 years. I waited until later in life (to join up), but it felt like something I really wanted to do."



## **Princess Patricia Beckons, *Continued***

So it was that Max left the comfort of hearth and home in the Durham Region of Ontario and headed west: "I was stationed in Edmonton. I was with 3 PPCLI (3rd Battalion, Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry), which was a light battalion. I was in a mountain company for the infantry." During his time with 3 PPCLI, Max learned many new skills. Obviously, he was trained in combat, but many of his skills were far more mundane, and applicable to everyday civilian life.

### **Life Skills Learned in the Military:**

Max holds that the most important of these skills was the ability to prioritize tasks. He explains whether it's simple things, like "brushing your teeth in the morning" or more complex things, like "thinking five steps ahead of where you have to be:" this kind of thinking was ingrained in Max during his service. "That has been my biggest benefit from the military; just knowing all these little things that I have to do before they need to be done. This makes the things I'm doing that much simpler and run that much smoother: to be able to have seamless transitions from one task to the next, like getting up in the morning, getting your bed made, getting ready for work, and everything like that. Before I was in the military, I made my bed maybe two days a week, and then, I'd come home at the end of the day, make my bed, tidy up – that kind of thing. But now I get up, make my bed immediately and put everything in order. That way, if you ever have to go back to your bedroom during the day, or at the end of the day, everything is in order exactly as you left it. I would say the biggest thing (I learned) was to be able to order and compartmentalize things – being able to have everything stored in a perfect sequence in my brain. I was able to do this a little bit before I joined the military, but the military definitely helped me to be able to concentrate on these kinds of skills."

**"I would say the biggest thing (I learned in the military) was to be able to order and compartmentalize things – being able to have everything stored in a perfect sequence in my brain."**

## Life Skills Learned in the Military, *Continued*

Beyond this, Max believes that the ability to follow orders and understand the necessity of rank and hierarchy are other important skills he learned while in the CAF. "In the construction industry, I found I related to [being able to follow orders]. I was in the construction industry before I joined the military, but afterwards, being on bigger jobs than I was before [I served] and seeing their structure – supervisors, down to foreman, down to the individual workers – it was a lot like the military: seeing how all those different factors work together to create an end goal. It made it easy being able to follow orders and listen effectively to your superiors. It made it that much easier for the people that I worked with; they love me because I can hear them, and I can understand what they're saying and what the end goal is. If I didn't have that perspective of structure and rank, it would not have worked the same as it did. I don't think I would have had the same respect for how important this person's job is to make my job at the bottom, or in the middle, or wherever I am, work, because it all works together. But having served my time in the military, where you have people above you and people below you, you understand that these people are all here for a reason, and their reason is to get the job done.. All the guys work, and you are a cog in the wheel. It's like a well-oiled machine. Moving forward in my career, this is a great thing to understand; understanding rank structure – to be able to apply that as I move up to higher responsibility levels, or to a foreman position: this is invaluable."

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## Calm, in the Face of Adversity:

Reflecting further, Max adds that he's noticed that the military also instilled in him the ability to approach pressure with a kind of stoic resolve. As Max tells me about his preparation to write his red seal exam for carpentry, he states: "[the test] is probably going to be the hardest academic test I've ever done." Pausing for a moment, he quips: "But not the hardest thing I've ever done! There's another great thing from the military too! Going back to school, I see all the guys I am going to school with, and they don't have that same ability to remain calm, cool, and collected in a stressful situation, or in a situation that increases your anxiety levels. Whereas the military definitely helped me to learn to control my emotions and my thinking or thought process, while other guys get more anxious writing a test. But so far, through all my levels of schooling, I haven't had any issues; I'd like to think that maybe that's because I was in the military. Because they train you to deal with stressful situations and to be able to think easily in a stressful situation."

Max continues on the theme of stress management: "even at work too: you get all this stuff dumped on you during the week. Let's say it's a Thursday and all this stuff needs to get done (by the end of the week): our bosses are stressed about it themselves. But personally, I don't take any of that stress home [on such occasions] because it doesn't feel like stress to me. It is more a case of 'we have all these jobs; they need to get done; there's no need to worry about them. We've just got to get them done.' Nothing is the same [as the stresses of military work] in the civilian world, that's for sure."

## Lions, Bulls, and the Edmonton Oilers:

Of course, the military was not only following orders and respecting hierarchy. Max reminisces of some of the fun and exciting moments during his time in service: on one occasion, while training with the U.S. Marine Corps in the mountains of California, Max and his fire-team partner had ascended the side of a cliff. While in position, they received a radio call from a Marine Corps sniper team. Max and his partner were told to "look directly below, 60 metres." Peering down the cliff face, lying in the warmth of the sun beneath them, they saw a mountain lion.

On several occasions, Max and his fellow soldiers, were called to Rogers Place, home of the Edmonton Oilers, to take part in Remembrance Day ceremonies at a hockey game and at a rodeo. "As I said, I was in the mountain unit." Max reminds us. "So, they would always get some of their best rappellers to go to the Oilers' games. We did an Oilers' game where we rappelled down from the Jumbotron, right into the middle of the arena. We brought the puck with us and I gave it to [Connor] McDavid. We also did a rodeo that was at Rogers Place in Edmonton, where we rappelled down from the Jumbotron, and did the big Remembrance Day event for them."





## Lions, Bulls, and the Edmonton Oilers, *Continued*

Max recalls with excitement: "It was 160 feet from where we rappelled! We would have our rope stop about eight feet in the air. They were dynamic ropes, so by the time they stretched just a little bit, you would be six feet from the ground. You would literally just drop to the ground for the last couple of feet. That way you're on the ground right away and ready to move, so you can put on a cool show...We landed on the ice too! That was a lot harder than doing the rodeo show, where we just landed on dirt. Landing on the ice and staying on your feet when you have all your weapon systems on you without sliding...then moving into the centre – it was all choreographed. We weren't allowed to drop anything at all, otherwise they would have to do a commercial break to fix the ice. And it would end up costing thousands of thousands of dollars. I think it was something like \$30,000 to stop the show for 30 seconds! Needless to say, if you drop anything, it's a major faux pas. You have to land on your feet and then go to the centre and that's it." Laughing, Max adds: "After doing something like the hockey game, stress is easy to handle. You don't mind something like: 'we need four pieces of wood cut.' OK that's no big deal."

## Discovering Helmets to Hardhats:

Max explains: "When I left the military, I did all these programs they make you do, so that when you leave the military you don't just go and become jobless. They teach you resume writing, interview techniques, etc. These were courses you could take when you were getting out of the military. One of these courses included a meeting with all these different employment venues, one of which was Helmets to Hardhats. They played their video and I thought to myself: 'well that's great. I already have the experience and all the hours. I might as well do something like that if I need to.' It never left my brain after I saw their video."



## Discovering Helmets to Hardhats, *Continued*

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“When I got out of the military, it wasn’t much of a thought to return to carpentry. I knew about Helmets to Hardhats, but [in the first 10 months out], I didn’t know if I wanted to approach them because I already had connections in the [non-unionized] construction industry. So, I went back to work about a week after leaving the military; there was no delay with that. But after some time, I realized that I needed something that had more structure and, in the long run, a pension and benefits so I could take care of my family when I’m not able to work anymore – just like in the military, where I had all those benefits and pensions. Once you don’t have that, you want it back again. So, I started thinking: ‘I need to look into this Helmets to Hardhats thing and see if I can get into one of these unions. Maybe I can better my career that way.’ It was probably ten months later when I called them. They had so many different options for where I could go, so I thought about that for awhile. And then I met Mike Humphries. And the rest is history.”

## Becoming a Union Man:

Max went to H2H and applied to join the Carpenters’ District Council of Ontario. “I was doing carpentry already, so [joining the union] was a natural fit. I figured that I might as well do carpentry at a different level. I applied with Mike Humphries and I literally got a phone call the next day! It was December 16th, 2019, when I contacted Mike. The next day he had me come in for a meeting and interview, and I was signed up to the union that same day. I didn’t begin doing unionized work until March 2020 because I had to finish up all my safety training and also finished some work for my previous employer to get a few jobs done. I could have begun working for the union even sooner and started with them in early January, right after Christmas, if I had really pushed myself, but it was a seamless transition regardless.



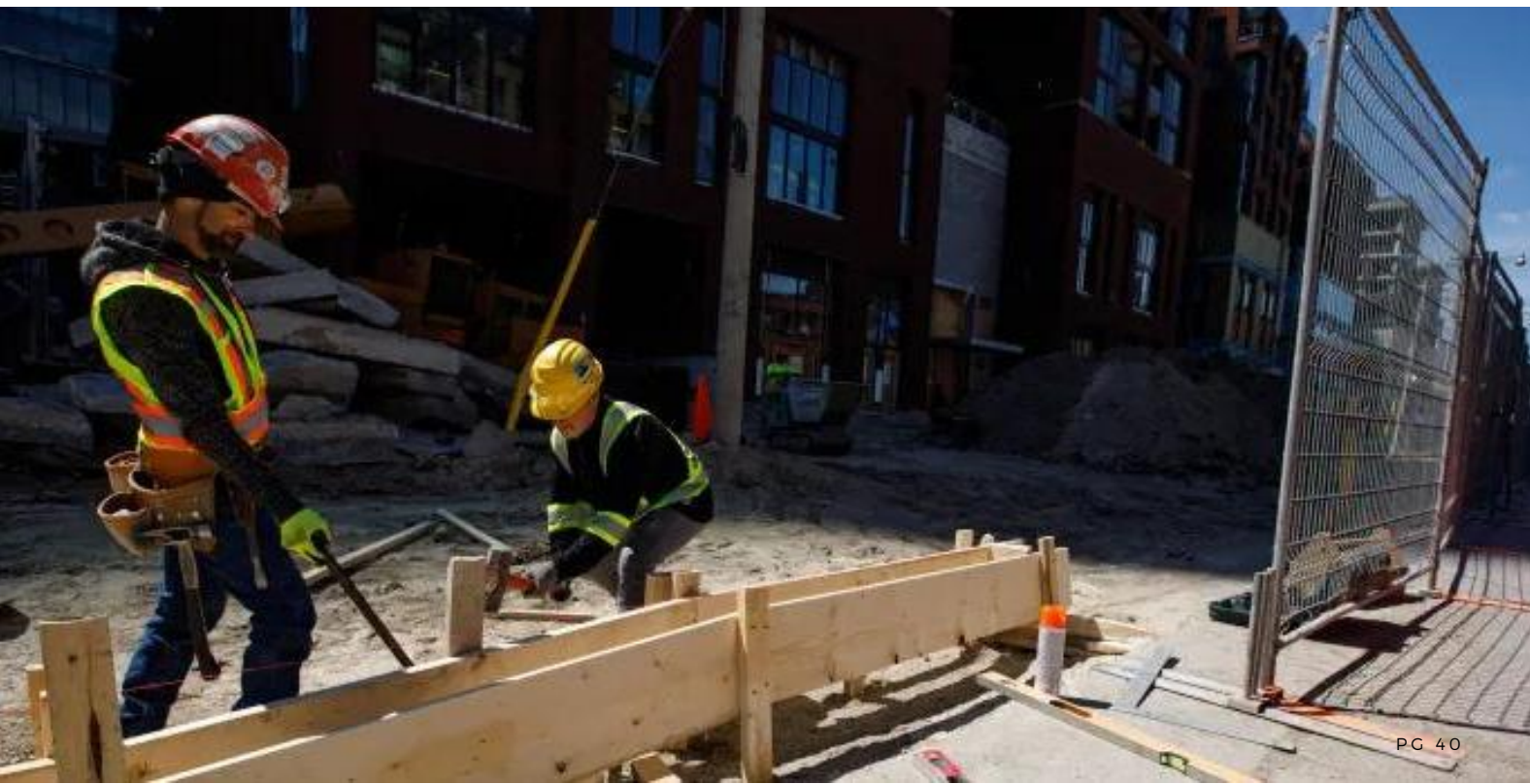
## Becoming a Union Man: *Continued*

“After I got into the union, and because I had a lot of experience already, Mike got me to begin working for a cool company, doing timber framing. This is prestigious work in the carpentry trade: timber framing compared to [the more traditional] forming concrete [method]. I did the timber framing job for a little bit, but then I reached out to Mike because Covid was just starting. Jobs were slowing down as there were no foundations being dug (because of Covid). So, I contacted Mike and asked if he knew if anyone was hiring and he told me: ‘yeah, I can get you a job starting tomorrow.’ Mike Humphries put me with this company, and they really liked my work. They promoted me almost right away. The company went from paying me as a second term to a full fourth term apprentice. Normally this would take a few years to get to that level.”

“From there I started working for a big builder in downtown Toronto. For two years, I did tons of work for them. I enjoyed doing the hours, but I was working so much overtime. I was working 70+ hours a week; I got all my hours for my apprenticeship this way. Now, I’ve just been attending school since I got all the hours for my apprenticeship. I just wanted to do all of the schooling combined; that way, it would stay in my mind, and I wouldn’t forget anything. Otherwise, you essentially do school and then you’re off working for two years, then you do more school, and you’re off working for another two years; that’s what a lot of people end up doing. I wanted to do it all together, so it would stay in my mind. Now I’m just nearing the end of my schooling. I have two weeks left, and then after that, I’ll be a full-fledged, ready-to-go [red seal] carpenter.”

Without Helmets to Hardhats’ help, Max’s landing in civilian life would not have been as smooth and seamless as it was. As Max’s story shows, Helmets to Hardhats was there to aid a Veteran looking for more in his post-service life. H2H put Max in touch with Mike Humphries at the Carpenters’ District Council of Ontario, which was in the same region in which Max lived and had him enrolled in the union within 24 hours. This opened new doors for Max, giving him better employment opportunities than he had had before. When he needed a new job, the union was there for him, and placed him into something immediately. This afforded Max with the chance to complete his entire apprenticeship at high speed, then put him through school at a faster pace, and be on track to earn his red seal. All of this was done in less than three years of first calling H2H. Max’s story outlines the way in which H2H serves those who served their country.

Since the time of Max’s interview, he has completed his final exam and is now a red seal carpenter.



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