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Harper government offloads war

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COLUMN: Susan Riley
BYLINE: Susan Riley
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The "take-away point" from a high-level media briefing Tuesday on Afghanistan — i.e., the story we journalists are expected to transmit — is that, according to senior government officials, Afghans are being successfully positioned to take responsibility for their own security and prosperity.

Whether this is true (there are conflicting reports, to say the least), this is the new tactic in a recalibrated public relations offensive from the Harper government.

With new ministers in Defence, Foreign Affairs and CIDA, a new parliamentary session to begin Oct. 16 and continuing public skepticism about the war, particularly in vote-rich Quebec, the language has changed. No more dismissive accusations of "cutting and running."

It is, increasingly, the Afghans' war, although we still seem to be running things. For now.

What we are asked to believe is that within an unspecified period — but presumably before February 2009, when Canada's combat role in Kandahar is expected to end — the Afghan army and police will be capable of containing drug lords, terrorists and the Taliban in the south, while western-trained judges (including some women) preside over scrupulously fair trials, local villagers brainstorm about municipal improvements, Kabul bureaucrats apply the fine points of "legislative drafting" gleaned from their Canadian coaches and the human rights of prisoners in Afghan jails are respected.

(There are plans for a "fair and transparent mechanism for approving senior appointments," too — something we should maybe try here.)

Not to be churlish, but it requires a huge leap of faith to accept that this attractive fiction is anywhere close to being realistic, especially given media reports of Afghan army recruits showing up fitfully and out of uniform, or, just last week, of accidentally exchanging fire with their Canadian mentors.

If anything, the reputation of the Afghan police is worse (although Canada is funding a course in "mid-career professional skills development" for the notoriously corrupt local constabulary).

Adding to doubts that a poor, ethnically divided, war-torn and largely illiterate nation can transform itself, within a few decades, never mind a few months, into "a country secure and at peace with itself" (in the words of one briefer), come reports that last year's military advances are now in doubt.

Military sources in Kandahar acknowledge that Quebec's Van Doos are fighting to secure territory supposedly won by their predecessors. There is "always back and forth," said Canada's ambassador in Kabul, Arif Lalani,

who insists that Kandahar is noticeably more secure than it was a year ago.

As for remaining pockets of Taliban resistance, ultimately that is a job for local police. "At the end of the day," said another official, "it is the Afghans who have to hold and maintain in the south."

On the controversial question of whether Canadian aid is getting to the impoverished, hungry and ill people for whom it's intended, officials came to the briefing armed with lists of small projects — wells, roads, schools, immunization programs, all paid for with Canadian cash.

These small successes, they complain with some justice, are overshadowed, often by larger failings — including the deplorable state of Kandahar's largest hospital and reports of people starving very near the Kandahar airfield.

One official said the UN's World Food Program would soon be delivering food within 500 metres of the Kandahar base — although officials later refused to say exactly who would be receiving the aid. That information will be given only to embedded reporters in Afghanistan, leading some to suspect the initiative has as much to do with feeding the media as with feeding the hungry.

For all that, helping Afghanistan police itself and run its own economy is a sensible course, both politically and morally. Unlike the Americans, who are also trying to disentangle themselves from Iraq, Canada has no imperial ambitions and no pecuniary interests in Afghanistan. Nor does anyone doubt the bravery of our Armed Forces or the sincerity of the diplomats and public servants who are working around the clock to help Afghanistan rebuild.

As for the media, Ambassador Lalani suggested the public isn't getting "the full story" from us. But it is getting, from correspondents on the ground, as full a story as they are allowed to provide, in reports that have been almost universally respectful of Canada's military.

Media from other NATO countries, along with the few aid workers still in the country, also tell stories that are often glaringly at odds with the official version.

If there is cynicism around this complex mission, it can be found at the top, among politicians and their emissaries. They insist their policies aren't flawed, just the delivery. The real story isn't getting out.

Then they offer a political script that is neither plausible, nor backed by tangible evidence.

Two Afghan police officers, two British soldiers killed

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SOURCE: Associated Press
COPYRIGHT: © 2007 Torstar Corporation
WORD COUNT: 421

Two British soldiers and two Afghan police officers were killed yesterday in Taliban attacks in southern Afghanistan, while nearly 30 insurgents were killed elsewhere, authorities said.

The deaths were the latest in a surge of violence that underlines the weakness of the central government six years after U.S.-led forces invaded the country and toppled the Taliban.

Most of the insurgent strikes are in the form of roadside bombs or suicide blasts, a tactic that NATO said yesterday had killed 227 Afghan civilians this year. That toll was "significantly higher" than the number of Afghan or international soldiers killed by the blasts, NATO added.

NATO, which itself has faced criticism over civilian casualties at the hands of its troops, announced the findings as part of efforts to draw attention to non-combatant deaths caused by the Taliban.

"These improvised explosive devices will have no impact on our ability to carry out our missions . . . but are having a devastating affect on the Afghans," said Maj. Charles Anthony, a spokesperson for NATO's International Security Assistance Force.

The two British soldiers were killed in an explosion as they patrolled in southern Helmand province, Britain's Defence Ministry said. A third British soldier and an Afghan interpreter were wounded, the ministry said, giving no other details.

Earlier yesterday, insurgents detonated a remote controlled bomb under a police vehicle in Helmand, killing two police officers and wounding three, said Abdul Manan, a local official.

Also in Helmand, Afghan and coalition forces called in air strikes yesterday after coming under attack during a combat patrol, the U.S.-led coalition said in a statement. "More than 24" insurgents were killed, it said.

In central Ghazni province, a joint coalition and Afghan force yesterday killed "several militants" in clash, a coalition statement said. A number of civilians were wounded in the clash, it added.

Afghan and coalition soldiers in Kandahar came under attack while on patrol Tuesday. They fought back before calling in air strikes that killed "over a dozen" insurgents, a coalition statement said.

About 30 kilometres away, insurgents sheltering in a traditional low-walled Afghan compound attacked another joint patrol on Tuesday. Air strikes later pounded the position, killing six rebels, the statement said.

It was not possible to confirm casualty figures because of the remote locations of the fighting and the dangers of travelling there.

More than 4,200 people — most of them insurgents — have been killed so far this year in Afghanistan, according to an Associated Press count.

A total of 26 Canadian soldiers have died so far this year, although three of the deaths were not due to enemy action.

Since 2002, a total of 70 Canadian soldiers and one diplomat have died in the war-torn country. Canada currently has some 2,500 soldiers stationed in the country, most in southern Kandahar province.

Election could turn on public's perception of Dion

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COLUMN: THE NATION
DATELINE: OTTAWA
BYLINE: JAMES TRAVERS
SOURCE: TORSTAR NEWS SERVICE
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WORD COUNT: 546

It's easy to be distracted in the political shell game. So get ready for a surprise ballot—question should a fall election plod from improbable to here we go again.

Afghanistan, the environment and the Stephen Harper trust factor will be fiercely debated if this government skewers itself on the sword of its own October throne speech. But the margin between winning and losing, majority and minority, is more likely to be St phane Dion.

Nine months after an upset convention victory, Dion remains an enigma. Is he a slow starter whose earnest integrity will ultimately fuel another fast finish? Or is he a serial stumbler awkwardly going through the motions of a first and last run as Liberal leader?

Much of the cleverness in the prime minister's decision to delay Parliament's return is that the answer will be clearer before Conservatives have to decide on the provocativeness of new fall priorities. Should Dion's chosen candidate lose traditionally Liberal—safe Outremont in a Sept. 17 byelection, party confidence in the leader and his ability to rebuild its Quebec base will vapourize. Knives now barely hidden will flash into full view.

That's no way to fight a campaign some lean and hungry Liberals see as the necessary precursor to another equally necessary leadership contest. But it would be a bonus for a prime minister who grasps Dion's importance to Conservatives.

As pollster and analyst Angus Reid puts it, Dion is the cork in the Liberal bottle. Antipathy to the Liberal leader is what keeps the official opposition from taking advantage of public discomfort with this prime minister and what he and his secretive clique might do with essentially unfettered power.

"As much as the country dislikes Harper, it dislikes Dion more," he says. " That makes it very difficult for Liberals to capitalize on Conservative weakness."

Numbers support Reid's conclusions. While only one in three Canadians support Conservatives, Dion scores half as well as Harper as preferred prime minister.

Conservatives are counting on that leadership edge to make the election difference. And, counterintuitively, Harper's most troublesome issues — the war and global warming — are best bets for maximizing that difference by shifting the focus to Dion.

Insisting the combat role ends in February 2009 and that Canada keeps its Kyoto promise are feel-good, superficially appealing Dion positions that leave Liberals vulnerable. Expect credible compromises in a throne speech that will also remind voters that after committing Canada to Afghanistan and doing precious little about climate change, Liberals now want to abandon one and do the impossible on the other.

Shouting that Dion is a rigid, hypocritical academic fish floundering in political water is more than a potentially winning Conservative strategy: It's also what a lot of Liberals whisper. Yes, many are still bitter about losing the leadership, but it's also true that once rock hard Liberal support is now ice cream soft.

Low public esteem, policies as suspect as the organization and a party weighing its election prospects against leadership change are a toxic Liberal mix. They are also a Conservative opportunity.

Shrewd prime ministers seize those moments. Jean Chr tien won consecutive majorities that way and Harper shares that tactical cunning and killer instinct.

A fall election isn't inevitable. But the odds are improving in lock step with the probability that a country reluctant to trust Harper will be forced to confront its doubts about Dion.

James Travers writes on national issues.

Amnesty voices concerns for prisoners in Afghanistan

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DATELINE: OTTAWA
SOURCE: Canadian Press
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WORD COUNT: 115

Federal Court is being warned that prisoners handed over to Afghan authorities by Canadian troops continue to face a daily risk of torture while lawyers at home haggle over their fate.

Paul Champ, a lawyer for Amnesty International, says the "leisurely pace" of the legal proceedings is doing little to help the detainees.

Champ voiced his concern after the federal government told the court it needs more time to sift through documents demanded by Amnesty.

The human-rights group has launched a legal action trying to bar Ottawa from handing over any more detainees, but the case is bogged down in procedural wrangling.

The government at first refused to deliver documents related to the treatment of the prisoners, saying the material could endanger national security if made public.

Taliban attack in south

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DATE: 2007.09.06

SECTION: World

PAGE: B7

COLUMN: Synopsis

SOURCE: AP

DATELINE: KABUL

WORD COUNT: 34

Two British soldiers and two Afghan police officers were killed Wednesday in Taliban attacks in southern Afghanistan, while nearly 30 insurgents were killed elsewhere, authorities said.

2 British soldiers, 2 police officers, 45 rebels killed in Afghan fighting

DATE: 2007.09.05
KEYWORDS: DEFENCE INTERNATIONAL POLITICS
PUBLICATION: cpw
WORD COUNT: 427

KABUL (AP) _ Two British soldiers and two Afghan police officers were killed Wednesday in Taliban attacks in southern Afghanistan, while nearly 30 insurgents were killed elsewhere, authorities said.

The deaths were the latest in a surge of violence that underlines the weakness of the central government six years after U.S.-led forces invaded the country and toppled the Taliban.

Most of the insurgent strikes are in the form of roadside bombs or suicide blasts, a tactic that NATO said Wednesday had killed 227 Afghan civilians this year. That toll was ``significantly higher" than the number of Afghan or international soldiers killed by the blasts, NATO added.

NATO, which itself has faced criticism over civilian casualties at the hands of its troops, announced the findings as part of efforts to draw attention to non-combatant deaths caused by the Taliban.

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A total of 26 Canadian soldiers have died so far this year, although three of the deaths were not due to enemy action.

Since 2002, a total of 70 Canadian soldiers and one diplomat have died in the war-torn country. Canada currently has some 2,500 soldiers stationed in the country, most in southern Kandahar province.

Defence minister meets with troops and Norad commanders in Winnipeg

DATE: 2007.09.05
KEYWORDS: DEFENCE INTERNATIONAL POLITICS
PUBLICATION: cpw
WORD COUNT: 152

WINNIPEG (CP) _ Defence Minister Peter MacKay arrived in Winnipeg on Wednesday to speak to troops and meet with Canadian Forces and Norad commanders based in the city.

MacKay is touring bases across the country to familiarize himself with military operations, said a spokesman with 17 Wing Winnipeg, based at Richardson International Airport.

In Winnipeg, he was to meet with Maj.-Gen. Marcel Duval, commander of 1 Canadian Air Division, Canadian headquarters of the North American Aerospace Defence Command.

MacKay was also scheduled to meet with Col. Scott Howden, wing commander of 17 Wing.

MacKay made news last weekend when he admitted Canada's NATO allies understood this country's military mission in Afghanistan would not continue past February 2009, though aid and diplomatic efforts would be extended.

Opposition parties have demanded Canadian troops be withdrawn by that date. MacKay also said discussion about Canada's role in Afghanistan, an issue that continues to divide this country, will continue in the House of Commons.

MacKay would not take questions from reporters Wednesday.

(Winnipeg Free Press)

Canada readies warship for Persian Gulf deployment, pending cabinet OK

DATE: 2007.09.05
KEYWORDS: DEFENCE INTERNATIONAL
PUBLICATION: cpw
WORD COUNT: 332

OTTAWA (CP) _ The Canadian navy is preparing to return to duty in the Persian Gulf.

The federal cabinet will soon be asked to approve the deployment of a single combat ship to the region in order to support the war on terror.

The chief of maritime staff wouldn't identify the warship because the formal order hasn't been given, but Vice-Admiral Drew Robertson says he expects the vessel to sail within a few weeks.

"The effort in the region is going to be ongoing for some time," said Robertson, who commanded Canada's biggest naval deployment to the region in 2001.

The navy took a breather since last spring from what's been almost continuous operations in the region.

HMCS Ottawa returned in March after a six-month deployment where the frigate was part of a U.S. carrier strike group.

Robertson indicated that the ship being readied will come from the navy's principal East Coast base in Halifax and has already been exercising with American warships.

Canada is expected to be called next year to lead the multinational naval task force in the region, which it has done in the past.

Over the last few years Ottawa has dispatched warships on an individual basis. It's unclear whether the Conservative government will be required to send more ships to meet the lead responsibility.

"We're certainly capable of making a larger contribution and there's a demand from the region for Canadians to contribute leadership from time to time," Robertson said in an interview.

"The coalition is expected to offer Canada a command role in 2008, but that doesn't say anything about the number of ships, or what the government might _ might not _ choose to do."

Since the first Gulf War in 1991, the navy has sent ships to the region 33 times. By far the biggest deployment came following the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on New York and Washington.

Six warships and more than 1,500 sailors and aircrew joined U.S. and British warships to help hunt down al-Qaida suspects fleeing Afghanistan by sea.

Since then the navy has rotated ships in and out of the volatile waters on an individual basis, but the pace _ when combined with training, maintenance and regular coastal defence _ has put a strain on resources.

Currently, the frigate HMCS Toronto is on duty with NATO's standing contingency task force, which is operating in waters off Africa.

Afghan–Cda–Detainees

DATE: 2007.09.05
KEYWORDS: DEFENCE INTERNATIONAL JUSTICE
PUBLICATION: bnw
WORD COUNT: 106

OTTAWA — Canada's top military cop has been cleared of potential criminal wrongdoing in the legal controversy involving Afghan detainees.

The Canadian army says there's no evidence to support a prosecution of naval Captain Steve Moore, the provost marshal.

The conclusion was reached following an investigation by two senior R–C–M–P officers.

They'd been called in by the military after allegations of abuse of Taliban prisoners surfaced last winter.

A spokeswoman for the National Investigative Service — a branch of the Canadian Forces — characterizes the investigation, which to this point had remained a secret, as procedural.

A separate national investigative probe is still underway into whether individual military police officers in Afghanistan could be held accountable if abuse has taken place.

(BN)

PTH

Afghan–Violence

DATE: 2007.09.05
KEYWORDS: DEFENCE INTERNATIONAL POLITICS
PUBLICATION: bnw
WORD COUNT: 143

KABUL, Afghanistan — Two NATO soldiers have been killed while on patrol in southern Afghanistan today.

The alliance says an I–SAF soldier and an interpreter were also injured, but gave no further details — including the soldiers' nationalities.

Authorities say 20 suspected insurgents have been killed in coalition air strikes and ground battles.

The fighting yesterday and today comes after Afghan forces claimed to have killed a Taliban commander involved in the kidnapping of 23 South Korean church workers in central Afghanistan in July.

Afghan and coalition soldiers in Shah Wali Kot district, in southern Kandahar province, came under attack while on patrol yesterday.

The NATO statement says they fought back before calling in air support.

The coalition said that early this morning insurgents attacked a joint coalition and Afghan force in the Ghazni province, triggering a clash that left several militants dead.

Two Afghan police officers were killed in the Helmand province when a remotely controlled bomb exploded under their vehicle.

Canada has about 25–hundred troops in Afghanistan, most of them in Kandahar province.

(AP)

Dion factor looms large in Harper's decision on fall session

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SECTION: News
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BYLINE: James Travers
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WORD COUNT: 551

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Much of the cleverness in the Prime Minister's decision to delay Parliament's return is that the answer will be clearer before Conservatives have to decide on the provocativeness of new fall priorities. Should Dion's chosen candidate lose traditionally Liberal-safe Outremont in a Sept. 17 by-election, party confidence in the leader and his ability to rebuild its Quebec base will vaporize. Knives now barely hidden will flash into full view.

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"As much as the country dislikes Harper, it dislikes Dion more," he says. "That makes it very difficult for Liberals to capitalize on Conservative weakness."

Numbers support Reid's conclusions. While only one in three Canadians support Conservatives, Dion scores half as well as Harper as preferred prime minister.

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A fall election isn't inevitable. But the odds are improving in lock step with the probability that a country reluctant to trust Harper will be forced to confront its doubts about Dion.

James Travers' national affairs column appears Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday.

Harper wants to use APEC as forum on Afghanistan; Eyes wider international military, development efforts in the region

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BYLINE: Tonda MacCharles
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COPYRIGHT: © 2007 Torstar Corporation
WORD COUNT: 432

With Canada poised to debate what role Canadian troops in Afghanistan should have beyond the mission's February 2009 deadline, Prime Minister Stephen Harper is looking to broaden international military and development efforts in the region at the summit of 21 Asia Pacific leaders this weekend.

"Whether it's at APEC or another forum, there are many ways in which other countries can participate," said a Canadian official, speaking on background.

"Sometimes it's through the provision of additional combat troops. Sometimes it's through medical support, logistical support. Sometimes it's in things like co-ordinating our approach to other governments, like Pakistan."

Australian host Prime Minister John Howard has shifted energy, security and climate change to the top of this year's agenda.

Also top of mind, says Howard, are issues of global security at meetings that include the leaders of Russia, China, South Korea, Japan, the U.S. and Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim nation.

Harper was to arrive this afternoon for the summit in Sydney.

Details of which bilateral meetings Harper would hold were not released but one senior official said the PM would use the summit as a way "to advance issues of importance fundamental to our collective efforts in Afghanistan."

The Afghanistan file is politically explosive for Harper's minority government, with Canadian casualties rising, Afghan security forces reported to be losing ground to Taliban-backed insurgents, and the fears about Taliban kidnappings of international aid workers.

Rookie Foreign Affairs Minister Maxime Bernier last week chided the South Korean government for directly negotiating the release of Christian Korean aid workers who'd been seized as hostages by the Taliban.

"We do not negotiate with terrorists, for any reason. Such negotiations, even if unsuccessful, only lead to further acts of terrorism," said Bernier, who will attend the summit.

Harper wants to use APEC as forum on Afghanistan; Eyes wider international military, development efforts in

American officials briefing reporters said U.S. President George W. Bush would highlight his concerns about Iran, Iraq and Afghanistan in many bilateral and multilateral meetings with counterparts.

Critics of Bush's Iraq policy say he diverted troops out of Afghanistan, undermining the international effort at stability there, for what turned out to be an ill-conceived war in Iraq.

Indeed, Bush intends to leave the APEC meeting after the first day to return to the U.S. to get ready for next week's debate over the future of American troops in Iraq.

The summit will be the second meeting of APEC leaders in under 10 months. They previously met last November in Hanoi.

In addition, Harper and leaders of the world's seven other major economic powers met at the G-8 in June, where climate change was also on the agenda.

Other issues Harper and the APEC leaders will address this year are stalled World Trade Organization talks, and more liberalized Pacific regional trade – a longstanding, but still unrealized goal of APEC member countries.

Harper's communications director Sandra Buckler said the Prime Minister's officials are working on a "couple" of bilateral meetings with country leaders, but would not confirm which ones.

Afghan blast kills 2 British soldiers

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Sun
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PAGE: 7
BYLINE: AP
DATELINE: KABUL
WORD COUNT: 177

Two British soldiers and two Afghan police officers were killed yesterday in Taliban attacks in southern Afghanistan, while nearly 30 insurgents were killed elsewhere, authorities said.

The deaths were the latest in a surge of violence that underlines the weakness of the central government six years after U.S.-led forces toppled the Taliban.

Most of the insurgent strikes are in the form of roadside bombs or suicide blasts, a tactic that NATO said yesterday had killed 227 Afghan civilians this year. That toll was "significantly higher" than the number of Afghan or international soldiers killed by the blasts, NATO added.

'DEVASTATING'

NATO, which itself has faced criticism over civilian casualties at the hands of its troops, announced the findings as part of efforts to draw attention to non-combatant deaths caused by the Taliban.

"These improvised explosive devices will have no impact on our ability to carry out our missions ... but are having a devastating affect on the Afghans," NATO Maj. Charles Anthony said.

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Afghan blast kills 2 British soldiers

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BYLINE: AP

DATELINE: KABUL

WORD COUNT: 177

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Most of the insurgent strikes are in the form of roadside bombs or suicide blasts, a tactic that NATO said yesterday had killed 227 Afghan civilians this year. That toll was "significantly higher" than the number of Afghan or international soldiers killed by the blasts, NATO added.

'DEVASTATING'

NATO, which itself has faced criticism over civilian casualties at the hands of its troops, announced the findings as part of efforts to draw attention to non-combatant deaths caused by the Taliban.

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Soldiers question general's battlefield decisions

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PUBLICATION: The Leader-Post (Regina)
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SECTION: News
PAGE: D8
DATELINE: OTTAWA
BYLINE: David Pugliese
SOURCE: CanWest News Service
WORD COUNT: 846

OTTAWA — Soldiers who fought in a key battle last year in Afghanistan that resulted in the deaths of four Canadians are questioning why a general deviated from the established plan to soften up enemy positions with several days of bombardment and instead ordered troops to attack Taliban fortifications across a river.

Military officials concede there have been questions among soldiers who had four of their comrades killed and another 10 wounded during the opening days of Operation Medusa last September.

The battle has been portrayed by Canadian and NATO generals as a major blow to the Taliban. But an article in the new edition of Legion Magazine, which is sent to members of the Royal Canadian Legion, brings the controversy into the public and echoes questions about whether Brig.-Gen. David Fraser was right to make some of the decisions he did.

It notes that a series of deceptions and feints that had been planned over a three-day period to allow troops to determine where the insurgents were were cancelled. And a multi-day aerial and artillery bombardment, designed to soften up the enemy, never materialized.

In the end, the article says Canadian soldiers had 15 minutes preparation, in some cases less, to cross a river into Taliban-held territory. The insurgents were waiting, hidden in trenches and fortified buildings. Fifty Canadian soldiers advanced as ordered. Four were killed, 10 wounded and at least six became stress casualties. Six soldiers received medals for their bravery that day.

"This was a struggle that saw a general's strategic instinct — his feel for the shape of the battle — lead him to abandon a carefully laid plan and overrule his tactical commanders in the field in order to send Charles Company on a hastily conceived and ultimately harrowing attack against a numerically superior enemy in a well-established defensive position," notes the 4,000 word article by Legion Magazine journalist Adam Day.

It described the attack as an "old-fashioned (First World War) style assault into the guns, albeit on a smaller scale. It was the charge of Charlie Company."

There was little, if any, battle procedure, no reconnaissance and the intelligence was either insufficient or wildly wrong, the article reports. "This was Canada's first company-sized mechanized combined arms attack on a fixed position since Korea. It was rushed and it was risky."

The magazine interviewed around 20 people involved in the battle, including Fraser. In an interview with CanWest News Service, the general said the article details the battle from the soldier's perspective and while that is valid, the overall picture has to be considered.

He noted that Operation Medusa eliminated the threat of the Taliban in the Panjwai district and later paved the way for numerous reconstruction projects to proceed. It also set the stage for bringing stability to the area where up to 30,000 Afghans have returned to live, Fraser said.

"The article gives you a soldier's perspective and in any operation that is fast-paced, that is dynamic, there are always going to be situations where subordinates will question their commanders and Medusa was no exception," Fraser said. "But look at the overall operation and measure the success. In this case Canadians won and the Taliban lost."

Medusa, involving more than 1,400 coalition and Afghan soldiers, began on Sept. 2 with Canadian units seizing the high points around the Panjwai area. A Canadian major could see no sign of civilians and confirmed that only groups of insurgents were in the target area.

With that confirmation, the established plan called for the battle group to take the next several days to heavily hit the Taliban, now trapped in a relatively small area. Air strikes would simultaneously destroy insurgent command and control locations. Those strikes, however, were cancelled so Canadian troops used the weapons on their armoured vehicles to fire on insurgents.

Canadian commander Lt.-Col. Omer Lavoie explained to Legion Magazine that once the enemy was hemmed in, the plan was to continue to attack the insurgents over three days, mainly with aircraft. Troops would then cross the Arghandab River to attack a key objective on the other side, an area where a month earlier four Canadian soldiers had died.

A series of deceptions and feints had been planned, allowing troops to determine where the insurgents were, according to the article.

But Fraser, who had planned Medusa, visited the area the afternoon of Sept. 2. At that point insurgent activity had eased and the general ordered troops to begin crossing the river.

Heated discussions followed, according to the magazine, and at one point troops went down to the riverbed but were later withdrawn.

About midnight, Fraser again issued his order to attack across the river but Lavoie managed to get that postponed by pointing out the force had little intelligence about enemy positions on the other side, didn't know the depth of the river and had yet to mark sites where they could ford. The troops were then told to attack at first light on Sept. 3, still 48 hours earlier than planned and without the promised bombardment, according to the article.

Ottawa Citizen

Rose-tinted view of Afghan mission

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DATE: 2007.09.06
EDITION: Final
SECTION: Viewpoints
PAGE: B7
DATELINE: OTTAWA
BYLINE: Susan Riley
SOURCE: The Ottawa Citizen
WORD COUNT: 859

OTTAWA — The "take-away point" from a high-level media briefing on Afghanistan on Tuesday — i.e., the story we journalists are expected to transmit — is that, according to senior government officials, Afghans are being successfully positioned to take responsibility for their own security and prosperity.

Whether this is true (there are conflicting reports, to say the least), this is the new tactic in a recalibrated public relations

offensive from the Harper government. With new ministers in Defence, Foreign Affairs and CIDA, a new parliamentary session to begin Oct. 16, and continuing public skepticism about the war, particularly in vote-rich Quebec, the language has changed. No more dismissive accusations of "cutting and running." It is, increasingly, the Afghans' war — although we still seem to be running things.

For now. What we are asked to believe is that within an unspecified period — but presumably before February, 2009, when Canada's combat role in Kandahar is expected to end — the Afghan army and police will be capable of containing drug lords, terrorists and the Taliban in the south, while western-trained judges (including some women) preside over scrupulously fair trials, local villagers brainstorm about municipal improvements, Kabul bureaucrats apply the fine points of "legislative drafting" gleaned from their Canadian coaches and the human rights of prisoners in Afghan jails are respected. (There are plans for a "fair and transparent mechanism for approving senior appointments," too — something we should maybe try here.)

Not to be churlish, but it requires a huge leap of faith to accept that this attractive fiction is anywhere close to realistic, especially given media reports of Afghan army recruits showing up fitfully and out of uniform, or, just last week, of accidentally exchanging fire with their Canadian mentors. If anything, the reputation of the Afghan police is worse (although Canada is funding a course in "mid-career professional skills development" for the notoriously corrupt local constabulary).

Adding to doubts that a poor, ethnically divided, war-torn and largely illiterate nation can transform itself, within a few decades, never mind a few months, into "a country secure and at peace with itself" (in the words of one briefer), come reports that last year's military advances are now in doubt. Military sources in Kandahar acknowledge that Quebec's Van Doos are fighting to secure territory supposedly won by their predecessors. There is "always back and forth," said Canada's ambassador in Kabul, Arif Lalani, who insists that Kandahar is noticeably more secure than it was a year ago. As for remaining pockets of Taliban resistance, ultimately that is a job for local police. "At the end of the day," said another official, "it is the Afghans who have to hold and maintain in the south."

On the controversial question of whether Canadian aid is getting to the impoverished, hungry and ill people it is intended for, officials came to the briefing armed with lists of small projects — wells, roads, schools, immunization programs, all paid for with Canadian cash. These small successes, they complain, with some justice, are overshadowed, often by larger failings — including the deplorable state of Kandahar's largest hospital and reports of people starving very near the Kandahar airfield. One official said the UN's World Food Program would soon be delivering food within 500 metres of the Kandahar base — although officials later refused to say exactly who would be receiving the aid. That information will be given only to embedded reporters in Afghanistan, leading some to suspect the initiative has as much to do with feeding the media as with feeding the hungry.

For all that, helping Afghanistan police itself and run its own economy is a sensible course, both politically and morally. Unlike the Americans, who are also trying to disentangle themselves from Iraq, Canada has no imperial ambitions and no pecuniary interests in Afghanistan. Nor does anyone doubt the bravery of our Armed Forces or the sincerity of the diplomats and public servants who are working around the clock to help Afghanistan rebuild. As for the media, Ambassador Lalani suggested the public isn't getting "the full story" from us. But it is getting, from correspondents on the ground, as full a story as they are allowed to provide, in reports that have been almost universally respectful of Canada's military. Media from other NATO countries, along with the few aid workers still in the country, also tell stories that are often glaringly at odds with the official version.

If there is cynicism around this complex mission, it can be found at the top, among politicians and their emissaries. They insist their policies aren't flawed, just the delivery. The real story isn't getting out. Then they offer a political script that is neither plausible, nor backed by tangible evidence.

– Riley writes for the Ottawa Citizen.

Afghan blast kills 2 British soldiers

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PUBLICATION: The Edmonton Sun
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SECTION: News
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BYLINE: AP
DATELINE: KABUL
WORD COUNT: 177

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SOURCETAG 0709060490

PUBLICATION: The Calgary Sun

DATE: 2007.09.06

EDITION: Final

SECTION: News

PAGE: 10

BYLINE: AP

DATELINE: KABUL

WORD COUNT: 177

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Mayor claims no 'hypocrisy' Decal debate haunts Yellow Ribbon declaration

SOURCETAG: 0709060481
PUBLICATION: The Calgary Sun
DATE: 2007.09.06
EDITION: Final
SECTION: News
PAGE: 5
ILLUSTRATION: 2 photos 1. photo of DAVE BRONCONNIER No 'hypocrisy' 2. photo of RIC MCIVER Playing 'politics'
BYLINE: SHAWN LOGAN, SUN MEDIA
WORD COUNT: 305

Mayor Dave Bronconnier says there is no hypocrisy in the city declaring September Yellow Ribbon Month while at the same time refusing to allow "Support Our Troops" decals on city vehicles.

Flanked by a military colour guard that raised the Canadian Forces flag in front of old City Hall yesterday, the mayor said Calgary's support goes beyond symbolic gestures.

Asked if the declaration was hypocritical, he said: "This will be the first of a number of initiatives to come forward this fall as we lead up to the departure of about 100 troops based in Calgary as they head off for Afghanistan," he said.

"I think city council's been very clear on where we're headed and that is to provide tangible support."

Controversy was sparked in July when council shot down a plan to adorn its entire civic fleet with yellow ribbon stickers, opting instead to sell the decorations at city facilities and give the proceeds to military families.

The resulting fallout saw many city workers defy the edict and place the decals on their vehicles, in some cases, leading to managers ordering them removed.

Declaring Yellow Ribbon Month, Bronconnier urged Calgarians to purchase the stickers to help support the families of troops abroad.

The Forces flag will be flown outside city hall for the entire month before it moves to its permanent home in council chambers.

But Ald. Ric McIver, who has led the yellow ribbon charge, said while he supports celebrating the troops for the entire month, it amounts to little more than politics.

"It's a good thing by itself but it doesn't substitute saying thank you all year round," he said.

"Everything we do is politics — we're playing catch up here."

McIver plans to bring a new motion to council on Monday allowing individual city workers to voluntarily put troop support decals on their vehicles and only an affirmative vote, he said, will redeem his colleagues.

Col. Art Wriedt, commander of the 41st Canadian Brigade Group based in Calgary, attended the ceremony but declined comment on council's previous decision, noting any support for troops is welcome.

"All I can say is I appreciate any recognition the soldiers and their families get," he said. However, asked his feelings on other cities, such as Edmonton and Toronto, which have used the decals on their fleets, Wriedt said, "Good for them." KEYWORDS=ALBERTA

Gutless Silly Hall vs. fearless leader Who wins the ribbon fight? Bronco again!

SOURCETAG 0707240619
PUBLICATION: The Calgary Sun
DATE: 2007.07.24
EDITION: Final
SECTION: News
PAGE: 5
BYLINE: RICK BELL
COLUMN: Page Five
WORD COUNT: 622

Gutless. But it's Silly Hall and they are usually absent many inches of intestine.

Yes, decals are not going on city vehicles.

The city council do put the decals on the agenda. But then they turn around and squash them and do the stomp with a political powerplay sure to make this week's highlight reel. Ald. Ric McIver, the member of city council behind the idea of sticking Support Our Troops decals on all city vehicles, sure sounds upbeat on the weekend. He thinks if he could just get his colleagues to debate the idea then it would succeed. Boy, is he wrong.

After all, the decals aren't about the whys and wherefores of the mission of Afghanistan or anywhere else. They are about us as a city supporting our Canadian men and women doing the ultimate service on the front lines.

So, yesterday morning, by an 11–4 vote, council allows the decal debate to go ahead.

But then the good intention hits the road to political hell. The brainstorm meets the mayor who doesn't like to lose and consequently almost never loses. He doesn't want the decals.

After hours of mind–numbing and eye–glazing gab, after the debate on decals moves further and further back on the timetable, the item finally comes up at an hour beyond most people's bedtimes.

Bronco rises after supper. He has no yellow ribbon pin on his lapel in the morning, but he sports one on his lapel as he speaks.

The mayor waxes poetic about his support for the troops. He shows off a medal in a frame. He says he wants to do something meaningful.

He creates an either/or situation. He wants to sell decals at city hall. The military families can keep the money. He says it is a better idea than decals. Naturally, it is his idea. Decals aren't.

And he doesn't want decals. Why can't there be both? He doesn't want both.

Bronco is not shy. He has figured out what is thoughtful and comprehensive and it is thoughtful and comprehensive because he thought it. He doesn't want a one–time photo opportunity with a decal. No, not the mayor, he likes many photo opportunities with many things.

Gutless Silly Hall vs. fearless leader Who wins the ribbon fight? Bronco again!

The chess-playing is at the grandmaster level. An alderman sits in to run the meeting as the mayor speaks his two cents. Ald. Madeleine King, the chair for the moment, backs the mayor's right to get his proposal on the floor even though his selling of decals sure looks like it is contrary to McIver's original proposal and therefore out of order.

The aldermen, many who are weird creatures who manage to survive without evidence of a backbone, fall into line like grunts in the mayor's army. Most vote to allow the mayor to get his way and have his brainchild debated. They then stand up and shamelessly kiss the mayor's butt as they remark on the impressive intellect of the man.

Yes, fearless leader, what a wonderful idea. Yes, dear leader, you've really come up with the right approach. Gag.

"The soldiers are fighting for choice," cries Ald. Craig Burrows. But the only choice is support the mayor or back McIver. That's the mayor's gig. Anybody who dares suggest you can have decals on city vehicles and also allow the sale of decals at city hall, the best of all possible worlds, are in a minority.

They just don't get it. This isn't about doing the best possible act. The mayor does not want decals so there will be no decals.

This page will admit I did not even think Bronco could play the puppets as well as he does. But there you go.

A few operate without strings. Ald. Barry Erskine pleads for council to stand up and be counted. McIver says the do-alikes are choosing to do less not more.

"There is great value," continues McIver, on the decals.

"You can choose to say it's meaningless but you're not fooling anybody. You're only fooling yourselves."

A lot of them act like fools. The mayor's idea is a slam dunk. As for McIver, he speaks like a man about to be executed, missing only the blindfold. The decals are a good thing, not the only thing but a good thing, a visible thing.

He gets his best parts handed to him with only three aldermen on his side plus himself -- Barry Erskine, Ray Jones and Andre Chabot.

"I guess we know where we stand. I would do the same thing again. But I'd do it harder," says McIver.

He is miffed. He knows he has been outplayed and politics is a blood sport.

Some people call this exercise democracy but one hopes our men and women in uniform are fighting for something more than this game.

Alas, in the end who will take a stand, who will whimper discontent. Very few.

And the truth remains. Support Our Troops decals will not be on city vehicles. KEYWORDS=ALBERTA

Official story on Afghanistan lacks evidence to back it up; Harper government's latest spin on mission at odds with reality

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PUBLICATION: Edmonton Journal
DATE: 2007.09.06
EDITION: Final
SECTION: Opinion
PAGE: A18
COLUMN: Susan Riley
KEYWORDS: PRIME MINISTERS; POLITICIANS; POLITICAL PARTIES; GOVERNMENT; CANADA
BYLINE: Susan Riley
SOURCE: Ottawa Citizen
WORD COUNT: 828

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If anything, the reputation of the Afghan police is worse (although Canada is funding a course in "mid-career professional skills development" for the notoriously corrupt local constabulary).

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"At the end of the day," said another official, "it is the Afghans who have to hold and maintain in the south."

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Susan Riley is a columnist with the Ottawa Citizen

General comes under fire over deadly battle; Soldiers question tactics used against Taliban

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PUBLICATION: Edmonton Journal
DATE: 2007.09.06
EDITION: Final
SECTION: News
PAGE: A5
KEYWORDS: VETERANS; WORLD WAR I
DATELINE: OTTAWA
BYLINE: David Pugliese
SOURCE: Ottawa Citizen; CanWest News Service
WORD COUNT: 489

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Canadian troops were then told to attack at first light on Sept. 3, 48 hours earlier than planned and without the promised bombardment, according to the article.

Fraser told Legion Magazine that while he listened to what his commanders said, he believes there was nothing to be gained by 48 hours of additional bombardment.

German police foil massive bomb plot by Islamist group; Al-Qaida-linked terror cell raided, three arrested after several months of observation

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DATE: 2007.09.06
EDITION: Final
SECTION: News
PAGE: A4

ILLUSTRATION: Photo: Reuters / A police officer observes the scene inside the main terminal of Frankfurt's airport on Wednesday. Germany said on Wednesday it had foiled a plan by Islamist militants to carry out massive bomb attacks, targeting Frankfurt international airport and a major U.S. military base in Ramstein. ; Photo: Reuters / A German police officer enters the Islamic Information Centre (IIZ) in Ulm on Wednesday. The sticker on door reads Islam is Peace. ;

KEYWORDS: TERRORISM; CRIME; GERMANY
DATELINE: BERLIN
BYLINE: William Boston
SOURCE: Christian Science Monitor
WORD COUNT: 795

BERLIN – Just days before the sixth anniversary of the 9/11 terrorist attacks against the United States, European security forces in Germany and Denmark uncovered two terrorist cells Wednesday that were planning massive attacks even more deadly than the bombings in Madrid and London.

For many Europeans, the threat of a major terrorist attack still does not seem an imminent danger. But the round of arrests this week shows that terrorist cells with links to al-Qaida are stepping up activity in Europe, and that increasingly, the plotters are European-born.

"The threat of new terror attacks continues to be high," said European Union Justice and Home Affairs Commissioner Franco Frattini, saying Europe must push ahead with plans to set up an EU-wide airline passenger data recording system despite privacy concerns.

After months of observation, German police on Wednesday swooped down on a vacation home in the wooded region of Sauerland in western Germany, engaging in a brief scuffle with one of the suspects before arresting three men who had amassed nearly 700 kilograms of hydrogen peroxide that officials said could have been used to make car bombs. Two of the men are German converts to Islam, which officials called another sign of the growing threat of "homegrown" terrorism in Europe. The third suspect is Turkish.

In a seemingly separate development, Danish police on Tuesday thwarted a bomb plot and arrested eight people who security officials said have ties to al-Qaida leaders. Six of the suspects were released on Wednesday and two remain in Danish custody.

Germany is increasingly seen as a target by terrorists because of its involvement in Afghanistan. German troops have been attacked and its citizens have been kidnapped. Despite the plots, there is little doubt, poll-watchers say, that Germany won't extend the mandate of its troops in Afghanistan, a move expected later

this month.

What is more likely is that the new arrests will lend support to Interior Minister Wolfgang Schaeuble's plans to widen the investigative powers of the federal police, to give them more FBI-like preemptive investigative authority. One controversial idea is to allow investigators to use the Internet to snoop on the computers of suspected terrorists.

Schaeuble told reporters that "the terrorists use all the means of modern technology to communicate" and said he favoured online surveillance.

"The big question will be what kind of security strategy comes out of this," says Klaus Segbers, a terrorism expert and professor at Berlin's Free University. "The most likely outcome is that this will put wind in Schaeuble's sails."

German police first became aware of the plotters in December when they observed Islamists under surveillance scoping out sites such as the U.S. air base in Ramstein; Frankfurt International Airport; as well as discos, clubs, and restaurants frequented by American military personnel in Germany.

Schaeuble said at least one of the men had links to a mosque in the southern city of Neu Ulm that investigators have long suspected of having ties to extremists. The man was already under surveillance when police obtained evidence that an attack plot was unfolding. Police continued to observe the three men, who had amassed enough chemicals to make a bomb with the explosive power equivalent to 550 kilos of TNT.

"This would have enabled them to make bombs with more explosive power than the ones used in the London and Madrid bombings," Joerg Ziercke, the head of Germany's Federal Crime Office, told reporters at a news conference in Karlsruhe. "I could imagine, for example, a scenario with several car bombs exploding simultaneously in different places."

During the observation, German investigators decided not to take any chances. While the suspects were out of the house, officials said, police sneaked in and replaced the volatile fluid with a watered-down chemical in case the suspects were able to elude the police.

Even if the risk seemed more calculated after the switch, police remained on alert. On Tuesday, the three men began building bombs, Ziercke told reporters at the news conference in Karlsruhe. Nervous discussion erupted among the suspects because, hours before, the three men had been stopped by police during a reconnaissance drive. They worried about the safety of their hideout and discussed finding another house.

Police decided then that it was time to move in. When the three began to leave the house, federal police and members of the GSG9 special police unit surprised them.

One man bolted, but was stopped after 100 metres. He managed to grab a policeman's weapon and shot an officer in the hand before being subdued, officials said.

"We were able to succeed in recognizing and preventing the most serious and massive bombings," federal prosecutor Monika Harms told reporters.

She said police raided some 41 homes nationally in connection with the arrests.

The men — whose ages ranged from 22 to 28 — appeared to belong to a group called the Islamic Jihad Union, which police said has ties to Islamic groups in Uzbekistan.

City shows the flag in support of troops; 'It reminds us we're not alone,' say families

IDNUMBER 200709060050

PUBLICATION: Calgary Herald

DATE: 2007.09.06

EDITION: Final

SECTION: City & Region

PAGE: B2

ILLUSTRATION: Photo: Stuart Gradon, Calgary Herald / Julie Gow, with son William, said she was pleased to attend the ceremony at City Hall on Wednesday to show support for Canada's military. Her husband is serving in Afghanistan. ;

BYLINE: Colette Derworiz

SOURCE: Calgary Herald

WORD COUNT: 466

For the first time in Calgary's history, the Canadian Forces flag will fly in front of City Hall for a month.

The Canadian Forces Ensign, which includes both the Maple Leaf and military's crest, was raised Wednesday morning in a ceremony in front of Historic City Hall on Macleod Trail.

It also marked the official start of what was declared Yellow Ribbon Month by the City of Calgary.

Mayor Dave Bronconnier, who read the proclamation, asked that Calgarians take time this month to learn more about the organizations that support the troops and their families.

"The intent is not only to recognize those who serve," he said, "but to support the families."

But Bronconnier and 10 of his council colleagues have come under fire since July, when they decided not to mandate putting Support Our Troops decals on city vehicles, leading an aldermen to suggest Wednesday's ceremony could be seen as "hypocritical."

Military families in attendance said they'd still like to see council reverse its decision on the decals.

"Absolutely," said Julie Gow, "but I appreciate any support they give us."

Her husband, Cpl. Matthew Gow, left for Afghanistan in August for six months, leaving Julie and the couple's 22-month-old son, William, on their own in Calgary.

"It's tough because it basically leaves me as a single parent," she said. "The support means so much. It reminds us we are not alone."

Colleen Rowe, executive director of the Calgary Military Family Resource Centre, said other families appreciate any show of support for the military -- whether it be putting a yellow ribbon on a vehicle or wearing a red Support Our Troops T-shirt on Fridays.

"It helps them feel less invisible," Rowe said.

About 250 Calgary reservists have served in Afghanistan since 2002.

Early next year, up to 100 more reservists serving with the Calgary Highlanders will be part of a troop of about 200 soldiers training to head to Afghanistan for six months.

Col. Art Wriedt, commander of the 41st Canadian Brigade Group, which oversees 1,150 soldiers across Alberta, said the Afghanistan mission has brought the military into stark focus.

"We are on an arduous mission," he said, noting it's important for soldiers to feel they are accomplishing something. "I appreciate all of the recognition."

While Wriedt wouldn't wade into the political debate on city council, Rowe said most military families would like to see council members reconsider the decision on the decals.

"I'd like to see city vehicles bearing yellow ribbons," she said, "but I'd like it to be their choice."

Ald. Ric McIver, who has been critical of the decision not to mandate the yellow ribbons, said while he supports raising the flag, it would be considered "hypocritical" if council doesn't allow city employees to display the decals on municipal vehicles.

"I hope we'll make a decision on the 10th that will show support for the other 11 months," McIver said, noting he'll take a motion to council Monday to allow employees to choose whether they want to put the decal on city-owned vehicles.

But the mayor said decals aren't the only way to show support.

In addition to flying the Canadian Forces flag, council has decided to sell the Support Our Troops decals at recreation facilities and donate the money to local military families.

The Calgary Police Service is also running the Soldier Care Package Campaign, collecting donations at police stations to send in care packages to soldiers stationed abroad.

Calgary is also working on a military leave policy for city employees serving as reservists.

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Canadian Forces slowly regaining their strength

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SECTION: The Editorial
Page
PAGE: A16
KEYWORDS: WAR
SOURCE: Calgary Herald
WORD COUNT: 500

Chief of Defence Staff Gen. Rick Hillier did a remarkable thing in appointing a panel of three former deputy defence chiefs to report on how his changes to the Canadian Forces command structure are working.

It would be as if the newly appointed CEO of a major corporation sought the judgment of a panel of former CEOs on his performance: It doesn't happen often.

Demanding a no-holds-barred assessment from a qualified source is typical of Hillier. It is also typical of the qualities that keep him in favour with the government, after more than two and a half difficult years as chief of defence staff.

This, even though the report identifies what at first blush seem important deficiencies. It blames the Afghan mission for soaking up resources at the expense of one element of Hillier's reorganized structure — Canada Command, which is tasked to deal with the defence of Canada and aid to the civil power in the event of natural disaster or terrorist attack.

And, even in main-event Afghanistan, operations are said to be hampered because Canadian Expeditionary Force Command has difficulty providing up-to-date intelligence.

This doesn't mean things aren't working. For one thing, the report was presented eight months ago, and may not describe the present situation.

More to the point, what could be more natural than putting scarce resources where Canadian soldiers face the most risk? Training and equipping personnel for a shooting war must surely take priority over everything else.

Arguably, therefore, the report validates government allocations. Only had resources been unlimited could one argue that not enough had been done.

The intelligence question is more vexing, as for want of information, soldiers get killed.

Here, the report correctly articulates the need to integrate Canada's intelligence silos.

That as recently as this January the expeditionary command lacked around-the-clock backup in Ottawa, even though Canadian troops were first deployed to Afghanistan in 2002, is a shocking omission.

The committee's proposal for a common operations centre for three of the commands so that intelligence can be more efficiently relayed to the field seems like an obvious remedy.

It is worth noting two other things.

Granted, it would be hard to exaggerate the difficulties of human intelligence–gathering in Afghanistan, when all interrogation is through interpreters, but NATO forces do share what they get.

That means the Canadian Forces almost certainly know things they can not admit knowing, even to a committee of retired generals. To the extent that they do, the latter's assessment may be unduly pessimistic.

Second, the problems with Canadian military intelligence are of a type with every other difficulty the Forces experienced, as a result of Ottawa claiming a so–called peace dividend at the end of the Cold War.

The need for spies and analysts was thought to be much reduced, if not anachronistic.

Yet, it takes 10 years to make a good analyst: The lesson here must be that once the skill is rebuilt, it should not be allowed to atrophy once more.

The good news about the Canadian army was beyond the committee's mandate to comment upon, but it is this: As a result of its Afghan experience, Canada now has the best trained, best equipped and best led combat–ready army for a country its size in the world.

There is plenty of catching up yet to do, but the cliché of Canada punching above its weight, often offered as an excuse for inaction, is true at last.

Soldiers question leader after fatal Afghan battle; Soldiers question leader after fatal Afghan battle

IDNUMBER 200709060013

PUBLICATION: Calgary Herald

DATE: 2007.09.06

EDITION: Final

SECTION: News

PAGE: A4

ILLUSTRATION: Photo: Calgary Herald Archive / A Canadian soldier targets a possible Taliban fighter during Operation Medusa last September. Four Canadians were killed in the offensive, and soldiers are now questioning the decisions made heading into the battle. ;

KEYWORDS: WAR; TERRORISM; VETERANS

DATELINE: OTTAWA

BYLINE: David Pugliese

SOURCE: CanWest News Service

WORD COUNT: 460

Soldiers who fought in a key battle last year in Afghanistan that resulted in the deaths of four Canadians are questioning why a general deviated from the established plan to soften up enemy positions with several days of bombardment and instead ordered troops to attack Taliban fortifications across a river.

Military officials concede there have been questions among soldiers who had four of their comrades killed and another 10 wounded during the opening days of Operation Medusa last September.

The battle has been portrayed by Canadian and NATO generals as a major blow to the Taliban.

But an article in the new edition of Legion Magazine, which is sent to members of the Royal Canadian Legion, brings the controversy into the public and echoes questions about whether Brig.-Gen. David Fraser was right to make some of the decisions he did.

It notes that a series of deceptions and feints that had been planned over a three-day period to allow troops to determine the location of insurgents were cancelled. And a multi-day aerial and artillery bombardment, designed to soften up the enemy, never materialized.

In the end, the article says that Canadian soldiers had 15 minutes of preparation, in some cases less, to cross a river into Taliban-held territory. The insurgents were waiting, hidden in trenches and fortified buildings.

Fifty Canadian soldiers advanced as ordered. Four were killed, 10 wounded and at least six became stress casualties. Six soldiers received medals for their bravery that day.

"This was a struggle that saw a general's strategic instinct — his feel for the shape of the battle — lead him to abandon a carefully laid plan and overrule his tactical commanders in the field in order to send Charles Company on a hastily conceived and ultimately harrowing attack against a numerically superior enemy in a well-established defensive position," notes the 4,000-word article by Legion Magazine journalist Adam Day.

It described the attack as an "old-fashioned (First World War) style assault into the guns, albeit on a smaller scale. It was the charge of Charlie Company."

Soldiers question leader after fatal Afghan battle; Soldiers question leader after fatal Afghan battle41

The magazine interviewed around 20 people involved in the battle, including Fraser.

In an interview with CanWest News Service, the general said the article details the battle from the soldier's perspective and while that is valid, the overall picture has to be considered.

He noted that Operation Medusa eliminated the threat of the Taliban in the Panjwai district and later paved the way for numerous reconstruction projects to proceed. It also set the stage for bringing stability to the area where up to 30,000 Afghans have returned to live, Fraser said.

"The article gives you a soldier's perspective and in any operation that is fast-paced, that is dynamic, there are always going to be situations where subordinates will question their commanders and Medusa was no exception," Fraser said. "But look at the overall operation and measure the success. In this case Canadians won and the Taliban lost."

Harper's fresh start a risky strategy; Ending parliamentary session early kills legislation in hopes of gaining votes

IDNUMBER 200709060035
PUBLICATION: Times Colonist (Victoria)
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SECTION: Comment
PAGE: A10
SOURCE: Times Colonist
WORD COUNT: 425

It's disappointing that Prime Minister Stephen Harper chose to end this session of Parliament with important work undone, especially because his purposes appear entirely political.

Parliament was scheduled to resume sitting in less than two weeks, picking up where it left off when MPs broke for the summer more than two months ago.

Instead, Harper decided to end this session and start a new one Oct. 16. The Conservatives gain a chance to write a new throne speech and relaunch their government, which has failed to win Canadians' support.

They can also attempt to control the terms of any non-confidence motion, forcing the opposition parties into a battle on their terms.

The short-term tactical advantages are clear. But so are the costs.

Because Harper has decided to end the session, all legislation now in the works ceases to exist. That includes laws passed by Parliament but waiting for Senate approval. So legislation raising the age of sexual consent to 16, ending the ability of predators to escape arrest by claiming a child looked 14, will die. So will new laws tightening bail restrictions on those charged with gun crimes and measures to tighten the rules around the business use of foreign tax havens.

The government's decision to choose political advantage over completing the work at hand might backfire. The Harper government promised a fresh start and a new relationship with Canadians, who were clearly tired of the political machinations of the former Liberal government. There was hope for a new style of government.

This looks much like the same old political opportunism of the past.

Harper's desire for a fresh start is understandable. After 19 months in government, the Conservatives have failed to win the confidence of Canadians. Polls indicate about 36-per-cent support for the party, unchanged since the election and short of the level needed for a majority government.

Given the Liberals' disarray, that signals problems with the Conservatives' approach.

On some major issues, the government has been out of step with the views of Canadians. It has been unable to articulate a clear vision for our role in Afghanistan, or offer a straightforward explanation for the future of the

Harper's fresh start a risky strategy; Ending parliamentary session early kills legislation in hopes of gaining votes

mission. The government hasn't offered a credible plan to address climate change, which continues to be a major public concern.

And on other issues, from health care to the state of First Nations, the government has still to demonstrate its ability to make things better. There is a sense of drift.

Positively, the relaunch of the government gives Harper a chance to demonstrate that he understands the need to address Canadians' concerns. If he seizes that opportunity, the Conservatives can likely count on an extended period to demonstrate their ability to govern.

If he doesn't, the chances of a fall election will rise sharply.

That is an outcome few Canadians would welcome.

Soldiers question general's decision in attack; Four dead, 10 wounded after deviation from battle plan

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PUBLICATION: Vancouver Sun
DATE: 2007.09.06
EDITION: Final
SECTION: News
PAGE: E3
KEYWORDS: VETERANS; WORLD WAR I
DATELINE: OTTAWA
BYLINE: David Pugliese
SOURCE: CanWest News Service
WORD COUNT: 698

OTTAWA — Soldiers who fought in a key battle last year in Afghanistan that resulted in the deaths of four Canadians question why a general deviated from the established plan to soften up enemy positions with several days of bombardment and instead ordered troops to attack Taliban fortifications across a river.

Military officials concede there have been questions among soldiers who had four of their comrades killed and another 10 wounded during the opening days of Operation Medusa last September.

The battle has been portrayed by Canadian and NATO generals as a major blow to the Taliban.

But an article in the new edition of Legion Magazine, which is sent to members of the Royal Canadian Legion, brings the controversy into the public and echoes questions about whether Brig.-Gen. David Fraser was right to make some of the decisions he did.

It notes that a series of deceptions and feints that had been planned over a three-day period to allow troops to determine where the insurgents were were cancelled. And a multi-day aerial and artillery bombardment, designed to soften up the enemy, never materialized.

In the end, the article says that Canadian soldiers had 15 minutes preparation, in some cases less, to cross a river into Taliban-held territory. The insurgents were waiting, hidden in trenches and fortified buildings.

Fifty Canadian soldiers advanced as ordered. Four were killed, 10 wounded and at least six became stress casualties. Six soldiers received medals for their bravery that day.

"This was a struggle that saw a general's strategic instinct — his feel for the shape of the battle — led him to abandon a carefully laid plan and overrule his tactical commanders in the field in order to send Charles Company on a hastily conceived and ultimately harrowing attack against a numerically superior enemy in a well-established defensive position," says the 4,000 word article by Legion Magazine journalist Adam Day.

It described the attack as an "old-fashioned (First World War) style assault into the guns, albeit on a smaller scale. It was the charge of Charlie Company."

There was little, if any, battle procedure, no reconnaissance and the intelligence was either insufficient or wildly wrong, the article reports. "This was Canada's first company-sized mechanized combined arms attack

on a fixed position since Korea. It was rushed and it was risky."

The magazine interviewed around 20 people involved in the battle, including Fraser.

In an interview with CanWest News Service, the general said the article details the battle from the soldier's perspective and while that is valid, the overall picture has to be considered.

He said Operation Medusa eliminated the threat of the Taliban in the Panjwai district and paved the way for numerous reconstruction projects to proceed. It also set the stage for bringing stability to the area where up to 30,000 Afghans have returned to live, Fraser said.

"The article gives you a soldier's perspective and in any operation that is fast-paced, that is dynamic, there are always going to be situations where subordinates will question their commanders and Medusa was no exception," Fraser said. "But look at the overall operation and measure the success. In this case Canadians won and the Taliban lost."

Medusa, involving more than 1,400 coalition and Afghan soldiers, began on Sept. 2 with Canadian units seizing the high points around the Panjwai area. A Canadian major could see no sign of civilians and confirmed that only groups of insurgents were in the target area.

With that confirmation, the established plan called for the battle group to take the next several days to heavily hit the Taliban, trapped in a relatively small area. Air strikes would simultaneously destroy insurgent command and control locations. Those strikes, however, were cancelled so Canadian troops used the weapons on their armoured vehicles to fire on insurgents.

Fraser, who had planned Medusa, visited the area the afternoon of Sept. 2. At that point insurgent activity had eased.

The troops were told to attack at first light on Sept. 3, 48 hours earlier than planned and without the promised bombardment, according to the article.

In his interview with CanWest News, the general said he hadn't heard that troops only had 15 minutes to prepare for their attack. But he said the intelligence he was receiving from various sources that were part of the battle, including the Afghans and other coalition units, led him to determine the time was right to cross the river.

Australia's much closer to the U.S. than Canada is

IDNUMBER 200709060046
PUBLICATION: Vancouver Sun
DATE: 2007.09.06
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SECTION: Editorial
PAGE: A15
COLUMN: Barbara Yaffe
KEYWORDS: ASYLUM
BYLINE: Barbara Yaffe
SOURCE: Vancouver Sun
WORD COUNT: 608

"It's always a great pleasure, George, to welcome you The United States president is always welcome in our country. We have no closer alliance with any country in the world than we have with the United States."

Does this sound like a greeting Stephen Harper might offer George W. Bush?

Not on your life.

In fact, it was part of a verbal hugfest between Australian Prime Minister John Howard and Bush that took place Wednesday at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit in Sydney. Harper is also attending.

The greeting underscored the remarkably different attitude Australians have toward their faraway friend, the U.S., compared to Canadians.

Britain and Australia fairly compete these days to get into U.S. good books, and do fairly well at it.

Indeed, Australia has supported the U.S. in Iraq from the beginning and, though not a member of NATO, is fighting in the south of Afghan-istan.

Moreover, in Iraq, the Australian government is serving notice that, despite pressure to leave from a good portion of its own citizens, it will keep boots on the ground alongside its American buddy, for as long as necessary.

Howard told an APEC news conference Wednesday: "I made it very clear to the president that our commitment to Iraq remains.

"Australian forces will remain at their present levels in Iraq, not based on any calendar, but based on conditions on the ground A close ally and friend such as Australia should be providing the maximum presence and indication of support to our very close ally and friend in the person of the United States."

The cuddles continued, with Bush responding: "You've got a great military, full of decent people. And you ought to be proud of them. And I know the Australian people are."

It's enough to prompt a Canadian to blanch. Canada has refused involvement in Iraq and is aggressively manoeuvring to extricate itself from Afghanistan, in accordance with public opinion and heavy opposition party pressure.

In Australia, with an election looming before the end of the year, even the opposition has endorsed the U.S. program.

Clearly, the Australians, so far away, and the Brits for that matter, feel no need to put ideological distance between themselves and the superpower.

Indeed, Australia wants protection, lying way out in the south Pacific — so removed from the Caucasian, anglophone world with which it feels a natural kinship. The Aussies are wary of immigration and live in a region where dictatorships threaten and terrorism is prevalent.

By contrast, Canada, which shares a continental bed with the U.S., is standoffish. Relatively few kisses are exchanged with the Americans.

Canadians have forever felt a need to stand on guard, believing the U.S. tends to take this country for granted. They find it necessary to be wary of the behemoth to the south because of its colossal military power, its occasionally bullying political postures, its infectious culture, its nationalistic urges.

But there can be no denying that the Australian efforts to align with the U.S. have a payoff. This week in Sydney a host of new agreements were announced between the folks Down Under and the ones at the centre of the universe.

A U.S.–Australia Defence Trade Cooperation Treaty will have the two nations sharing secret military technology so that their business communities can work more closely to develop new capabilities.

American and Australian forces will be doing more training together in kangaroo country in the fields of international surveillance and reconnaissance.

And a special American base, focused on disaster relief capability, may soon be located in Australia.

Bush also announced that 15,000 young Australians who are students or graduates will now be eligible to visit the U.S. for a gap year in their studies, similar to an arrangement already in place in Britain for young Australians.

"Both historically and contemporaneously," Howard boasted, "the importance of the alliance between the United States of America and Australia is deeply embedded in the minds of millions of Australians."

It is in Canada as well, of course. Just in a different way. And for that, Canadians do pay a price.

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Any 'ism' is bad when taken to extremes

IDNUMBER 200709060042
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SECTION: Editorial
PAGE: A14
KEYWORDS: 0
BYLINE: Craig Rea
SOURCE: Vancouver Sun
WORD COUNT: 120

Re: B.C. high schools get 'isms' course, Sept. 1

While are at it, why not teach the implications of other "isms" that have led to innumerable deaths and plagues on economy and society?

I offer fascism, Soviet communism and Maoism (with seven, 15 and 30 million—plus dead respectively); socialism (the British Columbia and Ontario economies) and tribalism (as in Rwanda and Zimbabwe).

We can even invent new ones such as Talibanism (with which we are fighting a war in Afghanistan); CUPE unionism (no merit, please); land claimism (precious little benefit and lots of money wasted), or even streetism (inner city takeovers by punks, the homeless and drug addicts). I would hope the message is that any "ism" taken to its logical extreme is not a good thing.

Craig Rea

West Vancouver

Doubts about Dion helps Tories

IDNUMBER 200709060056
PUBLICATION: The Hamilton Spectator
DATE: 2007.09.06
EDITION: Final
SECTION: Opinion
PAGE: A17
COLUMN: James Travers
DATELINE: Ottawa
BYLINE: James Travers
SOURCE: Toronto Star
COPYRIGHT: © 2007 Torstar Corporation
WORD COUNT: 545

It's easy to be distracted in the political shell game. So get ready for a surprise ballot—question should a fall election plod from improbable to here we go again.

Afghanistan, the environment and the Stephen Harper trust factor will be fiercely debated if this government skewers itself on the sword of its own October throne speech. But the margin between winning and losing, majority and minority, is more likely to be St phane Dion.

Nine months after an upset convention victory, Dion remains an enigma. Is he a slow starter whose earnest integrity will ultimately fuel another fast finish? Or is he a serial stumbler awkwardly going through the motions of a first and last run as Liberal leader?

Much of the cleverness in the prime minister's decision to delay Parliament's return is that the answer will be clearer before Conservatives have to decide on the provocativeness of new fall priorities. Should Dion's chosen candidate lose traditionally Liberal—safe Outremont in a Sept. 17 byelection, party confidence in the leader and his ability to rebuild its Quebec base will vaporize. Knives now barely hidden will flash into full view.

That's no way to fight a campaign that some lean and hungry Liberals see as the necessary precursor to another equally necessary leadership contest. But it would be a bonus for a prime minister who grasps Dion's importance to Conservatives.

As pollster and analyst Angus Reid puts it, Dion is the cork in the Liberal bottle. Antipathy to the Liberal leader is what keeps the Official Opposition from taking advantage of public discomfort with this prime minister and what he and his secretive clique might do with essentially unfettered power.

"As much as the country dislikes Harper, it dislikes Dion more," he says. "That makes it very difficult for Liberals to capitalize on Conservative weakness."

Numbers support Reid's conclusions. While only one in three Canadians support Conservatives, Dion scores half as well as Harper as preferred prime minister

Conservatives are counting on that leadership edge to make the election difference. And, counterintuitively, Harper's most troublesome issues — the war and global warming — are best bets for maximizing that difference by shifting the focus to Dion.

Insisting the combat role ends in February 2009 and that Canada keeps its Kyoto promise are feel-good, superficially appealing Dion positions that leave Liberals vulnerable. Expect credible compromises in a throne speech that will also remind voters that after committing Canada to Afghanistan and doing precious little about climate change, Liberals now want to abandon one and do the impossible on the other.

Shouting that Dion is a rigid, hypocritical academic fish floundering in political water is more than a potentially winning Conservative strategy: It's also what a lot of Liberals whisper. Yes, many are still bitter about losing the leadership, but it's also true that once rock-hard Liberal support is now ice cream soft.

Low public esteem, policies as suspect as the organization and a party weighing its election prospects against leadership change are a toxic Liberal mix. They are also a Conservative opportunity.

Shrewd prime ministers seize those moments. Jean Chr tien won consecutive majorities that way and Harper shares that tactical cunning and killer instinct.

A fall election isn't inevitable. But the odds are improving in lock step with the probability that a country reluctant to trust Harper will be forced to confront its doubts about Dion.

James Travers writes on national affairs. jtravers@thespec.com

Korean missionaries face criticism

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PUBLICATION: The Hamilton Spectator
DATE: 2007.09.06
EDITION: Final
SECTION: Canada/World
PAGE: A6
ILLUSTRATION: Photo: Lee Jin-Man, the Associated Press / Kim Kyung-ja, left, and Kim Gina, right, recount their experience as hostages. ;
DATELINE: ANYANG, South Korea
SOURCE: Spectator wire services
COPYRIGHT: © 2007 Torstar Corporation
WORD COUNT: 373

Two South Koreans, members of a church group seized by Taliban militants in Afghanistan, are speaking about their six weeks in captivity.

They spoke of being threatened with guns and their fear of dying.

The two women met reporters at a hospital south of Seoul where 21 freed hostages are receiving medical care.

One woman said her group was moved 15-to-16 times throughout the ordeal.

And they feared they might be killed whenever they were moved.

One of the two male hostages to be killed was kept in the same group.

The two women were freed Aug. 13 as a goodwill gesture by Taliban insurgents, who had seized their group of 23 South Koreans July 19.

The remaining 19 returned to South Korea Sunday after being freed last week.

They face a nation relieved that the volunteers were freed, but also increasingly angry at their decision to travel to Afghanistan despite government warnings, and at what many here consider overzealous proselytizing by South Korean churches.

Both Saemmul Presbyterian Church, to which the volunteers belong, and the government insisted that the 23 South Koreans in the group — two were freed earlier — had not been proselytizing, just providing aid. But many religious experts here consider such a distinction meaningless, since South Korean churches provide aid to gain converts.

Now that the volunteers are free, some people are demanding an accounting of who is to blame for the crisis they say damaged South Korea's reputation.

"I expect cannonballs of criticism flying at churches for causing such a disturbance, for squandering national energy and money," said the Rev. Kim Myung-hyuk, president of the Korea Evangelical Fellowship. "This is a good opportunity for Christian-bashing in a society that has been frowning upon churches."

The criticism of the volunteers, and of missionary work in Islamic countries, has been especially vitriolic on the Internet.

"Do they know what a tremendous humiliation and damage to our national credibility we suffered, as well as a monetary cost, just because they went to a place where they should not have gone?" said one posting.

Critics seem especially outraged that their government was put in what they called a no-win situation, forced to enter talks with a terrorist group despite international criticism. Debate on that issue is likely to intensify now that the Taliban say that South Korea paid them more than \$20 million, which they said would be used for more suicide attacks, according to a Reuters report. The South Korean government has denied such a deal.

South Korea, which is about 30 per cent Christian, has become the second-largest source of missionaries, after the United States, with almost 17,000 in 170 countries.

In the line of fire Part 3

IDNUMBER 200709010124
PUBLICATION: The Hamilton Spectator
DATE: 2007.09.01
EDITION: Final
SECTION: Discover
PAGE: D13

ILLUSTRATION: Photo: Special to the Hamilton Spectator / Before mounting an assault on the Taliban stronghold called the White Schoolhouse, the Canadian troops had to bulldoze a path through this grape field, whose dried-mud walls were like concrete. ; Photo: Department of National Defence / At Kandahar Airfield Sept. 5, 2006, five flag-draped coffins were carried onto a C-130 Hercules. Some of the injured soldiers hobbled into the plane for a private farewell to their fallen comrades. ; Map : ; Photo: Mark Graham ; Photo: Mark Graham's eight-year-old daughter, Shae-Lynn, with her grandfather, Albert. 'Our planet sits on the edge of destruction,' Mark wrote in his diary, 'and only through unity will my daughter and her children have a future of peace and prosperity.' ;

BYLINE: Steve Buist
SOURCE: The Hamilton Spectator
COPYRIGHT: © 2007 Torstar Corporation
WORD COUNT: 2366

Monday, Sept. 4

At 0300, Jim Myler was back on duty as the forward air controller after a few hours of sleep, once again guiding planes through the inky darkness of the Arghandab River valley.

It was cold that morning, the coldest since Charlie Company had arrived in Afghanistan. For the first time, heaters were turned on in the LAVs.

Sunrise would arrive at 5:44 a.m., and at first light, the Canadians were going to take another run at the White Schoolhouse.

Except this time, it would be a feint. Charlie Company would make the Taliban think that another offensive was heading straight across the river, but instead, the platoons would swoop down from the north and catch the insurgents off guard.

In preparation for the assault, Myler was directing the bombing and strafing runs on the enemy targets.

He was working with pairs of U.S. air force

A-10A Thunderbolt fighter planes, nicknamed Warthogs.

The single-seat, twin-engine planes are designed to provide close air support because of their accurate weaponry and excellent ability to manoeuvre in tight spaces.

They can carry a mix of 500-pound and 2,000-pound bombs, but their most notable feature is a 30-mm GAU-8/A seven-barrel Gatling gun that sticks out of the nose of the plane like the tip of a cigar butt between clenched teeth.

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That simple action would have fatal consequences.

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The following day, Graham's body and the bodies of Mellish, Cushley, Nolan and Stachnik arrived back in Canada at CFB Trenton, Ont.

On Sept. 15, 2006, in accordance with his wishes, Mark Graham was buried in the National Military Cemetery in Ottawa. That was an easy choice, according to his mother, Linda.

"Mark was very proud of being in the army," she said. "He liked pomp and circumstance and the structure of the army.

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And on Jan. 13, there's a message from Daniel Graham, Mark's younger brother and "a man of few words," according to his father, Albert.

"Hey big brother Mark, I missed you soo much during Christmas," Daniel wrote. "I don't come to this site often, I can't really handle it. I know you're watching over me. Every day, I put on the same uniform you passed in and wear it with so much more pride."

Daniel is also in the army, part of a tank battalion stationed in Edmonton, and that weighs heavily on Albert Graham's mind.

He knows his youngest son wanted to be a soldier from the time he was a little boy, but Albert has lost one child already to the war.

So far, Daniel has not been deployed to Afghanistan, and "I do believe he's weighing his options, whether he wants to stay in the army," his father said.

"Personally, if he walked through that gate and said, 'I'm finished,' I would throw a party," said Albert Graham. "But that's his decision."

With the first anniversary of their son's death approaching, the Grahams are apprehensive. They expect some sleepless nights.

"But for the past 11 months, that's not very strange," Albert said. "There have been a lot of sleepless nights."

There will come a day when he'll finally be able to go through his son's belongings.

They were returned to him last year but still sit in boxes.

"I started one day and I couldn't," said Albert. "I put them back.

"I'm not ready for that yet."

FFF

"Look at the world we live in and think not of your neighbour down the street but think of your neighbour from another country. Think of their children and the plight they exist in each day. Remember this as we soldiers go and do our jobs. Remember that we go, even in the face of imminent danger, we go of our free will. Most with reason and purpose often tied to our homes, our love of country.

"Support us even in times of hardship. Without our nation's support, we have no heart, no purpose, no soul. We, the Canadian soldier."

— From Mark Graham's diary, May 2006

About the author

Steve Buist

Veteran investigative reporter Steve Buist is a two-time National Newspaper Award winner in the Investigations category. He was also part of a team nominated for an NNA earlier this year in the Politics category. Buist has also won seven Ontario Newspaper Association awards and in 2004, he was named the ONA Journalist of the Year. He can be reached at 905-526-3226 or by e-mail at sbuist@thespec.com.

In the line of fire Part 3

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ILLUSTRATION: Photo: Department of National Defence / At Kandahar Airfield Sept. 5, 2006, five flag-draped coffins were carried onto a C-130 Hercules. Some of the injured soldiers hobbled into the plane for a private farewell to their fallen comrades. ; Photo: Mark Graham ; Photo: Mark Graham's eight-year-old daughter, Shae-Lynn, with her grandfather, Albert. 'Our planet sits on the edge of destruction,' Mark wrote in his diary, 'and only through unity will my daughter and her children have a future of peace and prosperity.' ; Map : ;
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Monday, Sept. 4

At 0300, Jim Myler was back on duty as the forward air controller after a few hours of sleep, once again guiding planes through the inky darkness of the Arghandab River valley.

It was cold that morning, the coldest since Charlie Company had arrived in Afghanistan. For the first time, heaters were turned on in the LAVs.

Sunrise would arrive at 5:44 a.m., and at first light, the Canadians were going to take another run at the White Schoolhouse.

Except this time, it would be a feint. Charlie Company would make the Taliban think that another offensive was heading straight across the river, but instead, the platoons would swoop down from the north and catch the insurgents off guard.

In preparation for the assault, Myler was directing the bombing and strafing runs on the enemy targets.

He was working with pairs of U.S. air force

A-10A Thunderbolt fighter planes, nicknamed Warthogs.

The single-seat, twin-engine planes are designed to provide close air support because of their accurate weaponry and excellent ability to manoeuvre in tight spaces.

They can carry a mix of 500-pound and 2,000-pound bombs, but their most notable feature is a 30-mm GAU-8/A seven-barrel Gatling gun that sticks out of the nose of the plane like the tip of a cigar butt between clenched teeth.

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By 0500, the soldiers of Charlie Company were awake and preparing for the new offensive.

The LAVs were all lined up in order, by platoon number, facing north toward the White Schoolhouse. At the back of the LAVs, protected from the enemy, the ramps were down as soldiers ate breakfast, chatted and packed up their kits.

Jeremy Hiltz, 8 Platoon commander, somehow remembers that he was eating strawberry Pop Tarts in the back of his LAV at the time.

"Mark came by and he said he was going to get warm by the fire and asked if anyone wanted to come," recalled Jordan Lobb, who was just a few metres away.

Each morning, it was standard procedure for Charlie Company to burn its garbage in a fire on the ground, and on this cold morning, Mark Graham took charge of the responsibility and started a fire just a few metres from the row of LAVs.

It was no surprise to Hiltz to see Graham standing next to the fire.

"He was the guy from Jamaica, the guy who was always cold," said Hiltz. "We always teased him about that. No matter what, he was always wearing extra clothes to try to stay warm."

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So far, Daniel has not been deployed to Afghanistan, and "I do believe he's weighing his options, whether he wants to stay in the army," his father said.

"Personally, if he walked through that gate and said, 'I'm finished,' I would throw a party," said Albert Graham. "But that's his decision."

With the first anniversary of their son's death approaching, the Grahams are apprehensive. They expect some sleepless nights.

"But for the past 11 months, that's not very strange," Albert said. "There have been a lot of sleepless nights."

There will come a day when he'll finally be able to go through his son's belongings.

They were returned to him last year but still sit in boxes.

"I started one day and I couldn't," said Albert. "I put them back.

"I'm not ready for that yet."

FFF

"Look at the world we live in and think not of your neighbour down the street but think of your neighbour from another country. Think of their children and the plight they exist in each day. Remember this as we soldiers go and do our jobs. Remember that we go, even in the face of imminent danger, we go of our free will. Most with reason and purpose often tied to our homes, our love of country.

"Support us even in times of hardship. Without our nation's support, we have no heart, no purpose, no soul. We, the Canadian soldier."

— From Mark Graham's diary,

May 2006

About the author

Steve Buist

Veteran investigative reporter Steve Buist is a two-time National Newspaper Award winner in the Investigations category. He was also part of a team nominated for an NNA earlier this year in the Politics category. Buist has also won seven Ontario Newspaper Association awards and in 2004, he was named the ONA Journalist of the Year. He can be reached at 905-526-3226 or by e-mail at sbuist@thespec.com.

In the line of fire Part 2

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ILLUSTRATION: Photo: Special to the Hamilton Spectator / Before mounting an assault on the Taliban stronghold called the White Schoolhouse, the Canadian troops had to bulldoze a path through this grape field, whose dried-mud walls were like concrete. ; Map : ;
BYLINE: Steve Buist
SOURCE: The Hamilton Spectator
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The start of Operation Medusa was to focus on the village of Pashmul, located on the north side of the Arghandab River, 30 kilometres southwest of the Canadian base in Kandahar.

In the three weeks leading up to the operation's launch, Charlie Company was out in the field, carrying out small missions but not yet engaged in "contact" — the army's sanitized word for direct combat with the enemy.

"We spent very little time at Kandahar Airfield — as little time as humanly possible, because that place sucks," said Sprague, who preferred to be out in the field.

"Once you left Kandahar, it was your terms," he explained. "You got to dictate the pace of things, what was going to happen, when it was going to happen."

But it also meant leaving behind even the most basic personal comforts.

The life of a Canadian soldier in Afghanistan certainly isn't glamorous.

Most of the time, Charlie Company was sleeping on the ground under the stars. One night, they slept in an onion patch.

If it rained, the soldiers would sleep on the ground beside their vehicles, which were equipped with tarps that could be pulled out for a tiny bit of protection.

"It was just something to have over our heads," said Chad Kinden, a member of Charlie Company's 7 Platoon who's now back home in Lewisporte, N.L.

Once in a while, Charlie Company would hole up in an abandoned building. Another time, they slept in a bunker system that they built.

"In December and January, it got really cold at night, so a couple of us found some stoves that were lying around and used them in our bunkers," said Kinden.D12

By the start of September, Charlie Company was moving into position on the south side of the Arghandab River for the beginning of Operation Medusa.

Prior to the launch of the offensive, coalition planes dropped leaflets in the Pashmul area, warning civilians to leave before the attack began.

"Basically: 'Get out. If you stay in, then you're the enemy,'" said Kinden.

"The only people that were left were the Taliban," Sprague added. "From our perspective, that makes things very easy because then you know who the bad guys are."

But the leaflet drop may have also set up the Canadian troops to be ambushed by the Taliban.

"They're not stupid, they can put two and two together," said Hiltz, adding that it's a fine line to navigate for the coalition forces.

"Optics are sometimes more important than tactics. If you don't give any warning and then you end up killing a bunch of civilians, which you don't want to do, it sometimes is more detrimental to us than any of the tactical achievements we've gained."

Mark Graham was born May 17, 1973, in Gordon Town, Jamaica, and came to Hamilton when he was a young boy.

He attended Chedoke Middle School, then Sir Allan MacNab Secondary School, where he excelled at track and basketball.

At 6-foot-4, with a chiselled frame of 200 pounds, Graham was an imposing, one-in-a-million physical specimen who was as gentle as a big puppy.

He specialized in the 400 metres and was named to Canada's 4x400m relay team for the 1992 Summer Olympics in Barcelona. He also represented Canada in the 400 metres at the 1994 Commonwealth Games in Victoria.

In 1993, he earned a full track scholarship to the University of Nebraska, where he spent two seasons before transferring to Kent State University in Ohio.

Mike Caza, Graham's roommate for two years at Kent State, remembers the sprinter for his sense of humour.

"He was just a character," said Caza, who now runs an athlete training centre in suburban Cleveland. "He always had a smile on his face.

"He was always the guy who stuck out in a crowd, not just because of his physical stature but his personality, too."

Caza was a high jumper from Chatham who transferred to Kent State from Louisiana State University the same year Graham arrived from Nebraska. The two Canadian kids, both transfer students, were a natural fit to be roommates.

"There's not too many guys in the world with his build. Unbelievable genetics. And he had the athleticism to go with it.

"He was definitely a machine," said Caza. "He was obviously a very good athlete but never cocky or

arrogant."

But by 1996, injuries cut short his athletic career and he was unable to qualify again for the Olympics.

For several years, Graham worked as a fitness instructor while also helping coach track and field at MacNab. In 2004, he decided to join the army, in part because he wanted the structure that military life could provide.

Basic training took him from St. Jean-sur-Richelieu in Quebec to Meaford and then eventually to CFB Petawawa, where 1st Battalion, Royal Canadian Regiment is based.

Graham's role in 8 Platoon, C Company, was to drive a LAV-3, one of the eight-wheeled, light-armoured vehicles that Canadian troops use in combat.

"He's one of the nicest guys you'd ever meet," said Kinden, who was a LAV gunner at the time.

"The ladies liked him," he added with a chuckle. "Just go to the bar and he'd be the centre of attention."

Graham arrived in Kandahar in the first week of August with Charlie Company.

"Some days, Mark called me twice," said his father, Albert. "Some of the conversations, he said things, and my answer was 'Aww, nothing will happen, let's not talk about that.'"

"And he said: 'You never know, Dad, you better say some of these things. If anything ever happened, I'd like to be buried in the capital.' And I said, 'Yeah, yeah, right, when you're old and grey.'"

Albert Graham last spoke with his son on Friday, Sept. 1, the day before Operation Medusa's ground offensive began. Mark was scared.

"I don't share a lot of our last conversation with a lot of people. I will just say he knew what could have happened."

Saturday, Sept. 2

By Saturday morning, Charlie Company, the other supporting coalition forces and a limited number of Afghan National Army soldiers had rolled into position along the hillside south of the Arghandab River, facing the village of Pashmul.

The troops were stationed at a place called Ma'Sum Ghar — Ma'Sum is a person's name, and Ghar means a mountainside cave in the country's Pashto language.

Just below Ma'Sum Ghar were the distinctive walled grape fields of the district, set out roughly in 100-metre-square plots.

Inside the squares, there were rows of wide-based mud walls that stood chest high, with the grape vines planted firmly across the tops of the walls. Over time, the vines and roots held the walls together almost like the reinforcing steel bars inside concrete.

The grape field walls were one of the first obstacles that would have to be overcome before the assault could begin.

"They've been there for 50 years, they're hard as rock," said Sprague. "You can't drive through them, you can't jump over them because you've got the vines growing along the top."

The first step was to bulldoze a path through them so the troops would eventually be able to reach the riverbed.

From the troops' line on the hillside at Ma'Sum Ghar, it was about 400 metres down to the edge of the sprawling bed of the Arghandab River, which was almost a kilometre wide.

But the Arghandab was a river in name only. There was almost no water running through the bed, and what water there was in a couple of places could be easily crossed on foot.

On the north side of the riverbed were farmers' fields and the village of Pashmul.

"Because it's a riverbed, it's pretty much the only greenbelt, so it's the most densely populated areas over there," said Kinden. "When you get on the other side of the river, it's trees, plants, farms, you name it."

And huge fields of marijuana plants growing as tall as trees.

"Afghanistan's full of warlords and what I'd heard was that the warlords would pay the farmers to grow these crops and no one really bothered them," Kinden said. "You'd see big marijuana plants in people's front gardens. It's a different world."

By the time Operation Medusa began, Hiltz said, the plants were at least 10 feet tall.D12

From the far side of the river bed, it was about 400 metres through the fields to the first objective of Operation Medusa — the White Schoolhouse, a heavily fortified compound that was known to be held by the Taliban.

The Canadians would learn later — too late, as it turned out — that the compound was nearly impenetrable, and connected to nearby buildings with a series of tunnels.

"It quite literally was a very, very impressive defensive position and they could have easily waited out a long time in there and not been hurt," Hiltz said.

All through the day, Charlie Company pounded the White Schoolhouse with 25–mm cannons mounted on the LAVs, along with .60–calibre machine–gun fire.

The LAV ammo had no trouble reaching the White Schoolhouse about 1.6 kilometres away, and almost no fire was being returned at the Canadians.

Overhead, there was a constant parade of coalition aircraft raining 500–pound and 1,000–pound bombs on the Taliban positions on the north side of the river.

On the ground, Sergeant Jim Myler of St. John's, N.L., was Charlie Company's vital link with the aircraft above.

Myler was the forward air controller and he was responsible for directing the air strikes onto Taliban positions, including the White Schoolhouse.

Equipped with a telescope, radio, global positioning system and night vision equipment, Myler was tasked with delivering the bombing co–ordinates to the F–15s, F–16s, F–18s, A–10s and B–1 bombers that were at the disposal of the coalition's ground forces.

"Who wouldn't like it," Myler said of his job. "I get to go out, put a radio on my back and I control a multimillion–dollar aircraft."

"The pilot listens to all my commands, he's like my robot," Myler added with a laugh. "It's a huge responsibility, but a great one at the same time."

The aircraft travelled in pairs, and from the time they entered the airspace over Panjwahi, Myler's job was to guide them to the targets.

They'd communicate to each other using their radio call signs -- Myler's handle was "Flare."

"One guy's throwing the business while the other guy's covering," explained Myler. "Those two would leave and two more would come."

The air strikes continued all Saturday and through the night.

"Planes, choppers, bombers, the whole nine yards were going all the time, so that was normal," said Kinden. "To hear the planes, it was like hearing the crickets at night: you don't pay any attention to them any more."

The plan was to soften up the enemy for a few days with constant long-range bombardment and air strikes. Through the day, a bulldozer and front-end loader plowed makeshift roads down to the river bed.

"The initial objective of why we took the hill was to assess the insurgency, see what the Taliban was doing there, and try to find their strong points," said Sprague. "At the end of that, we were to move across."

But at some point Saturday, the decision was made higher up the chain of command to begin the ground offensive at first light the next morning, after just one day of bombardment.

"I think because we had been bombing for the previous 18 hours and there was no resistance, I believe in my mind that someone was convinced there was nobody left there," said Myler. "I think the feeling was 'OK, they're all gone, let's get moving.'"

"There's a lot of people that have their issues with (the decision)," said Hiltz, 8 Platoon commander. "At the end of the day, we were given an order."

"It definitely wasn't fun."

For the first time since the Korean War more than half a century earlier, Canadian troops were going to launch a combat assault on a prepared enemy-held position.

"You could see it, a lot of the younger guys, they were apprehensive and it was something completely new to them," said Hiltz.

"They knew that once they were done shooting up there (on the hill), then the next step would be to go across."

"That was in the back of their minds."

Sunday, Sept. 3

At 0600, just minutes after sunrise, Operation Medusa's ground offensive began.

"We weren't supposed to leave until Tuesday, so this was much earlier than planned," said Sprague. "So we really didn't have much of a plan."

"We didn't really know what we were up against."

Charlie Company's 7 Platoon, 8 Platoon and 9 Platoon started their descent down the hillside at Ma'Sum Ghar to the Arghandab River bed below, reaching the bottom in just over an hour.

The LAVs were firing rounds from below while the air strikes continued on the White Schoolhouse from above.

None of the fire was being returned by the Taliban.

"It was very quiet," Hiltz said. "That's the whole thing, it was too quiet.

"Everybody sat there afterward and said, 'I knew something was wrong.'"

The three platoons then gathered in a flat, open field next to the riverbed that was surrounded by a berm. The heavy machinery was used to knock a couple of holes in the berm so that the LAVs could squeeze through.

On the other side of the berm was an irrigation ditch and then a field of marijuana.

The ditch was almost four metres wide and about two metres deep, so the first order of business was to fill in part of the ditch to make a path across for the other vehicles.

Seven Platoon was to head directly toward the White Schoolhouse, with 8 Platoon providing protection from the side.

By 9 a.m., the three platoons were across the first ditch and into the field of marijuana plants.

"You couldn't see more than two feet in front of you in the field," said Sprague. "It was very bizarre."

Seven Platoon was within 50 metres of the White Schoolhouse when they reached a second ditch in the marijuana field. The plan was to once again plow a path across with the heavy equipment.

Suddenly, a red flare shot into the sky from the top of the White Schoolhouse. That was the signal.

"And then it was complete chaos all the way around," said Hiltz.

The Taliban had been patiently lying in wait and they unleashed a furious attack on the Canadians, who were trapped on three sides by the heavily armed insurgents.

Rocket-propelled grenades, machine-gun blasts, small arms fire and the deadly, powerful rounds from Chinese-made 82-mm recoilless rifles.

"They pack a bit of a kick to them," Sprague noted.

"They're actually more powerful than most of the weapon systems we have," Kinden added.

The very first rocket-propelled grenade was a direct hit on one of Charlie Company's Gelaendenwagen armoured vehicles -- G-Wagons, for short.

Seven Platoon Warrant Officer Rick Nolan, a 39-year-old from Mount Pearl, N.L., was killed with the first shot of the battle.

The second shot was also a direct hit, taking out a LAV and killing 30-year-old Sergeant Shane Stachnik of Waskatenau, Alta.

"The G-Wagon that Warrant Nolan was in, that was about 20 feet off to my left so I saw that one hit," Sprague said. "I knew we had casualties there. The second one hit 20 metres to my front, so I knew we had two sets of casualties. These were direct hits.

"It's not like you see in a movie, where a rocket hits a vehicle and it explodes in a giant ball of flame. There's a puff of dark smoke and the vehicle stops."

Corporal Jordan Lobb, a 26-year-old from Dorchester, Ont., near London, was driving one of 8 Platoon's G-Wagons when the ambush started.

8 Platoon was to the left of 7 Platoon, providing coverage to the southwest flank.

"The very first two shots were kill shots," Lobb said. "I was terrified. I had a million things going through my mind because I knew someone got hurt."

Lobb saw the explosion when Nolan's G-Wagon was hit.

"I knew instantly that it had peeled it open like a can. It was terrible." D12

Sprague's first concern was to re-establish contact with the LAV that had been hit.

He learned later that both the LAV driver and the radio had been knocked out. When the driver came to, he managed to transport some of the injured back to the casualty collection point that had been set up in the open field behind the berms by the riverbed.

Chad Kinden and 7 Platoon were at the most forward point when the ambush began.

He was looking through the periscope viewports in the turret of his LAV and he clearly remembers his first thoughts.

"What's that? It's a fucking rocket," said Kinden.

"Once we came under contact, you saw no faces, you saw nothing," Kinden remembered. "All you saw were flashes and the movement of the marijuana plants.

"I can remember it ... I see it every day.

"That was the first time we had seen combat, so it was kind of like, catch your breath and let's get down to it now," said Kinden.

"It's all adrenalin. Three and a half hours went by in the snap of a finger."

Sprague, the company commander, was standing up in the hatch of his LAV, with his head sticking out so he could see above the marijuana plants.

Enemy fire was buzzing around his head. Sometimes, he said, he could feel the pressure waves from a passing rocket-propelled grenade (RPG).

"I don't know how close," he said. "Metres? Inches? Centimetres? Stuff was flying off the sides of vehicles, so I'm assuming some of it was pretty close."

Yet, he said, there was never any doubt that he'd be poking his head out the turret in the face of enemy fire.

"You can't worry about stuff coming back at you, you'd go nuts. You'd never do anything.

"I've got 300—some guys there. If I duck my head down and run away, I'm not really helping anybody. I'm probably causing more problems than I'm solving.

"If I'm going to expect my soldiers to stick their heads up and shoot, which I do, then I'd better be able to stick my head up and shoot. And if you're unwilling or unable to do those sorts of things, then you're probably in the wrong job."

Once the Taliban started firing, Hiltz, the 8 Platoon commander, grabbed his radio, jumped out of his LAV and ran up and down the lines through the marijuana field, trying to organize the troops.

"I remember seeing an RPG fly right over my head," Hiltz recalled. "If I hadn't stepped down in a ditch, it would have hit me in the face. It singed the top of my helmet.

"That was kind of a slow-motion thing I remember."

Because Hiltz was carrying a radio in the field, he was a running target for the Taliban.

"It was very obvious that they were trying to engage me," said Hiltz.

There's little emotion in his voice as he recounts in a matter-of-fact manner how bullets and rocket-propelled grenades flew past his head during the intense combat.

"I went over there expecting that kind of stuff," said Hiltz. "That's what we train for.

"Back in Canada, we do it with blanks. With this, if you make a mistake, you don't just get failed, you get killed. There's nothing I can do about that.

"It's luck, fate, God, whatever anyone wants to call it."

In the LAV next to Sprague, Myler got on his radio and began calling for air support.

"I said: 'Break, break, break, this is Flare, we're taking effective enemy fire. Are you able to come down and support us?'" Myler recalled, "And he said, 'Yeah, I can come in and support you.'"

Graham's LAV was positioned on the far left flank during the fire fight. As the driver, he was under orders to stay with his vehicle.

"He was probably sitting in his vehicle, listening to the radio and swearing," said Hiltz. "He was probably sitting there wishing he could be outside helping everybody."

"As you know, I'm here in Asscrackastan and currently writing you from my driver's hatch. We are currently in the midst of conducting our largest operation to date. We are being told it's the largest operation and objective taken by Canada since WWII. We have been conducting this operation for the past two days with a series of air and artillery ... FUCK wait out. We have been engaged!!! ... We are in a shit pot of hurt! 2X KIA!!

"I'll get back to you when I can. Who would have thought I would have picked this time to write to you!!"

— From Mark Graham's diary, Sept. 3, 2006

Back at the casualty collection point near the riverbed, the wounded were being tended to on the ground between the berm and the company's bulldozer, which was supposed to provide some protection from the enemy fire.

But a blast from one of the Taliban's 82-mm recoilless rifles sent shrapnel flying into the middle of the casualty area.

Warrant Officer Frank Mellish, 38, of Truro, N.S., and 21-year-old Private Will Cushley of Port Lambton, Ont., were killed as they tended to their wounded comrades behind the berm.

The decisive point came a couple of hours into the battle during one of the bombing runs.

A bomb intended for the White Schoolhouse lost its guidance system in mid-air, went off course, bounced on the ground without exploding and slid to a stop next to the Canadian front-line troops.

"So you can imagine that 20 feet to the right, you see a 500-pound bomb bounce off the ground and land beside you," said Sprague, the commander.

"I sort of said, 'OK, we're kind of screwed here,' because I don't know anything about bombs and the thing could go off in two minutes or two days or two years.

"I said to myself, 'OK, it's time to get out of here.'"

Sprague made the order to retreat but it was a time-consuming, painstaking process that took a few hours.

One of the G-Wagons, a LAV and the bulldozer ended up stuck in the irrigation ditch.

A couple of members of 8 Platoon had to jump out under fire and retrieve Nolan's body from the LAV that was stuck in the ditch. After about an hour spent trying to pull the three vehicles out of the ditch, the decision was made to abandon them.

A couple of A-10 planes were sent into the area and Myler spent the rest of the afternoon and the evening directing strikes at the White Schoolhouse and strafing runs across the marijuana fields.

After the Canadians completed their retreat, air strikes were called in to drop 1,000-pound bombs on the stranded vehicles so that they couldn't be retrieved by the Taliban.

The troops gathered in the riverbed, to take stock of the situation and allow choppers to take the wounded back to Kandahar.

The mood was sombre.

"It was real quiet," said Lobb. "I was outright crying. I was bawling.

"We wanted revenge, and we were sad for our friends."

By 3 p.m., Charlie Company had retreated back to its original position on the hillside at Ma'Sum Ghar, across the river from the White Schoolhouse.

"We all wanted to go back to (Kandahar)," said Kinden. "Sit back, not get shot at. They told us no, we're not going back.

"Yeah, we were pretty pissed."

"So the shit has stopped for now. We have pulled back off our original objective. And sure as shit we have our tails between our legs. We got hit and hit hard. 6X casualties and 4X KIA including two Warrants. One was Warrant Mellish, our Warrant. He was a great man. He is the one who inspired me to stay in the ranks and become a Warrant myself.

"Anyway, I'll write you in a bit. Command is figuring what we have to do. This is going to serve as a wake-up call for all those involved."

— From Mark Graham's diary, Sept. 3, 2006

In the line of fire

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ILLUSTRATION: Photo: The Hamilton Spectator / Mark Graham; Photo: Department of National Defence / Private Mark Graham, right, was killed around dawn last Labour Day by a U.S. air force fighter plane, an A-10A Thunderbolt, nicknamed the Warthog. Graham's task was to drive a light-armoured vehicle, or LAV-3. As he made an entry in his diary while awaiting orders in his LAV, the Taliban attacked without warning. ; Photo: Toronto Star File Photo / Corporal Chad Linden, left, and Master Corporal Allan Johnson were with Charlie Company of the Royal Canadian Regiment a year ago at Ma'Sum Ghar, Afghanistan, where a battle with the Taliban left dozens of Canadians injured and five dead, including Private Mark Graham of Hamilton. ; Photo: Spectator File Photos / Private Mark Graham was killed around dawn last Labour Day by a U.S. air force fighter plane, an A-10A Thunderbolt, nicknamed the Warthog. ; Photo: Graham's task was to drive a light-armoured vehicle, or LAV-3. As he made an entry in his diary while awaiting orders in his LAV, the Taliban attacked without warning. ; Photo: Private Mark Graham ;

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Three seconds.

Actually, 3.3 seconds, to be precise.

That's just about the same amount of time it takes to read this sentence.

Still, with the unimaginable fury that's been built into today's military weaponry, that's enough time for a fighter plane's machine-gun to spit out 211 rounds of high-explosive, armour-piercing ammunition – brutal, nasty stuff designed specifically to fragment and then rip apart whatever it touches.

On the manufacturer's website, there are pictures of the ammo slicing through layers of inch-thick metal plates lined in a row. Sometimes, the deadly

17-centimetre-long bullet contains uranium, heavier than the usual tungsten alloy, just to give it a little added kick.

Three seconds. That's all.

Tick. Tick. Tick.

So many lives affected because of a tragic mistake that lasted three short seconds just before dawn on Sept. 4, 2006.

One bloody weekend Part 1

Canadians who lived through the carnage tell the tale of two deadly days at Ma'Sum Ghar

Steve Buist

The dozens of Canadian soldiers left dazed and bleeding in the faint, gathering light before the sun cracked the horizon. Their families in Canada who'd soon learn the news by telephone.

The American pilot, never publicly identified, who ignored the information on his cockpit display and now carries the weight of that fateful mistake with him each day.

And one dead Canadian soldier, a 33-year-old former Olympic track star from Hamilton's west Mountain named Mark Graham, killed not by the enemy but by his allies.

Tuesday marks the first anniversary of the friendly fire incident in southern Afghanistan that killed Graham and wounded 35 other Canadian soldiers.

A long-awaited report released by the Canadian government recently concluded the American fighter pilot was solely responsible for Graham's death and the other injuries because he neglected to confirm his cockpit display, which showed he was strafing the wrong target.

The friendly fire incident was the final, bitter insult of a bloody Labour Day weekend in southern Afghanistan for the Royal Canadian Regiment's Charlie Company.

A day earlier, four members of Charlie Company were killed and another six were injured when they were ambushed in a field by the Taliban.

In less than 24 hours, C Company's 8 Platoon had been horribly shredded. When the dust cleared Labour Day morning, only eight of the platoon's 37 soldiers were left unscathed.

This is the story of that deadly weekend in Afghanistan, told from the ground and from the air, from those who witnessed the carnage firsthand. Some are telling their stories for the first time.

The soldiers of RCR's Charlie Company left CFB Petawawa and began arriving at Kandahar Airfield during the first week of August 2006.

"The heat, the smell," said Captain Jeremy Hiltz, recalling his first thoughts when he reached the main Canadian base in Afghanistan.

"Bullets constantly going off because there's always people shooting on ranges and stuff, helicopters and jets coming and going."

Just 25 at the time, Hiltz was commanding officer of Charlie Company's 8 Platoon, Graham's assigned unit.

Charlie Company's mission was to help lead Operation Medusa, named for the Greek mythological being who had snakes for her hair and a gaze that could turn others to stone.

Operation Medusa was a NATO coalition offensive centred on the Panjwahi district of southern Afghanistan, about 30 kilometres southwest of Kandahar.

The objective was to secure the Taliban-controlled Highway 1, the area's major transportation route.

Even a cursory glance at a history book suggests it would be a difficult mission.

With its mountainous passes and its location in the heart of central Asia, Afghanistan was described by one historian as the "roundabout of the ancient world."

It's a country woven together over time from many rival tribes and languages, notoriously difficult to rule, but even more difficult to conquer for those through history who have been brave enough — or perhaps foolish enough — to invade. The British learned that lesson twice in the 19th century. The Soviet army would discover the same after suffering heavy losses over 10 years following their 1979 invasion.

Canada's decision to send ground troops to Afghanistan shortly after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks has come under increasingly harsh scrutiny here at home.

The casualties continue to mount — 70 Canadian soldiers dead, to date. And there's growing criticism that no end to the war is in sight while Canada's reason for being there has become blurry.

That rankles the soldiers on the ground.

Major Matthew Sprague of Kenora was Charlie Company's commanding officer during the launch of Operation Medusa.

Sprague is stationed in Kingston now, but he'd go back to Afghanistan in a second because he's proud of what Canadian forces have helped accomplish there.

"When we first got there (Panjwaii district) at the start of September, there was maybe 100 people living there because they were too poor to leave or had nowhere to go," said Sprague.

"By the time we left in February, there were 15,000 people who lived in the area, because we'd gone in and made it secure for them.

"They're not sexy stories, so nobody picks up on them, but for all intents and purposes that's the reason we're there."

Mark Graham was also aware of the role that Canadians were playing in lives of Afghans.

In his phone calls home, he would tell his parents, Albert and Linda, about how it affected him to see the living conditions faced by young girls who were the same age as his eight-year-old daughter, Shae-Lynn.

"Mark was clear that he was there for democracy," said Linda Graham. "He knew why he was there.

"He knew it was about democracy and making a safer world."

"In the long run, all that matters to me are my set of values and morals. I believe that those of my leaders and country still remain congruent with mine. These people need help. We, who are the fortunate, must extend a hand to help so as to provide a stable environment for thousands of children to grow and contribute to the final globalization of our planet and destroy those who would oppose such vision and desire with threats of terror.

"Our planet sits on the edge of destruction and only through unity will my daughter and her children have a future of peace and prosperity."

— From Mark Graham's diary, May 2006

SALARIES Police wages set to double in Afghanistan

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WORDS: 542
WORD COUNT: 493

GRAEME SMITH KANDAHAR, AFGHANISTAN Afghan police salaries are expected to double under a new pay scheme now being drafted in Kabul, a provincial governor said yesterday, suggesting that international donors are responding to criticism that the force has been short-changed.

Perhaps nowhere in the country has the crisis among the Afghan National Police – corruption, desertion, drug use, high casualties – been more obvious than Kandahar province, where Canadian soldiers have conquered Taliban strongholds only to watch their gains fall apart as the ANP fail to keep the peace.

Kandahar Governor Asadullah Khalid acknowledged the problems, and said he is working with authorities in the capital to raise the basic patrolman's wages to the equivalent of about \$150 a month, up from \$77.

"Very soon the salary will be doubled," Mr. Khalid said.

The changes will apply to the whole country, the governor added, a move that would likely cost an extra \$170-million a year.

Donors such as Canada pay for all of Afghanistan's police wages through a trust fund, an arrangement likely to continue for years because the latest increases would mean that police salaries consume half of the country's total domestic revenue.

Base salaries for the ANP have already been increased recently, up from \$17 a month, but a growing consensus has emerged that the police are still dangerously underpaid.

A report by the International Crisis Group last week concluded that police salaries should at least be increased to match the \$105 a month paid to Afghan soldiers, because the police take equivalent risks as they're deployed to fight the Taliban.

"Compared to other civil servants, police do relatively well – they earn more than many judges, for instance – but \$70 is not a livable wage, particularly in urban areas, so petty corruption is a temptation, and both recruitment and retention are difficult," the report says.

As the Taliban aim their attacks at softer targets this year, they have increasingly focused on the police, who drive unarmored vehicles and often aren't equipped with enough bullets or weapons to fend off the insurgents.

The Interior Ministry announced this week that 500 Afghan policemen have been killed in the past five months, double the rate of such killings in the previous 12 months.

The salary increase is smaller than the raise requested by Kandahar's police chief, Sayed Agha Saqib, who told The Globe and Mail in a recent interview that the pay should be tripled, at least.

A group of Kandahar's senior politicians also travelled to Kabul in the first week of July, in part to complain about the poor salaries and lack of medical facilities for police.

Salary increases were only one of the dozens of recommendations in the ICG report, which recommended sweeping reforms of the force.

Even the current salaries often fail to reach ordinary patrolmen because the money gets siphoned off by their corrupt bosses.

The governor agreed that the money is only the beginning.

"This is not the reason people are jumping to the Taliban side," Mr. Khalid said.

"The police are under reform. They need more training. They need more equipment." He added: "We still have to do a lot of work with the ANP. We are remaking the ANP now, in this process."

ADDED SEARCH TERMS:

GEOGRAPHIC NAME: Afghanistan

SUBJECT TERM: police; wages; government finance; internal security; strife

Treading water on the Rideau: The outlook is for more inertia

PUBLICATION: GLOBE AND MAIL
IDN: 072490216
DATE: 2007.09.06
PAGE: A19
BYLINE: LAWRENCE MARTIN
SECTION: Comment Column
EDITION: Metro
DATELINE:
WORDS: 763
WORD COUNT: 707

LAWRENCE MARTIN As the fall political season opens in Ottawa, the catchword is immobility.

Rarely has federal politics been so stagnant. For a year and half, the major party leaders have been crisscrossing the country, stirring up apathy. In that time, their parties have barely budged in the polls, remaining plunked in the low to mid-30s.

Lord Tennyson once said of a compatriot that reading his work was akin to "wading through glue." Our party leaders haven't reached those depths, but uplifting has never been a term used to describe their performances. Not only in word but in look and action their tone is melancholy, and the public attitude toward them is much in keeping. If an election were held today, the polling booths, as one wag suggested, would resemble the salt flats of Utah.

All the parties have intellectually gifted leaders. But, as Conservative MP Joe Comuzzi was pointing out the other day, "no one can capture the public imagination." For understatement, his offering may have ranked with the sailor aboard the Titanic who muttered, "I think we may have hit something." Old Joe has been around so long, he could get winded playing checkers.

Having recently made the switch from Liberals to Conservatives, he's seen both asylums and isn't overly impressed. "I used to be in the auto business," the 74-year-old explained by way of analogy.

"And I'll let you in on a secret. You got to make cars that people want to buy." But don't look for the parties to be moving much stock off their lots this fall. The outlook is for more inertia. The Harper Conservatives are delaying Parliament a month so they can bring in a Throne Speech to signal a new direction. But, behind the scenes, they are candid enough to warn not to look for anything terribly new. Just a fresh can of paint that, given the ambiguous state of support for other parties, probably will be enough to ward off defeat in the House of Commons and an election.

Stephen Harper's big change of direction has already occurred.

All signals are that he is cutting and running from his pledge not to cut and run from Kandahar. It represents one of the bigger U-turns seen in this town in quite some time. But the Prime Minister, who complains of bad press treatment, has remarkably escaped embarrassing headlines on the file.

Imitation being the best form of flattery, opposition parties could be making hay. Liberal Leader Stephane

Dion should be toying with the PM, saying now that you have come our way on Afghanistan, how do you feel about Iraq? But, instead, he comes out sounding, as do most opposition leaders, like a grump.

Not that you'd want to try lightening up in this town. Michael Ignatieff recently tried joking about a bird – and was taken literally.

The last time a sense of humour was spotted in Ottawa was in the days of John Crosbie and Allan Fotheringham. With their departure, the capital, in the personality sweepstakes, has been left to vie with Adelaide. For a barrel of laughs in '07, close your eyes for a moment and imagine Mr. Harper, Mr. Dion, Bloc Quebecois Leader Gilles Duceppe and NDP Leader Jack Layton in the same room.

One of the reasons not to expect much change in the gridlock is that the policies, like the personalities, are not all that dissimilar.

Some thought Mr. Harper would offer a real Conservative alternative.

But the Prime Minister has been quick to realize that this country, not China, is the real middle kingdom. His moderate moves on war, budget-making, the environment and social policy almost put him within Red Tory range.

Mr. Harper perhaps remembers that Canadians didn't leave the Liberals in the last election because of their ideas or philosophy. They left them because of the way they were doing politics. Which leads many to wonder why the PM runs the government in a way that has him being accused of making Machiavelli look like Mary Poppins.

Since he resembles the Liberals in more ways than one, how coincidental is it that, in the latest poll, the Conservatives are dead even with the Grits at 33 per cent? As the new season begins, there's a strange air about the place.

The Conservatives are not sure whether they want to go to the polls.

Nor are the other parties. Nor are the voters. On the Rideau, everyone's treading water.

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ADDED SEARCH TERMS:

GEOGRAPHIC NAME: Canada

SUBJECT TERM: government; political

ORGANIZATION NAME: Conservative Party of Canada; Liberal Party; New Democratic Party; Bloc Quebecois

What is and isn't honourable

PUBLICATION: GLOBE AND MAIL
IDN: 072490171
DATE: 2007.09.06
PAGE: A18
BYLINE: FRANK STEEVE
SECTION: Letter to the Edit
EDITION: Metro
DATELINE: Barrie, Ont.
WORDS: 65
WORD COUNT: 83

Frank Steeve Barrie, Ont.

Christie Blatchford finds it remarkable that the families of dead soldiers "remain willing and committed" to the war in Afghanistan (The Stink Of Our Failure – Sept. 5). Did she think they would ever admit to a wasted death of their child? She concludes that failing to stay the course would not be "honourable." By that logic, the U.S. would still be fighting in Vietnam.

ADDED SEARCH TERMS:

GEOGRAPHIC NAME: Canada; Afghanistan

SUBJECT TERM:foreign policy; defence; strife

Canadian aid is helping

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IDN: 072490158
DATE: 2007.09.06
PAGE: A18
BYLINE: ROBERT GREENHILL
SECTION: Letter to the Edit
EDITION: Metro
DATELINE: Gatineau, Que.
WORDS: 141
WORD COUNT: 139

Robert Greenhill president, Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) Gatineau, Que.

We disagree with the view the Senlis Council presented of development activities in Afghanistan. Canadian aid efforts are making a positive difference in the lives of Afghans (What Happened To CIDA's Aid Funds? – editorial, Aug. 31).

Polio cases are down 77 per cent this year. Since the fall of the Taliban, child mortality has dropped more than 20 per cent, saving 40,000 children every year.

In Kandahar, week after week, real successes are being realized.

Many land mines have been cleared; more than 190 kilometres of rural roads have been repaired and more than 1,200 wells installed. More than 5,600 people are receiving literacy training and some 200,000 people have benefited from food aid.

Together with the World Food Program, the World Health Organization and Unicef, we are helping Afghans build a better future for themselves.

ADDED SEARCH TERMS:

GEOGRAPHIC NAME: Afghanistan; Canada

SUBJECT TERM:foreign aid; reconstruction; development

ORGANIZATION NAME: Senlis Council; Canadian International Development Agency

IN BRIEF 2 British soldiers die in Afghan explosion

PUBLICATION: GLOBE AND MAIL
IDN: 072490003
DATE: 2007.09.06
PAGE: A17
BYLINE:
SECTION: International News
SOURCE: REUT
EDITION: Metro
DATELINE: Kabul AFGHANISTAN
WORDS: 92
WORD COUNT: 100

Reuters Kabul Two British soldiers and more than two dozen Islamist Taliban insurgents were killed in southern Afghanistan yesterday, Britain's Ministry of Defence and the U.S. military said.

The two British soldiers were killed when an explosion hit their vehicle in the restive southern Helmand province. A third soldier and a civilian interpreter were wounded.

In a separate incident, Afghan police and U.S.-led coalition troops backed by air strikes killed more than two dozen Taliban fighters when their patrol was ambushed in the same province, the U.S. military said.

ADDED SEARCH TERMS:

GEOGRAPHIC NAME: Great Britain; Afghanistan

SUBJECT TERM: strife; bombs; war deaths

ORGANIZATION NAME: Armed Forces; Taliban

Editorial – Give it a break

PUBLICATION: WINNIPEG FREE PRESS

DATE: 2007.09.06

PAGE: A10

SECTION: Editorial Leaders

WORD COUNT: 514

None Federal New Democratic Party Leader Jack Layton says that Prime Minister Stephen Harper's decision to delay for a month the scheduled re-opening of Parliament is tantamount to "locking MPs out" and preventing them from doing their jobs. Why, he asks, would the government do this, and announce it the day after Labour Day when everyone else in the country is just getting back to work? Self-righteousness is Mr. Layton's stock-in-trade -- most of the country, except perhaps for him and his colleagues, has been working for most of the summer -- but in this case he might actually have a point. At least, he might have had a point if the opposition parties, including his own NDP, had not already laid down a strategy that meant that reconvening on Sept. 16 would have led to nothing but political gamesmanship over Afghanistan that could only have hurt the nation's interests.

On Tuesday, the government announced that it would prorogue the session that was to resume this month and open a new one with a throne speech on Oct. 16. There is, in fact, work that could have been done in the month preceding that. Several bills, some dear to the government's heart -- such as reform of the firearm registry and minimum sentences for gun crimes -- and others of which it is less enamoured -- a bill requiring it to implement the Kelowna Accord -- will die on the order paper.

But with a minority government, three opposition parties fixated almost exclusively on the two hot-button issues of the Afghan war and global warming, and a Liberal-dominated Senate in an obstructionist mood to deal with, there could be no guarantee that any useful activity would have taken place in the rump of the previous session between Sept. 16 and Oct. 16. The opposition parties made it clear what their agenda for those weeks was and it did not serve any public interest.

Mr. Harper has given himself an extra four weeks, unhampered by a querulous opposition -- unhampered even by a reasonable opposition, should such a thing unexpectedly appear -- to prepare an agenda for the second stage of his government. Conservatives proudly boast that they have fulfilled the campaign promises they made for their first round at governing -- "boast" is perhaps the operative word there. They now need to bring in a throne speech that offers a clear vision for the next stage -- a strong statement on Afghanistan, a realistic plan to deal with climate change, and a strategy to deal with a North American economy that is looking increasingly troubled. If the opposition cannot agree to that, Mr. Harper must be willing to take that vision to the voters.

MackKay just another dud? Minister seen but not heard on Afghanistan

PUBLICATION: WINNIPEG FREE PRESS

DATE: 2007.09.06

PAGE: A1

SECTION: Columns

WORD COUNT: 764

Daniel Lett Dan Lett The new face of Canada's war in Afghanistan arrived in Winnipeg Wednesday and guess what? He pretty much picked up where the old face left off.

Peter MacKay, appointed as minister of defence just two weeks ago, blew into town, dropped in on the Canadian troops and military brass in Winnipeg and left again without a single comment on the war, or any new direction he might be bringing to the portfolio.

To be completely factual, to our knowledge he didn't even offer an assessment of the weather.

The Free Press tried to talk with MacKay. We even sent a reporter familiar to MacKay. He got a warm smile, a brief handshake and a great view of MacKay's back as he was spirited away.

MacKay's refusal to engage the media or offer the good citizens of Winnipeg an assurance that his government's policy in Afghanistan was the right one is pretty much the approach the previous guy took, and look at how that turned out.

Former defence minister Gordon O'Connor was generally considered a dud, having done little to inspire or comfort a frightened nation about the carnage Canadian soldiers are facing in Afghanistan. O'Connor's ouster has been viewed by many pundits as an acknowledgment that the voting public is worried about Afghanistan, so much so that it might become a key issue in the next election.

As a result, the federal Conservative government is facing the very real possibility that an issue it inherited from the Liberals will become the albatross that will keep it from winning a majority in the House of Commons.

Given the stakes here, the strategy is especially curious. But MacKay showed Wednesday he is unsure of how to accomplish what O'Connor could not, or that he and his government just don't care about whether the media or the public approve or disapprove of what's happening in Afghanistan.

To be fair, this is not a strategy unique to the Afghanistan file.

The government of Prime Minister Stephen Harper has made "refused to comment" an art form, isolating the national media in Ottawa and generally ignoring all inquiries from intrepid journalists from coast to coast.

Although loyal lieutenants such as MacKay are well practiced in the black art of frustrating the media, Harper is the principal embodiment of this policy. The prime minister doesn't do many interviews or answer many questions, issues few news releases and provides little warning about his itinerary or his activities.

What is particularly appalling about Harper's anti-media strategy is that Conservative militants have given the prime minister a prolonged standing ovation for justly delivering punishment to a media that they feel is deeply aligned with the former Liberal government.

Screw journalists, the militants argue, for they have screwed us over for a very long time. Missing from their gloating, however, is the impact this is having on democracy itself.

In the case of the war in Afghanistan, Canadians are desperate to hear from MacKay and his government about how we got into this desperate battle and where it is going. There is still a place in politics for an individual with vision and confidence to bring an entire nation to a greater understanding of complex issues.

Afghanistan is certainly that kind of issue, and there is some reason to believe MacKay may be that kind of politician. Alas, MacKay is forced to fall into line with other Harper ministers who are often seen, but seldom heard saying anything of any import.

What's even more confusing is that the Conservatives appear blissfully unconcerned about the consequences of this non-communication strategy.

Recent national polls show that Canadians aren't buying into Afghanistan, and they aren't buying into the idea of a Conservative majority.

The polls seem to show that Harper and his team are making progress on other files, but that positive feedback is not translating into votes.

Conservatives certainly don't want to consider that Harper's spurning of the media has anything to do with the party's stall in the polls.

However, by ignoring the media the Harper government is also ignoring an easy and effective avenue to the voting public. In addition, it appears by now that a good portion of the electorate think that by gagging his ministers, Harper is determined to do all the thinking and talking for his government, and they don't like what that says about the rest of his team.

Conservatives may celebrate the ostracization of the media as payback long deserved. But dealing with the media head on is one of the burdens of the job, and an essential part of democracy. And until they can come up with a better excuse for their failure to draw enough votes to win a majority, they might just consider that shutting down the media sends the wrong message to voters.

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Afghanistan; The politics of war

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SECTION: Editorial/Opinion
PAGE: A6
SOURCE: Windsor Star
WORD COUNT: 667

If the war in Afghanistan was justified in those dark days following the 2001 Sept. 11 attacks -- and we believe it was -- then it is justified today. The battle against global terrorism is every bit as fierce and important now as then, and Afghanistan, should we retreat and allow it to revert to a failed state, could once again become a staging ground for terrorists.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper used to deliver that message to Canadians resoundingly, with clarity and without qualification, stressing he was prepared to fight and lose an election on the Afghan question because it was, quite simply, the honourable thing to do.

Wearing a flak jacket and standing before the troops at Kandahar Airfield in March of last year, Harper said this: "There will be some who want to cut and run but cutting and running is not my way and it's not the Canadian way," said Harper. "We don't make a commitment and then run away at the first sign of trouble. We don't and we will not, as long as I'm leading the country."

Harper certainly isn't saying that anymore. In the face of mounting casualties -- 26 soldiers have been killed this year and 36 soldiers and a diplomat were killed last year bringing the death toll since 2002 to 71 -- and sagging public support for the war, the Tories have grown wobbly. The fact a regiment from Quebec is currently in Kandahar has made Harper's government weaker still over fears further casualties will deny the party crucial seats in Quebec.

Harper has said Canada's military mission in the volatile south will not extend past 2009 without a "parliamentary consensus." That position effectively scuttles the mission because none of the other parties in the minority Parliament support an extension.

New Defence Minister Peter MacKay went even further on the weekend, saying our NATO allies had been told that our "current configuration" -- read fighting in Kandahar -- "will end in February 2009." MacKay stressed Canada would remain in Afghanistan doing reconstruction and diplomatic work, which is a nice way of saying Canada is cutting and running and leaving the dangerous grunt duties to other countries.

Canada's soldiers, who are doing brave and honourable work in Afghanistan, simultaneously rebuilding that shattered country while working to protect and enhance the international reputation of this one, used to have a champion in Harper and his government. Sadly, that no longer seems to be the case. Harper seems more concerned about winning a majority government than winning the war against the Taliban and international terrorism.

If Harper won't persuade Canadians of the merits of the mission and if he won't make a principled stand in Parliament, then the battle is all but lost. Because Canada's fighting presence is vital for success in Afghanistan. Redevelopment can't succeed unless security is restored and maintained through military might and sacrifice.

There are 37 NATO countries in Afghanistan but only three — Canada, the United States and Britain — are doing the heavy lifting. The alliance will be dealt a severe, potentially fatal, blow — and the insurgency a propaganda coup — if Canada pulls out of Kandahar and no other nation emerges to fill the gaps in the line.

Canada and NATO are achieving their objectives in Afghanistan but success in a counter-insurgency operation has to be measured over years and decades rather than weeks and months. Canada isn't trying to destroy an enemy but rebuild a country. That takes time and patience. We can't leave, in good conscience, until Afghanistan's army can stand against the insurgency on its own.

That day will come if Canada has the courage and the conviction to finish what it started but it isn't likely to come by 2009. And it might never come at all if Canada cuts and runs because of the short-term political considerations of a minority government.

Harper government offloads war

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EDITION: Final
SECTION: Forum
PAGE: A8
COLUMN: Susan Riley
BYLINE: Susan Riley
SOURCE: Ottawa Citizen
WORD COUNT: 762

The "take-away point" from a high-level media briefing Tuesday on Afghanistan — i.e., the story we journalists are expected to transmit — is that, according to senior government officials, Afghans are being successfully positioned to take responsibility for their own security and prosperity.

Whether this is true (there are conflicting reports, to say the least), this is the new tactic in a recalibrated public relations offensive from the Harper government.

With new ministers in Defence, Foreign Affairs and CIDA, a new parliamentary session to begin Oct. 16 and continuing public skepticism about the war, particularly in vote-rich Quebec, the language has changed. No more dismissive accusations of "cutting and running."

It is, increasingly, the Afghans' war, although we still seem to be running things. For now.

What we are asked to believe is that within an unspecified period — but presumably before February 2009, when Canada's combat role in Kandahar is expected to end — the Afghan army and police will be capable of containing drug lords, terrorists and the Taliban in the south, while western-trained judges (including some women) preside over scrupulously fair trials, local villagers brainstorm about municipal improvements, Kabul bureaucrats apply the fine points of "legislative drafting" gleaned from their Canadian coaches and the human rights of prisoners in Afghan jails are respected.

(There are plans for a "fair and transparent mechanism for approving senior appointments," too — something we should maybe try here.)

Not to be churlish, but it requires a huge leap of faith to accept that this attractive fiction is anywhere close to being realistic, especially given media reports of Afghan army recruits showing up fitfully and out of uniform, or, just last week, of accidentally exchanging fire with their Canadian mentors.

If anything, the reputation of the Afghan police is worse (although Canada is funding a course in "mid-career professional skills development" for the notoriously corrupt local constabulary).

Adding to doubts that a poor, ethnically divided, war-torn and largely illiterate nation can transform itself, within a few decades, never mind a few months, into "a country secure and at peace with itself" (in the words of one briefer), come reports that last year's military advances are now in doubt.

Military sources in Kandahar acknowledge that Quebec's Van Doos are fighting to secure territory supposedly won by their predecessors. There is "always back and forth," said Canada's ambassador in Kabul, Arif Lalani,

who insists that Kandahar is noticeably more secure than it was a year ago.

As for remaining pockets of Taliban resistance, ultimately that is a job for local police. "At the end of the day," said another official, "it is the Afghans who have to hold and maintain in the south."

On the controversial question of whether Canadian aid is getting to the impoverished, hungry and ill people for whom it's intended, officials came to the briefing armed with lists of small projects — wells, roads, schools, immunization programs, all paid for with Canadian cash.

These small successes, they complain with some justice, are overshadowed, often by larger failings — including the deplorable state of Kandahar's largest hospital and reports of people starving very near the Kandahar airfield.

One official said the UN's World Food Program would soon be delivering food within 500 metres of the Kandahar base — although officials later refused to say exactly who would be receiving the aid. That information will be given only to embedded reporters in Afghanistan, leading some to suspect the initiative has as much to do with feeding the media as with feeding the hungry.

For all that, helping Afghanistan police itself and run its own economy is a sensible course, both politically and morally. Unlike the Americans, who are also trying to disentangle themselves from Iraq, Canada has no imperial ambitions and no pecuniary interests in Afghanistan. Nor does anyone doubt the bravery of our Armed Forces or the sincerity of the diplomats and public servants who are working around the clock to help Afghanistan rebuild.

As for the media, Ambassador Lalani suggested the public isn't getting "the full story" from us. But it is getting, from correspondents on the ground, as full a story as they are allowed to provide, in reports that have been almost universally respectful of Canada's military.

Media from other NATO countries, along with the few aid workers still in the country, also tell stories that are often glaringly at odds with the official version.

If there is cynicism around this complex mission, it can be found at the top, among politicians and their emissaries. They insist their policies aren't flawed, just the delivery. The real story isn't getting out.

Then they offer a political script that is neither plausible, nor backed by tangible evidence.

Afghan 'gun culture' is fuelled by fear

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DATE: 2007.09.06
EDITION: Final
SECTION: News
PAGE: A15
BYLINE: Mark Sedra and Robert Muggah
SOURCE: Citizen Special
WORD COUNT: 698

Once heralded as a success story in the global war on terror, Afghanistan is reaching a tipping point. In spite of desperate efforts by western governments to contain spiraling violence outside of Kabul, more than 4,400 Afghans were killed in 2006, many of them by gunfire.

Although NATO troops are struggling to put down the Taliban-led insurgency, efforts to regulate and collect the tools of war must be redoubled. Recent news that Chinese arms were recovered from insurgents should hardly come as a surprise. It confirms what experts have long known: together with heroin, AK-47s are fuelling violence in Afghanistan.

Since the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, billions of dollars worth of firepower have been funnelled to successive regimes and armed groups such as the Mujahedeen and the Northern Alliance. Arms dealers have sought and found thriving markets there. Suppliers ranged from the Soviets, the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, and the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence, to China, Iran, and Central Asian states.

Since 2003, Croatia, Italy, Poland, and the United States have transferred still more arms. Today, a resurgent Taliban is reportedly receiving military support from Pakistan and private benefactors in the Gulf.

These weapons have long lives.

The Geneva-based Small Arms Survey estimates that Afghanistan is home to as many as 10 million arms, including thousands of U.S.-made FIM-92 Stinger missiles. Unexploded ordnance and mines littering the countryside also attract enterprising Afghans who fashion them into the improvised explosive devices that currently wreak havoc among NATO troops.

Afghanistan is a free-for-all for insurgents and terrorists. While the international community -- including Canada -- has a political obligation to regulate and curb new supplies, it also has a moral duty to remove those already in circulation. The good news is that the international community is trying to do precisely that.

Several years ago the Afghan government, together with the UN, began focusing on reducing gun violence. The centrepiece of their strategy included a massive disarmament and demobilization initiative called Afghanistan's New Beginnings Programme. The \$142-million (U.S.) scheme focused on the Afghan military force -- itself a loose assemblage of militias that were formerly affiliated with the Northern Alliance and came to power in the wake of the Taliban's collapse.

Within three years, more than 57,000 assault rifles were surrendered and more than 56,000 ex-soldiers received financial assistance. Other programs yielded a similar harvest. More than 100,000 tonnes of ammunition and more than 200,000 anti-personnel and anti-tank mines have been destroyed since 2004.

As impressive as these gains are, still more must be done.

There are millions of illegal weapons still floating around Afghanistan. Owing to the country's porous borders, NATO commanders fear that guns are now being re-circulated more than ever before. Many of these automatic weapons are going to the Taliban and warlord militias who control the country's surging heroin industry, while others are ending up in the hands of civilians.

The reluctance to establish a more ambitious arms collection program stems from the international community's suspicion of a deeply ingrained "gun culture" in Afghanistan. But a recent poll carried out by the Afghan Human Rights Research and Advocacy Consortium reveals that two-thirds of Afghans think that disarmament is the single most important path to security.

In fact, Afghanistan's famous gun culture is motivated as much by fear as by cultural norms. From Kabul to Kandahar, people are not willing to surrender their weapons if they feel vulnerable to criminals, warlords, or Taliban insurgents.

The window for disarmament in Afghanistan is closing fast. But gun collection programs alone cannot solve Afghanistan's security challenges. Without tighter constraints on new supplies, demonstrated improvements in the effectiveness of the Afghan security forces, and guarantees of safety for civilians, locals will hold onto their guns. If Afghanistan is to have a genuinely new beginning, the true measure of success has to be real and perceived security for ordinary civilians.

Mark Sedra is a research assistant professor in political science at the University of Waterloo. Robert Muggah is project co-ordinator of the Geneva-based Small Arms Survey and an SSRC fellow at Oxford University.

Military manoeuvres

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SOURCE: The Ottawa Citizen
WORD COUNT: 280

Most Canadians realize that the military mission in Kandahar is a demanding and dangerous test for the soldiers on the ground, but they probably did not realize it would prove such a difficult challenge for the entire military establishment, including National Defence Headquarters in Ottawa.

Two recent reports requested by the Chief of Defence Staff Gen. Rick Hillier paint a disturbing picture of the Canadian Forces' ability to cope with this mission, and with other important demands that are being placed upon the service.

The first report documents how an attempt to modernize the military command structure has been sideswiped by the competing demands of Afghanistan (and spin-off issues such as recruitment and the purchase of new military equipment).

The other report indicates that the military's ability to process information from the battlefield in Afghanistan — to wage an intelligence-driven war, in other words — has been hampered because mission command isn't up to the job.

It is a dismaying situation. A modern military ought to be able to execute many complex tasks at once — it should be able to make a difference in Afghanistan while simultaneously hiring new soldiers and acquiring new trucks and helicopters.

But there is a reason why this is not happening. The Canadian military has only just begun to rebuild itself after more than a decade of neglect. Shedding the accumulated rust is not an easy task, but it can't be postponed any longer. There have been and will be more bumps along the way but the goal is the right one: Canada needs a well-funded, well-managed military to defend our interests at home and abroad.

Views of Ottawa

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The same thing

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PAGE: A13
BYLINE: Nedra Nash
SOURCE: The Ottawa Citizen
WORD COUNT: 261

When the United States entered the war in Iraq, I tried to discuss this military action with my sister-in-law and her family by e-mail.

Because her deceased husband and son-in-law were in the American military, she must have sent my letter to others. I was barraged with e-mail vilification. The gist of the correspondence was how anti-American I was for not supporting the troops.

That's what's wrong with the car decals or the red shirts: it looks like you support the Canadian military involvement in Afghanistan. Naive me, I hadn't quite realized that Prime Minister Stephen Harper's statements were so black and white -- troop support and mission support are the same thing. So now I know that's what the red shirt and the car decals are about.

I hope columnist Janice Kennedy continues to write intelligently to keep us alert and away from our government's besottedness with George W. Bush's policies.

Those alert readers should know that the educated reviews of the effect of the military in Afghanistan state very clearly that until we get social reform education and economic revitalization programs -- all the grass-roots developments under way that are agents of a healthy way for a family to live in Afghanistan, we don't stand a chance of ending the power of warlords, the Taliban or the opium trade in this impoverished society.

Without reform in Afghanistan, we will only lose more young men. And we will only continue to challenge the insurgents (basically other misguided young men, serving their society) to develop better roadside bombs.

Nedra Nash,

Stittsville

It is political

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DATE: 2007.09.06
EDITION: Early
SECTION: News
PAGE: A13
BYLINE: Cal McKerral
SOURCE: The Ottawa Citizen
WORD COUNT: 153

Congratulations to Janice Kennedy on her thoughtful and well-written column. I keep telling anyone around me who will listen, that soldiers don't start wars, politicians do.

I took my two children (now adults) to visit the Canadian War Museum recently, and was dismayed at the Afghanistan promotional display we were guided into just after walking in the front door. It is explained there that we have a military presence in Afghanistan because it is an effort that is led by NATO and sanctioned by the UN. I guess that is supposed to make it just.

It is also explained that Afghanistan is a country that gave the Taliban "safe haven." Really? I thought it was their (mostly Pashtun) country to begin with. And we are doing really good work there. The whole display is political and shameful. And it is housed in a national museum.

Cal McKerral,

Orléans

Enough is enough

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BYLINE: Karen Haarbosch
SOURCE: The Ottawa Citizen
WORD COUNT: 157

I am truly terrified of what's happening in this country and wonder how many more body bags it will take before Canadians finally say enough -- enough to Stephen Harper, to his government and its use of innocent young men and women in this shameful, tragic mistake of Canada's involvement in Afghanistan.

I bristle at the phrase "Support Our Troops." I do not wear red on Fridays and abhor the sight of those decals. If someone thinks this is a sign of not being patriotic, then I say good.

The whole idea of patriotism has become distasteful to me and where it once might have meant being proud of one's country, it instead seems to be the driving force in the creation of conflict and detrimental to world peace. Many of my friends and work colleagues feel the same. They will nod in agreement with Janice Kennedy's column as I have.

Karen Haarbosch,

Ottawa

My son, buddies appreciate support from Canadians

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SECTION: News
PAGE: A13
BYLINE: Sylvaine Sorel
SOURCE: The Ottawa Citizen
WORD COUNT: 255

Re: Why I won't wear red, Sept. 2.

My family and friends wear red and have the "Support our Troops" logo to show us that they are here in spirit for us instead of us always wondering "are you all right?" It is the same as having a lighted pumpkin on Halloween -- it says come in, you are welcome. It is not necessary, but it makes you feel like you are not alone.

Our son left last October and I put a yellow ribbon on our tree in front of the house. A couple days later all the houses on our street had yellow ribbons attached to the trees. My neighbour had left a note to all our neighbours explaining that our son had left for Afghanistan and if they wished they could pick up a ribbon at their house. I cried when I saw all those ribbons coming back from work.

We felt so alone when he left and suddenly all those people were saying they cared.

Every Friday my office co-workers almost all wear red, my daughter's class also and my husband's co-workers wear the yellow ribbons. It has helped us tremendously during this 10-month ordeal and it has helped my son, since his return home in August, to re-adapt to a normal life, as he sees that people cared for him and his buddies. That is the meaning of Red Friday and "Support our Troops" and I won't let other people change this meaning.

Don't let others influence you, do what you believe in. I support the troops and I am showing it.

Sylvaine Sorel,

Orléans

Canadian troops criticize deadly 2006 attack on Taliban; Soldiers moved in before aerial bombardment had chance to 'soften' enemy's outpost

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ILLUSTRATION: Colour Photo: Sgt. Lou Penney, DND / Brig.-Gen. David Fraser, front and centre, tours the Panjwaii region last year after a battle with the Taliban that has drawn criticism from soldiers over the general's command. ; Photo: Photo Courtesy Department of National Defence / Pte. William Jonathan James Cushley ; Photo: Photo Courtesy Department of National Defence / Warrant Officer Frank Robert Mellish ; Photo: Photo Courtesy Department of National Defence / Sgt. Shane Stachnik ; Photo: Photo Courtesy Department of National Defence / Warrant Officer Richard Francis Nolan ;

BYLINE: David Pugliese
SOURCE: The Ottawa Citizen
WORD COUNT: 1229

Soldiers who fought in a key battle last year in Afghanistan that resulted in the deaths of four Canadians are questioning why a general deviated from the established plan and troops were rushed to attack Taliban fortifications without the several days of promised bombardment needed to soften up enemy positions.

Military officials concede there have been ongoing questions and criticism among the soldiers who saw four of their comrades killed and another 10 wounded during the opening days of Operation Medusa last September.

But an article in the new edition of Legion Magazine brings to the public that controversy about how the battle unfolded and whether Canadian Brig.-Gen. David Fraser was right to make some of the decisions he did.

The battle has been portrayed by Canadian and NATO generals as a major blow to the Taliban.

But the article in the publication, sent to members of the Royal Canadian Legion, details how questions remain among some troops about Brig.-Gen. Fraser's decision to change the attack plan at the last minute. A series of deceptions and feints planned over a three-day period to allow troops to determine where the insurgents were, so they could plan the final attack, were cancelled, according to the magazine. And a multi-day aerial and artillery bombardment, designed to soften up the enemy, never materialized.

In the end, Canadian soldiers had 15 minutes' preparation, in some cases less, to cross a river into Taliban-held territory. There, the insurgents were waiting for them, hidden in trenches and fortified buildings. Fifty Canadian soldiers advanced as ordered. Four were killed, 10 wounded and at least six became stress casualties. Six received medals for their bravery that day.

"This was a struggle that saw a general's strategic instinct — his feel for the shape of the battle — lead him to abandon a carefully laid plan and overrule his tactical commanders in the field in order to send Charles

Canadian troops criticize deadly 2006 attack on Taliban; Soldiers moved in before aerial bombardment had

Company on a hastily conceived and ultimately harrowing attack against a numerically superior enemy in a well-established defensive position," notes the 4,000 word article by Legion Magazine journalist Adam Day.

The magazine described the attack as an "old-fashioned WWI-style assault into the guns, albeit on a smaller scale. It was the charge of Charlie Company."

There was little, if any, battle procedure, no reconnaissance, and the intelligence was either insufficient or wildly wrong, the article reports. "This was Canada's first company-sized mechanized combined arms attack on a fixed position since Korea. It was rushed and it was risky -- doctrine was out the window."

The magazine interviewed about 20 people involved in the battle, including Brig.-Gen. Fraser.

In an interview with the Citizen, the general said the article details the battle from the soldiers' perspective and while that is valid, the overall greater picture has to be considered.

That, he noted, is that Operation Medusa eliminated the threat of the Taliban in the Panjwaii district and later paved the way for numerous reconstruction projects to proceed. It also set the stage for bringing stability to the area, where up to 30,000 Afghans have returned to live, Brig.-Gen. Fraser said.

"The article gives you a soldier's perspective and in any operation that is fast-paced, that is dynamic, there are always going to be situations where subordinates will question their commanders, and Medusa was no exception," Brig.-Gen. Fraser said. "But look at the overall operation and measure the success. In this case, Canadians won and the Taliban lost."

Medusa, involving more than 1,400 coalition and Afghan soldiers, began on Sept. 2 with Canadian units seizing the high points around the Panjwaii area. A Canadian major could see no sign of civilians, and confirmed that only groups of insurgents were in the target area. With that confirmation, the established plan called for the battle group to take the next several days to heavily hit the Taliban, now trapped in a relatively small area. Airstrikes would simultaneously destroy insurgent command and control locations.

Those strikes, however, were cancelled, so Canadian troops used the weapons on their armoured vehicles to open fire on insurgents.

Canadian commander Lt.-Col. Omer Lavoie explained to the magazine that once the enemy was hemmed in, the plan was to continue to attack the insurgents over three days, mainly with aircraft. Such a bombardment would degrade the enemy's ability to fight before the main force would be committed into the attack, he said.

Troops would cross the Arghandab River to attack a key objective on the other side, an area where, a month earlier, four Canadian soldiers had died. A series of manoeuvres had been planned, allowing troops to determine where the insurgents were so they could plan the final attack, according to the article.

That, however, was changed after Brig.-Gen. Fraser, who had planned Medusa, visited the area the afternoon of Sept. 2. At that point, insurgent activity had tapered off and seeing this, the general gave the order for the troops to begin crossing the river.

Heated discussions followed, according to the magazine, and at one point troops went down to the riverbed, but were later withdrawn.

At about midnight, Brig.-Gen. Fraser again issued his order to attack across the river, but Lt.-Col. Lavoie managed to get that postponed by pointing out that the force had little intelligence about enemy positions on the other side, didn't know the depth of the river and had yet to mark sites where they could ford the waterway.

Canadian troops criticize deadly 2006 attack on Taliban; Soldiers moved in before aerial bombardment had

The troops were then told to attack at first light on Sept. 3, still 48 hours earlier than planned and without the promised bombardment, according to the article. Soldiers involved in the battle still question why the original plan was abandoned and why there was a rush to move across the river. They note the Taliban was trapped and it was just a matter of destroying them.

The magazine reports the decision to move the attack forward was based, in large part, on Brig.-Gen. Fraser's appraisal that the enemy was weakened.

In his interview with the Citizen, the general said he hadn't heard about troops only having 15 minutes to prepare for their attack. But he said the intelligence he was receiving from various sources that were part of the battle, including the Afghans and other coalition units, led him to determine the time was right to make a move and have troops cross the river earlier than planned.

"The Taliban were weak and disrupted at that time," Brig.-Gen. Fraser said. "All the information I was receiving at the time painted a picture that was the time to act."

He also told Legion Magazine that while he listened to what his commanders said, he believes there was nothing to be gained by 48 hours of additional bombardment. No matter when the river was crossed, it was going to be a difficult mission since the Taliban were waiting and ready to fight, he argues.

Some soldiers involved in the battle, however, say the original plan would have provided Canadian troops with the advantage of destroying the buildings that ultimately provided the Taliban with excellent cover and concealment. One officer said it would have allowed time to conduct manoeuvres to draw insurgents out where Canadian firepower would have decimated them.

But Brig.-Gen. Fraser said "on balance" he has no regrets about his decisions. There is a need on the battlefield to be flexible and the operation was adjusted based on what the enemy was doing and what was being achieved, he added.

"At the end of the day, the measure of success was who won, who lost," he said. "We one, they lost."

For Legion Magazine's report on the battle, go to www.legionmagazine.com

Arrests follow months of German warnings; Officials Have Long Cautioned Of Threats To Country

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BYLINE: Mark Trevelyan

SOURCE: Reuters

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LONDON – If some Germans still believed their country's opposition to the Iraq war would spare it from Islamist bombings, they have suffered a rude awakening.

Yesterday's news of a thwarted plot to carry out "massive bomb attacks" against U.S.-linked targets in Germany followed months of stern warnings from authorities that the country faced a grave threat, including possible suicide attacks.

Officials, long aware that Germany's troop presence in Afghanistan could make it a target, had become increasingly concerned in the past year about the training of German nationals at al-Qaeda camps in Pakistan.

If anything, security analysts said, the surprise was that the alleged plot was directed not primarily at Germans but against Americans on German soil. Suspects had scouted out sites such as discos, pubs and airports frequented by Americans.

"Germany is in Afghanistan and it is a weak coalition partner," said Dr. Peter Neumann, a German national and director of the Centre for Defence Studies at King's College, London. "If you carried out a massive terrorist attack in Germany, probably this would alter the [public] attitude toward Germany's engagement in Afghanistan very significantly. Some of the Taliban leaders have argued along these lines and that's why I believe Germany is very much in the front line now."

Germany has "moved up the ladder," he said, becoming a more attractive target as the focus of the international jihadist movement has increasingly shifted to Afghanistan, where NATO forces are facing a resurgent Taliban.

Security analysts said there seemed to be significant Pakistani links to the German plot, with all three arrested suspects reported to have trained in militant camps there. They were also intrigued by the German federal prosecutor's statement that the three were members of the Islamic Jihad Union, an obscure group with roots in Uzbekistan.

KEYWORDS: TERRORISM; FOREIGN AID; CRIME; GERMANY; AFGHANISTAN

THE FACES OF WAR

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CORPORAL RITA DIANE

CORRIVEAU, 26

(Light Armoured Vehicle main gunner at FOB Ma'Sum Ghar)

"I am surprised to miss the comforts of home. I have been on tour before and did not miss the little things as much."

"I do consider myself a patriot. I stand proud and strong for the country of Canada. Being a female in a male-dominated world it can be tough sometimes to stand, feeling alone, but then you look around and see the men beside you and feel proud to know you are standing amongst them. Not alone ... Also, I would hope that the people of Afghanistan would see a woman in my position and maybe, someday, they'd be able to treat women differently ... And the women of this country would someday say they are proud to stand strong and have a voice".

The National Post's Richard Johnson spent six weeks this summer chronicling the daily lives of Canadian soldiers in Afghanistan in a very old-fashioned way: with pencil and sketch pad. Throughout the month of September, one of his portraits of a soldier will appear every weekday on Page A2.