

Table of Contents

<u>Afghan aid is vital.....</u>	1
<u>Afghanistan needs a unified NATO.....</u>	2
<u>NATO protesters prepare.....</u>	4
<u>Afghanistan: yes or no?.....</u>	6
<u>Spend tax dollars on making peace, not war.....</u>	8
<u>Protesters: NATO serves no purpose; Mass rally planned as generals meet to plot future.....</u>	10
<u>'Find the mines before they get us'; Canadian soldiers say no way to avoid the danger of explosives...<u></u></u>	12
<u>Cops, villagers search for kidnapped deminers.....</u>	14
<u>Rick Mercer hits the stage for amputee program.....</u>	15
<u>No helicopters? Blame Liberals.....</u>	17
<u>Mercer to host show to benefit amputee program.....</u>	18
<u>A Soldier's Story; Eric Mehalacopoulos is a Québécois with a difference – he fought in Iraq as a U.S. marine. Now he returns to that war in the film Battle for Haditha.....</u>	20
<u>Afghan police lose ground gained by Canadians.....</u>	24
<u>Rick Mercer helps out a friend; Comedian stages fundraiser for Alberta amputee program.....</u>	26
<u>Realpolitik shifts Afghan objectives; Realpolitik shifts Afghan objectives.....</u>	28
<u>Achieving real results.....</u>	31
<u>Afghan police lose ground won by Canadian troops; Taliban overrunning checkpoints.....</u>	32
<u>Comic drawing laughs to help soldier; Edmontonian lost legs after bombing in Afghanistan.....</u>	35
<u>Stretch of Ont. highway renamed to honour soldiers killed in Afghanistan.....</u>	37
<u>Take a good look down, says Canadian soldier sweeping Afghan road for bombs.....</u>	38
<u>Two NATO soldiers, 40 insurgents killed in southern Afghanistan.....</u>	39
<u>While NATO generals meet, demonstrators plot protest strategy.....</u>	41
<u>Thousands protest at APEC; minor scuffles but mostly peaceful.....</u>	43

Table of Contents

<u>Soldier–Funeral</u>	44
<u>Afghan–Violence</u>	45
<u>Safety comes first in Lonely Planet's guide to Afghanistan</u>	46
<u>NATO talks here likely to centre on Afghanistan</u>	47
<u>Protesters rally today for abolition of 26–country alliance</u>	48
<u>Ontario</u>	50
<u>Mercer brings his sardonic humour to the stage for amputee program</u>	52
<u>Held hostage by Afghanistan; We negotiate with terrorists all the time, and we should again -- it may be the only way to resolve the conflict with the Taliban</u>	54
<u>Enough to Taliban</u>	56
<u>Help for Afghans</u>	57
<u>Taliban dislodge Afghan police from highway checkpoints; Canadian commanders say the Afghan National Army is making reasonable progress, Andrew Mayeda reports, but the police are seen as under–equipped, incompetent and corrupt. They need reinforcement at a time when NATO troops are stretched thin</u>	58
<u>Try, try again becomes new motto of Canadian soldiers; The inability of Afghan police to hold villages the Canadians had successfully secured against the Taliban underscores the challenges NATO allies face in trying to pacify the unruly southern province of Kandahar when troops are stretched thin, writes Andrew Mayeda</u>	61
<u>Alberta. Comedian's show to help wounded soldier's cause</u>	64
<u>GLAD TO BE HOME What I won't miss about Afghanistan Grim conversations, close quarters, fearful locals, constant dehydration: The dust isn't all that gets under your skin</u>	65
<u>NATO AND AFGHANISTAN Cheering from the sidelines</u>	67
<u>DEFENCE NATO a puppet for U.S. agenda, protesters say Peace groups to rally today against military committee meeting in Victoria</u>	69
<u>IN BRIEF Search is on for workers abducted by Taliban</u>	71
<u>On the road to a safer country</u>	72
<u>Leisure earned in a hostile environment</u>	73

Table of Contents

<u>It was a gold medal day Trenton rallies troops; Highway of Heroes official.....</u>	75
<u>Protesters question NATO's role.....</u>	77
<u>Hockey night in Kandahar Life with the Provincial Reconstruction Team.....</u>	78
<u>Remorseful thief returns slain soldier's picture.....</u>	80
<u>Soldiers honoured on 401.....</u>	81
<u>Notes from the field -- the hockey field.....</u>	82
<u>Anti-NATO rally set Protesters gather in B.C.....</u>	84
<u>Ruckpaul: A mantra of duty, service Major; Raymond Ruckpaul, a Hamilton native serving with the Royal Canadian Dragoons who died in Afghanistan on Aug. 29, will be honoured today with a military funeral at Church of the Ascension in Hamilton. His friend and former Canadian Forces colleague Andrew Zdunich will be among the mourners.....</u>	85
<u>Museum honours dogs of war; Handlers believe canine heroes saved 10,000 soldiers in Vietnam.....</u>	88
<u>Stretch of 401 officially named 'Highway of Heroes'.....</u>	91
<u>In the line of fire, Part 3.....</u>	92
<u>In the line of fire, Part 2.....</u>	100
<u>In the line of fire Part 1.....</u>	110
<u>Afghanistan file tops the agenda Canada's role past 2009 an issue.....</u>	113

Afghan aid is vital

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PUBLICATION: The Record (Kitchener, Cambridge And Waterloo)
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PAGE: A16
BYLINE: Allan Sauder
COPYRIGHT: © 2007 Torstar Corporation
WORD COUNT: 207

I read with interest the Sept. 4 editorial on Canadian International Development Agency's aid in Kandahar (Helping Afghans Is A Vital Goal).

The Mennonite Economic Development Associates, a Waterloo-based non-governmental organization, is committed to helping in the Canadian International Development Agency-sponsored development efforts in Afghanistan.

My concern is that the Senlis council report speaks to the effectiveness and accountability of aid projects only in Kandahar.

There are larger questions regarding aid to Kandahar, I believe. Can development happen in a war zone? Is it effective to have non-governmental organizations working with the military? Most choose not to.

The council's analysis has the effect of painting all aid work in the country with the same brush and, in the Canadian public's eye, calling into question the many good and viable projects currently being conducted in other regions of Afghanistan.

These projects are effective and accountable to the Canadian taxpayer. More importantly, they are bringing much hope to people who have lived for too long in harsh conditions. For example, more than 13,000 women are running their own businesses using credit from one of our partners.

Afghanistan needs more than a military solution to its problems. Canada, through its development agency, is making great efforts to help this country rebuild.

Allan Sauder, President

Mennonite Economic

Development Associates

Waterloo

Afghanistan needs a unified NATO

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If NATO loses the war in Afghanistan, it will be due to a failure on the home front more than the battlefield. It's true that the top NATO generals meeting in Canada today need a strategy to stop the highest levels of insurgent violence in Afghanistan since 2001. But the challenges they face go beyond the military. In Canada, Netherlands, Germany and Britain, governments are all being pressured by an anxious public to pluck their troops out of a dangerous conflict that seems increasingly hard to comprehend.

This is a critical time, not just for the Afghanistan mission but for the North Atlantic Treaty Organization itself. It is essential that the NATO countries stand together — not just at a two-day meeting in Victoria, B.C., but where it matters most, on the ground in Afghanistan where 33,000 troops from 26 NATO countries are deployed. It is just as essential that the citizens of those NATO countries remember the strong moral and strategic justification for their soldiers to be in Afghanistan in the first place.

The reason seemed obvious enough after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks killed nearly 3,000 people in the United States: security — for North America and Europe. Then, Afghanistan was governed by the Taliban which forced an extreme form of Islam on the populace while allowing al-Qaida militants to use the country as a staging ground for terrorism. Toppling the Taliban, which refused to restrain al-Qaida, and rooting out al-Qaida itself, were seen as legitimate ways to end violence in that region and stop it from exporting violence around the world. The United Nations itself sanctioned the current NATO intervention.

Beyond international security, there was also a consensus that the people of Afghanistan, battered by years of war and oppressed by their own government, needed help. The NATO military mission aimed to make the country safe for an emerging democratic government and the international aid efforts that could build it into a stable and prosperous nation. What a worthy dream.

But six years have passed since the first, American-led invasion of Afghanistan. In the rich and comfortable industrial world, memories of 9/11 and other terrorist attacks in Britain, Spain, Turkey and Indonesia have faded. Civilians in many NATO countries are, however, painfully aware when the coffins bearing their soldiers killed in Afghanistan are brought home. And there is a disconnect between the peace the civilians see around them and the sudden intrusion of a faraway war.

But not always. This week, German authorities arrested three men and sought a dozen others after breaking up an alleged Islamist terrorist plot that planned to explode huge bombs near Frankfurt. Now German officials, their memories refreshed to the real threat of terror attacks, are begging the Canadian government to keep Canadian troops in Afghanistan after 2009. The Germans fear they could be targeted for more attempted attacks if NATO is weakened.

It is understandable that Canada, which has accepted one of the most onerous combat roles in Afghanistan and

lost 70 soldiers in the process, is reluctant to commit its troops to the most lethal warzones after 2009 — especially when allies such as Germany assiduously keep their own troops out of harm's way in the more sedate north. The NATO alliance will work only if all its members share the danger. Canadian troops should not have to shoulder the most treacherous assignment indefinitely. Other NATO countries should now be willing to step forward and take the place of the Canadian troops in Kandahar after 2009. But for their part, Canadians should consider carefully the implications of pulling out entirely from Afghanistan after that time.

What if the NATO wall guarding Afghanistan crumbles? What if Canada and the Netherlands abandon Afghanistan? What if the Germans and the British should follow after that? And what if the current government of Afghanistan, imperfect as it is but still a nascent democracy, should fall? What happens when the Taliban returns and resumes the execution of homosexuals and the killing of girls who try to go to school? What happens when the welcome mat is rolled out for al-Qaida? How easily, then, will the good citizens of the NATO countries — the citizens of Frankfurt, London, Amsterdam or even Toronto — sleep at night?

NATO protesters prepare

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PUBLICATION: The Record (Kitchener, Cambridge And Waterloo)
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SECTION: Front
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ILLUSTRATION: Photo: CANADIAN PRESS / Lorenzo Bouchard was the lonedemonstrator yesterday morning in front of Hotel Grand Pacific in anticipation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization meetings in Victoria. The top 26 military leaders from the organization gathered for a weekend conference at the hotel in Victoria's Inner Harbour. ;
DATELINE: VICTORIA
SOURCE: Canadian Press
COPYRIGHT: © 2007 Torstar Corporation
WORD COUNT: 365

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization serves no useful purpose in the role it plays today and protesters this weekend will stress that point, a spokesperson for a protest coalition said yesterday.

"We're saying it no longer has any rationale for its existence the way it's being used these days," said Phil Lyons, a spokesperson for a coalition of peace groups.

While NATO leaders plot strategy this weekend in Victoria, the protesters plan a mass rally starting at noon in front of the legislature, a short distance from the meeting.

"Remember it's their forces that usually create the violence . . . It's not necessarily, and very seldom, the people protesting that create violence."

Lyons also had an ominous warning if the protesters aren't allowed to demonstrate peacefully.

"If the police decide they're going to clear people up, they're going to fight back."

NATO's military committee of 26 generals gather for what spokesperson Lt.-Col. Tony White said will be a session discussing the organization's current and future operations.

White said Afghanistan will be a topic on the agenda but it's not the main item. The focus this weekend is larger than any single war zone, he said.

"The discussions are going to be very strategic. It's going to be about how does NATO prepare itself and have the right capabilities for today, but more importantly, for future operations."

Lyons predicted "busloads" of people would gather at the legislature grounds for the "No to NATO" rally.

The coalition wants NATO to disband because it claims it is no longer a defence force, but is instead a puppet of the U.S., he said.

"NATO, which had some reason perhaps when it was first formed, some defensive reason, is no longer a defensive force. It's a force that uses its strength to follow the Americans' dictates in their attempts to build an empire."

NATO forces have been responsible for much human suffering throughout the world, he said.

"Essentially, they're using some of the worst armaments that have ever come along in terms of damaging the civilian populations of those countries," he said, referring to Kosovo and Afghanistan.

The meeting takes place in the midst of growing tension over the increasingly bloody war in Afghanistan.

Gen. Ray Henault, chair of NATO's military committee and former chief of Canada's defence staff, said the alliance has not received formal notice from the federal government that it intends to end its combat commitment as scheduled in February 2009.

He said the alliance anticipates there will be changes but has not begun the formal process of scouting out replacement nations.

Last week Defence Minister Peter MacKay said Canada's current mission in its current "configuration" will be over in 2009.

Afghanistan: yes or no?

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PUBLICATION: Times & Transcript (Moncton)
DATE: 2007.09.08
SECTION: Opinion
PAGE: D8
BYLINE: W.E. (Bill) Belliveau IN
DEPTH
COPYRIGHT: © 2007 Times & Transcript
(Moncton)
WORD COUNT: 992

Canada's military mission to Afghanistan began soon after the 9/11 attacks on the United States in 2001.

Although Canada had provided some limited humanitarian aid to Afghanistan prior to that point, about \$10 million a year, many people believe that our military commitment was made as an alternative to joining the Americans in Iraq. We could rationalize a multilateral (NATO) engagement with al-Qaeda but not an illegal invasion of Iraq by U.S. led "coalition forces".

At a conference on Afghanistan in Tokyo in January 2002, Canada made a major commitment to assist in the reconstruction of the war-torn country. Canada's Department of Foreign Affairs says Afghanistan is now "the single largest recipient of Canadian foreign aid." So far, according to Foreign Affairs, Canada has allocated a total of \$616.5 million to Afghanistan for the period 2001 through 2009.

In February 2002, a battle-ready group from the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry was sent to Kandahar for six months to assist the United States and other NATO forces in their offensive against Osama bin Laden and elements of the Taliban and al-Qaeda in the rugged southern regions of Afghanistan.

From August 2003 to December 2005, Canada's military commitment was largely based in the capital, Kabul, as part of the International Assistance Force. The military objective was to provide intelligence and security to allow "rebuilding of the democratic process," something which eventually would lead to elections in the fall of 2005.

In July 2006, Canada assumed a military role in the southern part of the country, with more than 2,000 soldiers based near Kandahar. For six months ending on Nov. 1, 2006, Canada also held the command of one of the main military forces in the area, called Multi National Brigade for Command South.

In May 2006, members of Parliament voted to keep Canadian soldiers there for two years longer than previously planned. At least 70 Canadian soldiers have now been killed in Afghanistan. By the spring of 2007, the natives were getting restless.

Liberal Leader, Stéphane Dion and Bloc Québécois Leader Gilles Duceppe called for the government to notify its allies that Canada will not extend its mission leading NATO troops in southern Afghanistan, past February of 2009. The NDP have demanded an immediate withdrawal.

Last Sunday, Defence Minister Peter MacKay said in a television interview that Canada has signalled to allies that they cannot count on our troops fighting in the Kandahar region past 2009. Mr. MacKay added that Parliament will vote on Canada's future role in Afghanistan after 2009. A spokesman for Mr. MacKay, Dan Dugas clarified later that the Defence Minister had really meant that Canada has not sent a new signal to

NATO, but rather that allies know that the current mission ends in 2009 and that a new vote must be held in Parliament to decide what Canada will do after that.

Mr. Dion says Mr. MacKay's indication that our allies have been advised not to expect an extension of the Kandahar mission is an effort to suggest that it will end in 2009 -- but without saying so unequivocally.

On Wednesday, Public Works Minister Michael Fortier (the unelected Senator from Montreal) said that all options remain open, including the possibility that the House of Commons will vote on a different mission for Canada in Afghanistan after 2009. "Any renewal of the mission in its current form or another form will be subject to the approval of the Parliament of Canada," Mr. Fortier told Radio-Canada television.

On Thursday, NATO's top generals arrived in Canada for a meeting to map out Afghan strategy amid growing strains in the alliance over the increasingly bloody war in that country. The protracted battle to put down the Taliban insurgency has the Netherlands questioning their deployment of combat troops in the region.

General Ray Henault, chairman of NATO's military committee and former chief of Canada's defence staff, said the alliance has not received formal notice from Ottawa that it intends to end its combat commitment as scheduled in February 2009. He said the alliance anticipates there will be changes but has not begun the formal process of scouting out replacement nations.

The General said he hopes Canada will stay because progress is being made, but he also said there's no way to say when NATO will achieve its objectives in Afghanistan. He sounds a lot like George Bush and his good news stories about Iraq.

The more immediate concern for NATO is the decision expected within weeks by the Netherlands, which has combat troops, helicopters and aircraft operating in Uruzgan province, north of Kandahar. The Dutch are expected to say whether their forces will remain in Afghanistan -- a decision that could trigger a domino effect if they decide to leave. The Australians, who are not members of NATO, have about 1,000 support troops and combat engineers in Afghanistan but say they will not stay if the Dutch decide to leave. Such an exodus combined with the reluctance of Germany (they're begging Canada to stay), Italy and France to commit their combat forces to fighting the Taliban could make a tenuous situation even more dangerous.

Canada has steadily increased its involvement in Afghanistan since the fall of 2001. According to Canada's Department of National Defense, "Afghanistan is not, nor has it ever been a traditional peacekeeping mission. There are no ceasefire arrangements to enforce and no negotiated peace settlement to respect".

The question today, is whether or not we are making a difference and whether or not the battle of reconstruction can ever be won?

Canada prides itself in being a peace-keeper. Fighting a war without a foreseeable outcome makes us uncomfortable. That's not reason enough to cut and run but maybe its justification for a change in role.

– W.E. (Bill) Belliveau is a Shediac resident and Moncton business consultant. His column appears on this page every Saturday. He can be contacted at bill.bellstrategic@nb.aibn.com

Spend tax dollars on making peace, not war

PUBLICATION:	Kingston Whig–Standard (ON)
DATE:	2007.09.08
SECTION:	Forum
PAGE:	9
ILLUSTRATION:	An Afghan soldier stands guard near the wreckage of a vehicle full of explosive materials that was blown up by U.S. and Afghan forces west of Kabul.
WORD COUNT:	381

I am a Quaker. I believe in the protection of all God's creation. The world– wide objective must be the welfare of people.

Civilians, especially women and children, are the primary victims of war. Innocent people in Afghanistan are being ravaged by war. The cost in human lives is outrageous.

All people deserve to live their lives free from the destruction and terror of war. Only through peace can this be done.

The Canadian Forces are going into Afghanistan with weapons to kill other human beings. This is war. Friendly– fire deaths of our troops and the killing of innocent victims are a reality of war.

Canadian troops have sent people to almost–certain torture by the Afghan authorities. Our troops – our children – are taught to hate their enemies and to kill them on command.

Canadians have no choice but to have a huge number of their tax dollars used to finance these atrocities. Our money is used to support the corporations that feed off war. Our economy is fed by production of war material, which, in turn, fuels the lust for power and greed for profit.

Young men and women are targeted with the Canadian Forces' campaigning techniques for recruitment. The military now has a presence in our schools. The cadet program is the most well–funded youth program in Canada and is free, making it enticing for low– income families.

There are alternatives to the violent methods of war in order to find peace and to boost our economy. Peace can be found with preventive action, such as providing humanitarian aid and caring for the Earth.

We must learn conflict–resolution methods rather than methods to improve ways of killing one another. We need to facilitate discussion of ways to overcome hostility between parties and to find resolutions based on truth and equity, not power and violence.

Vulnerable groups must be taught to take responsibility for their own community. Our skills in non–violent action need to be increased. Nonviolent peace forces need to replace Canada's military establishment.

We need a government office with the mandate of working towards international peace. Tax dollars should be spent on these peace initiatives rather than on war.

Canada stood for peace for many years. Our soldiers went to other countries under the United Nations to take action for peace.

Canadians loved their country for the work our soldiers were doing towards bringing peace on Earth. It is crucial for our survival that we work towards continuing and expanding our peace initiatives.

Dale Andrews

Kingston

Protesters: NATO serves no purpose; Mass rally planned as generals meet to plot future

PUBLICATION: The Chronicle–Herald

DATE: 2007.09.08

SECTION: Canada

PAGE: A12

SOURCE: The Canadian Press

ILLUSTRATION: Victoria police thread heavy wire through a temporary fence in front of the Hotel Grand Pacific in anticipation of the NATO meetings Friday in Victoria, B.C. (Deddeda Stemler / CP); Four large buses dropped off delegates behind the Hotel Grand Pacific in Victoria, B.C., for the NATO meetings which began Friday. The top 26 military leaders are gathering for a weekend conference. (Deddeda Stemler / CP)

WORD COUNT: 368

VICTORIA – The North Atlantic Treaty Organization serves no useful purpose in the role it plays today and protesters this weekend will stress that point, a spokesman for a protest coalition said Friday.

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"Find the mines before they get us'; Canadian soldiers say no way to avoid the danger of explosives

PUBLICATION: The Chronicle–Herald

DATE: 2007.09.08

SECTION: World

PAGE: A6

SOURCE: The Canadian Press

BYLINE: Dene Moore

An Afghan boy rides his bicycle on his way home in Kabul, Afghanistan, on Friday.

ILLUSTRATION: Canadian soldiers say not only are they in Afghanistan to find Taliban insurgents, but to protect the local population. (RAFIQ MAQBOOL / AP)

WORD COUNT: 357

SPERWAN GHAR, Afghanistan – In this war–torn land, almost anything can be – and has been – used as a roadside bomb.

For the untrained eye, every bump in the road and every stray water bottle poses a deadly threat.

And for Canadian soldiers trying to secure the most dangerous districts of Afghanistan, there is no way to avoid the danger.

"You can't just be in a vehicle," says Capt. Bryan Ouellet, 27, of the Royal 22nd Regiment's 3rd Battalion battle group.

"We need to have contact with the local people so they know we're here to help, not just to find Taliban but to bring security to the local population."

And so, with a warning that there could be hidden explosives on the dusty village road to the forward operating base at Sperwan Ghar, Ouellet and four of his soldiers got out on foot to sweep for bombs that threaten the convoy behind them.

For 700 extremely long metres, they walked from side to side in search of any sign of the improvised explosive devices – or IEDs – that have killed 38 Canadian soldiers and thousands of Afghans.

Sperwan Ghar is a remote outpost in the Panjwaii district southwest of Kandahar city. The journey of just over six kilometres takes 45 minutes because of the frequent need to sweep for IEDs.

"The threat is there," Ouellet said. "You just have to be aware of it and take a look down."

"We still have to get out and find the mines before they get us."

Although Canadian military officials say they have struck some heavy blows against the Taliban here in their ideological heartland, insurgents are still widespread.

And they're watching.

The Taliban took advantage of the changeover of Canadian regiments this summer to re–establish a presence in several areas.

"Find the mines before they get us'; Canadian soldiers say no way to avoid the danger of explosives

Now the Royal 22nd Regiment, known as the Van Doos, are trying to win back the local population and re-establish their presence in the region.

At Sperwan Ghar, Lieut. Marie-Christine Alamy said a lot of that has been done. The base, rimmed by small villages in the shadow of Khyber Mountain, has been quiet and she hopes it remains that way.

"We go into the village to speak to the villagers, to ask if there's been any strange activity and if there are things we can do," she said.

"If someone is sick, we help them. We also give crayons to the children, put a smile on their faces."

Alamy said it's paid off.

"There's a lot less activity here now," she said of the Taliban. "People are starting to come back."

And that, say many, is how war will ultimately be won.

Yet it's unlikely to be won with kindness alone.

Back at a base at Masum Ghar for the night, the soldiers didn't even have time to take off their vests before a rocket attack happened. One rocket whistled in over their heads, landing about 30 metres away.

Nobody was hurt.

"Find the mines before they get us"; Canadian soldiers say no way to avoid the danger of explosives

Cops, villagers search for kidnapped deminers

PUBLICATION: The
Chronicle–Herald
DATE: 2007.09.08
SECTION: World
PAGE: A6
SOURCE: The Associated
Press
WORD COUNT: 228

KABUL – Police and villagers hunted Friday for 13 mine-clearing workers kidnapped in a restive part of Afghanistan, a day after two NATO soldiers and more than 20 insurgents were killed in fierce fighting.

The deminers, all Afghans working for a UN-funded landmine clearance agency, were kidnapped Thursday in eastern Paktia province on the border with Pakistan, said provincial deputy police chief Ghulam Dastager.

"We have nothing to do with politicians, the people of the area asked us to come," said Kefayatullah Eblagh, the head of Afghan Technical Consultants, the demining agency.

In the past, Taliban insurgents have abducted deminers and occasionally killed them, but Dastager said it was too early to speculate on the identity or motives of the kidnappers, noting criminal gangs also frequently take hostages for ransom.

The Taliban recently released 19 South Koreans held for almost six weeks after an unprecedented deal with the Seoul government, and vowed to carry out more abductions of locals and foreigners.

Dastager and Eblagh said police and villagers were hunting for the crew, who were travelling in two vehicles.

The two NATO soldiers were killed in two separate bomb blasts Thursday in southern Afghanistan, the International Security Assistance Force said in a statement. It gave no more details.

Also Friday, several suspected insurgents were killed in restive Kandahar province, bringing to more than 235 the number of Taliban killed in daily fighting in the region since Aug. 27, the U.S. military said in a statement.

Rick Mercer hits the stage for amputee program

PUBLICATION: The Telegram (St. John's)
DATE: 2007.09.08
SECTION: National
PAGE: B10
SOURCE: CanWest News Service
BYLINE: Elizabeth Withey
ILLUSTRATION: Rick Mercer
WORD COUNT: 416

Rick Mercer has a gift for making people laugh. It's a gift he wants to share with his friend, Master Cpl. Paul Franklin, who lost his legs in 2006 after a suicide bombing in Afghanistan.

At Franklin's request, Mercer is staging a one-time performance, *Adventures in Canadian Television: An Evening with Rick Mercer*, Sunday in Edmonton in support of the Northern Alberta Amputee Program. Franklin will also speak at the event.

"All I'm doing is helping a friend out, really," says Mercer. "The cause is great and this is going to be a fun, positive night. I kind of equate it to if a friend of yours asked you to move. There are certain people you'll help move, and he's one of them."

Mercer got to know Franklin in Afghanistan before the Edmonton soldier was seriously wounded on tour. The two bunked together on a Canadian military base with a bunch of other guys who were "in their early 20s and playing Play Station," Mercer says. Both men loved politics and comedy. They hit it off and stayed in touch.

Franklin even sent Mercer souvenirs and postcards from overseas.

"I left him 100 bucks U.S. and he really stretched it out. Every two months a package would show up with a book in it, or a prayer rug, or a clock that does the Muslim call to prayer every two hours."

Mercer's one-hour show is a mix of stand-up and storytelling featuring video clips of his illustrious television career, including *This Hour has 22 Minutes*, *Talking to Americans* and *The Rick Mercer Report*.

Edmonton Journal writer Liane Faulder recently wrote a book about Franklin's accident and recovery. *The Long Walk Home: Paul Franklin's Journey from Afghanistan* was published in August. Franklin will be signing books at Mercer's show.

Mercer calls Franklin a perfect example of the human spirit's ability to triumph over adversity.

"The fact that he's walking at all is tremendous," he says. "Quite frankly, I can't even imagine the inner strength it would take."

The television star is adamant about his support for the troops.

"It has everything to do with the individuals I've met," Mercer says. "To me they personify public service. If we're going to have a Canadian Forces and we're going to ask them to go to the worst places on earth and do the hardest jobs on our behalf, we have to support them."

Season 5 of the Rick Mercer Report starts Oct. 2, and Mercer's new book, Rick Mercer Report: The Book, comes out Sept. 25. The work is a compilation of material from his television show and blog.

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The fact that he's walking at all is tremendous. Quite frankly, I can't even imagine the inner strength it would take.

No helicopters? Blame Liberals

IDNUMBER 200709080047
PUBLICATION: The Leader-Post (Regina)
DATE: 2007.09.08
EDITION: Final
SECTION: Letters
PAGE: B7
ILLUSTRATION: Photo: Leader-Post file / In the absence of Canadian helicopters, Canadian soldiers carry an Afghan man to an American chopper ;
BYLINE: Peter Gordon MacKay
SOURCE: The Leader-Post
WORD COUNT: 239

Further to the comments made by Sen. Colin Kenny in the article, "Senator calls for choppers" written by CanWest News Service reporter David Pugliese and published

Aug. 30, the senator really should be asking why he and his Liberal colleagues chose not to equip the Canadian Forces with appropriate equipment.

It is unfortunate that the senator doesn't know his facts. The current mission requires a medium-lift helicopter to carry a sufficient number of personnel. The Griffon is neither intended nor capable to fill the role of a medium-lift helicopter.

Canada's new government is addressing the shortcomings of the Griffons through our planned purchase of 16 medium-to-heavy-lift helicopters. This purchase not only delivers on our commitment to strengthen Canada's military, it also reinstates a vital capability that aircrews and soldiers have done without for over a decade.

We are working alongside 36 other nations in Afghanistan at the request of the democratically elected government as part of a UN-sanctioned, NATO-led mission. The various military capabilities and equipment resources in Afghanistan provided by the contributing nations are considered NATO International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) resources, and therefore are shared and tasked for use by the regional commanders. The current shared resources of medium-lift helicopters within ISAF Regional Command (South), where the Canadian Forces operate, include Chinook helicopters from the U.S. and the Netherlands.

Kenny should know this and not unfairly malign the Canadian Forces through innuendo.

Peter Gordon MacKay

MacKay is Conservative minister of national defence.

Ottawa

Mercer to host show to benefit amputee program

IDNUMBER 200709080038
PUBLICATION: The Leader-Post (Regina)
DATE: 2007.09.08
EDITION: Final
SECTION: Arts & Life
PAGE: B4
BYLINE: Elizabeth Withey
SOURCE: CanWest News Service
WORD COUNT: 406

Rick Mercer has a gift for making people laugh. It's gift he wants to share with his friend, Master Cpl. Paul Franklin, who lost his legs in 2006 after a suicide bombing in Afghanistan.

At Franklin's request, Mercer is staging a one-time performance, Adventures in Canadian Television: An Evening with Rick Mercer, Sunday in Edmonton in support of the Northern Alberta Amputee Program. Franklin will also speak at the event.

"All I'm doing is helping a friend out, really," says Mercer. "The cause is great and this is going to be a fun, positive night. I kind of equate it to if a friend of yours asked you to move. There are certain people you'll help move, and he's one of them."

Mercer got to know Franklin in Afghanistan before the Edmonton soldier was seriously wounded on tour. The two bunked together on a Canadian military base with a bunch of other guys who were "in their early 20s and playing Play Station," Mercer says. Both men loved politics and comedy. They hit it off and stayed in touch.

Franklin even sent Mercer souvenirs and postcards from overseas.

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Mercer's one-hour show is a mix of stand-up and storytelling featuring video clips of his illustrious television career, including This Hour has 22 Minutes, Talking to Americans and The Rick Mercer Report.

Edmonton Journal writer Liane Faulder recently wrote a book about Franklin's accident and recovery. The Long Walk Home: Paul Franklin's Journey from Afghanistan was published in August. Franklin will be signing books at Mercer's show.

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"The fact that he's walking at all is tremendous," he says. "Quite frankly I can't even imagine the inner strength it would take."

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Edmonton Journal

A Soldier's Story; Eric Mehalacopoulos is a Québécois with a difference – he fought in Iraq as a U.S. marine. Now he returns to that war in the film Battle for Haditha

IDNUMBER 200709080146

PUBLICATION: Montreal Gazette

DATE: 2007.09.08

EDITION: Final

SECTION: Culture

PAGE: E1 / BREAK

ILLUSTRATION: Colour Photo: (See hard copy for photo description); Colour Photo: PHOTOS COURTESY OF HANWAY FILMS / The Battle for Haditha is a film about a dark day in the history of the U.S. Marine Corps – a massacre of 24 Iraqi civilians. ; Colour Photo: PHOTOS COURTESY OF HANWAY FILMS / Eric Mehalacopoulos, on the right, plays Sgt. Ross, the marine who ends up facing murder charges. ;

KEYWORDS: 0

BYLINE: BRENDAN KELLY

SOURCE: The Gazette

WORD COUNT: 1550

On the phone recently from his home in Orange County, Calif., Eric Mehalacopoulos is proud to say "Je suis Québécois." But this Montreal-born, Ste. Agathe-raised, 26-year-old francophone admits that when he comes back to his home province, he tries to keep quiet about how he's spent a good chunk of his adult life.

"When I come home, I don't advertise," said Mehalacopoulos. "Of course, people know because people talk. But I'm not a bragger. I don't walk around with my chest pumped-out saying 'I did this, I did that.'"

"If people ask, I tell them. When I come back, it's to see my friends and my family, and enjoy what I remember of home. Some people in Quebec probably think (I'm) a traitor. Whatever. You live your life. You have opportunities, you take them."

What he tells them, when they ask, is that he signed up for the U.S. marines when he was 18, shortly after he and his family had moved from Quebec to Virginia. A few years later, he spent two tours of duties in Iraq, often in the midst of some very intensive fighting.

Now he has been cast along with a number of fellow ex-marines in director Nick Broomfield's controversial Iraq-set film *Battle for Haditha*, which will have its world premiere Tuesday at the Toronto Film Festival. The British filmmaker (Biggie and Tupac, Kurt & Courtney) recreates the events surrounding the killing of 24 Iraqi civilians by U.S. marines in Haditha in 2005.

Broomfield discovered Mehalacopoulos via a Los Angeles casting agent who had the Quebecker's name on a list of actors with military experience. Mehalacopoulos had come to the casting director's attention thanks to his work as an extra on the film *Jarhead*.

Mehalacopoulos was on the frontlines in the initial invasion of Iraq in March 2003, as his battalion fought through the country to Baghdad. His unit – the 3rd battalion, 4th Marines – was the first marine unit to reach

A Soldier's Story; Eric Mehalacopoulos is a Québécois with a difference – he fought in Iraq as a U.S. marine

the Iraqi capital from the south, and his battalion is responsible for one of the iconic images of the early days of the war – the pulling down of the giant statue of Saddam Hussein in central Baghdad.

Mehalacopoulos returned to the United States after a four-month stint, but he was back in Iraq a year later, and his unit was in fiercer fighting the second time round, most notably during the 30-day battle for Fallujah.

Mehalacopoulos is well aware that many of his francophone Quebec confreres are not wildly enthusiastic about military conflicts of any sort, a fact underlined by the province's well-documented ambivalence about the Canadian mission in Afghanistan in general and the participation of the Quebec Van Doos in particular.

But Mehalacopoulos has no regrets about his decision to join the marines and risk life-and-limb in Iraq, and he claims to be not particularly haunted by what happened over there.

"It might sound odd, but I take it as a blessing," he said. "It made me grow up a lot. Going through all that hardship opened my eyes. I'm a person who observes a lot, and I learn through observation. Just day-to-day life with the guys and seeing how certain people deal with it, how certain people are better leaders.

"It made me a leader. And that led me to want to pursue different things once I got out. Right now, I'm in college, and I want to be an actor. It just gave me that drive. I'm not afraid of what's going to happen because I've already been through a lot of stuff. It's just part of my life.

"I saw a lot of tough things. I lost friends. But you have to realize it's life. You just have to move on. I'm proud of what I did."

Mehalacopoulos had originally joined the marines to add some discipline to his life. He says he was the class clown in high school in the Laurentians and was looking for a radical change.

When he moved to Virginia just after high school, he figured the marines were just the ticket to help straighten him out. He enlisted in June 1999 – "right before St. Jean Baptiste," he notes – and he was in marine boot camp by January 2000. His mother – who lives in St. Jérôme now – wasn't crazy about her son joining the marines, but his parents respected the decision.

Mehalacopoulos wasn't thinking he'd see active duty because there didn't seem to be an armed conflict on the horizon. Then 9/11 happened and, all of a sudden Mehalacopoulos and his fellow marines realized they might be going to war very soon.

His unit was not sent to Afghanistan, so it was 18 months before the call finally came to pick up their weapons and head into battle. His battalion had been deployed to Kuwait just prior to the Iraq war, and when President George W. Bush ordered the invasion in March 2003, Mehalacopoulos's unit was on the Iraqi border ready to pounce.

He was in many firefights, but he said those weren't the scariest moments.

"Every time we got hit with indirect fire, like mortar or rocket attacks, you don't know where that thing is going to land. You hear the sound of the explosion, you feel the concussion, and that's nerve-racking. It's also scary sleeping at night on a rooftop knowing they're lobbing rounds over your head, and one can land right on you and you won't wake up the next day. A direct firefight, you know where it's coming from. They're shooting at you, and you're fighting back. You feel like you're more in control."

He says the second tour of duty was much tougher.

"First time, we were pumped. The second time

A Soldier's Story; Eric Mehalacopoulos is a Québécois with a difference – he fought in Iraq as a U.S. marine

wasn't as great. The motivation wasn't as much there. The thing that kept us going was (thinking about) coming back home alive and making sure your buddy comes back home alive.

"It wasn't really about the cause. It was about getting it over with. Every time you go on a patrol, you think this might be the one, and, especially toward the end, when I knew I was getting out and only had a few weeks left in Iraq, you don't want to be that statistic – the guy who was so close to coming home to see his family and his girlfriend and gets it."

Battle for Haditha is a look at a dark moment for the U.S. military in Iraq. On Nov. 19, 2005, 24 Iraqis were killed in the city in western Iraq. At first U.S. military authorities claimed the deaths took place as the result of a bomb detonation and the ensuing firefight .

But months later, allegations surfaced that the dead Iraqis were all civilians – not insurgents – and that they had been massacred by the U.S. marines as payback for the killing of a fellow marine.

Mehalacopoulos admits the incident doesn't reflect well on the marines, though he continues to call the U.S. Marine Corps "a great organization." He knows about the intense pressure the troops are under in Iraq, but he says that's where the leadership comes in: squad leaders have to make sure the guys don't snap.

He is aware of the irony that while he believes the marines are an ultra-disciplined fighting force, he is starring in a film that showcases the marines at their most undisciplined. In the film, he plays the tough, no-nonsense Sgt. Ross, who ends up facing murder charges.

Broomfield – whose other films include Heidi Fleiss: Hollywood Madam and Aileen: Life and Death of a Serial Killer – wrote a detailed script outline but did not have a finished screenplay. Instead much of the dialogue was improvised during the shooting, and Broomfield relied on the ex-marines to try to keep it real. But there were some on-set squabbles between the Iraq veterans and the filmmaker.

"It's a movie, so it's not true-true, but the basics are there," said Mehalacopoulos. "It is somewhat exaggerated, and those were some of the arguments we had with the director. Because we're experts in our field."

The former marines often knocked heads with Broomfield, taking him to task for things they felt weren't realistic.

"But then he's coming in with the creative aspect, and he knows more about movies than we do."

So the former marines would fight to keep things as accurate as possible. But they understood that sometimes real-life military operations can be pretty boring, which doesn't necessarily make for great movie storytelling. So the two camps had to compromise along the way.

Battle for Haditha was shot in Jordan between March and May of this year, and Mehalacopoulos enjoyed going back to the region as someone playing a soldier rather than as a real soldier at war with the locals.

"Man that was a great experience for me. Coming back from two combat tours, you have this view of Middle Eastern people and going back to a country that's peaceful – there's still people that give you dirty looks, but they're more accepting of Americans there. It allowed me to see a different side of the people. At first I was stressed because I was used to being in that part of the world watching my back all the time."

Mehalacopoulos admits he hasn't been closely following the debate in Canada about the country's combat mission in Afghanistan.

A Soldier's Story; Eric Mehalacopoulos is a Québécois with a difference – he fought in Iraq as a U.S. marine

"I don't know enough to talk about it, but I just hope that Canada makes independent choices and does it because they think it's right and not because they think Big Brother wants them to do that."

Battle for Haditha will have its world premiere Tuesday at the Toronto International Film Festival. It has yet to be bought by a North American distributor, but it almost certainly will open across the continent sometime in the next year.

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Afghan police lose ground gained by Canadians

IDNUMBER 200709080061
PUBLICATION: Montreal Gazette
DATE: 2007.09.08
EDITION: Final
SECTION: News
PAGE: A23
KEYWORDS: WAR; TERRORISM; BOMBINGS
DATELINE: HOWZ–E–MADAD, Afghanistan
BYLINE: ANDREW MAYEDA
SOURCE: CanWest News Service
WORD COUNT: 574

Leaning on his rickety bicycle at the side of the road, Ainadeen shrugs when asked where the explosions came from.

All he knows is that they kept coming, which is why he and other villagers fled to the relative calm of the desert.

"The police couldn't provide security here," said Ainadeen, who like many Afghans goes by a single name.

Around last Christmas, Canadian Forces rolled into this sparse but strategically located village without much resistance from the Taliban.

But now, residents and local police officials say a small cell of Taliban fighters has entrenched itself in the grape fields behind the crumbling mud walls.

As recently as last month, in fact, the black–and–white flag of the Taliban could be seen flying above the village. Until Canadian combat engineers arrived this week to build a new security outpost, Taliban fighters and police engaged in daily firefights, said the village's deputy police chief, Hafiz Ullah.

The failure of Afghan security forces to hold villages such as Howz–e–Madad underscores the challenges that Canada and its NATO allies face as they try to pacify the unruly southern province of Kandahar with a limited number of troops.

During last fall's Operation Medusa, the biggest and bloodiest offensive that Canada has fought in Afghanistan, Canadian troops flushed the Taliban out of its stronghold in Panjwai district, west of Kandahar City.

The operation prompted the governor of Kandahar to declare that the Taliban had been "eliminated" from Panjwai and parts of neighbouring Zhari district to the north.

Meanwhile, Canadian Forces set up police checkpoints along Highway One, a well–travelled road that links Kandahar with Kabul to the northeast and Herat to the northwest.

But many of the checkpoints have either been abandoned by the Afghan National Police or overrun by the Taliban. At Howz–e–Madad, for example, British and Canadian soldiers built a checkpoint last winter that was to be manned by the ANP.

But Ullah, the deputy police chief, said his small team of 15 officers has struggled to hold the Taliban at bay.

"I have only one magazine, and when I reach for the second I have nothing. I cannot provide security in this way," he said through an interpreter.

With few men and little firepower, the police have had their hands full with a group of about 20 Taliban fighters believed to have found refuge in the village.

Ullah said the situation is comparable at many of the checkpoints along Highway One. He said seven police at a nearby checkpoint were recently killed – some of them kidnapped and beheaded – by the Taliban.

"Some of the checkpoints were lost. There were so many of them with so few ANP, and that probably caused them to be lost," said Capt. Daniel Morin, second in command at Patrol Base Wilson, a forward operating base further east toward Kandahar City.

As a result of the collapse of the ring of security along Highway One, Canadian Forces have launched Operation Garanday Zmarny (Strong Lion). Under the operation, Canadian soldiers have been reinforcing checkpoints in the region that were lost or abandoned.

This week, engineers here began building an encampment that will serve as a small Afghan National Army base.

Canada's top military commander in Afghanistan, Brig.-Gen. Guy Laroche, said recently the checkpoints will eventually be protected by a combination of police, soldiers and Canadian troops.

The hope is that the operation will choke off the Taliban's freedom of movement in the district and prevent it from staging attacks on Kandahar City.

But the need for joint checkpoints is a troubling admission of the ANP's inadequacy at a time when NATO troops are already stretched thin.

The Canadian military has been training and mentoring the Afghan National Army for some time, and military commanders say the ANA has made progress toward becoming a reliable force.

The Afghan National Police is widely seen as under-equipped, incompetent and corrupt. Canadian commanders say the goal is eventually to hand over the country to Afghan forces, but refuse to say when that might happen.

Rick Mercer helps out a friend; Comedian stages fundraiser for Alberta amputee program

IDNUMBER 200709080085
PUBLICATION: Edmonton Journal
DATE: 2007.09.08
EDITION: Final
SECTION: Culture
PAGE: C1 / FRONT
ILLUSTRATION: Colour Photo: Mercer;
KEYWORDS: 0
DATELINE: EDMONTON
BYLINE: Elizabeth Withey
SOURCE: The Edmonton Journal
WORD COUNT: 404

COMEDY PREVIEW

Adventures in Canadian Television: An Evening with Rick Mercer

In support of the Northern Alberta Amputee Program

With: The Wajjo Drummers

When: Sunday at 7 p.m.

Where: Winspear Centre

Tickets: \$55 to \$65 at www.winspearcentre.com

EDMONTON – Rick Mercer has a gift for making people laugh. It's a gift he wants to share with his friend, Master Cpl. Paul Franklin, who lost his legs in 2006 after a suicide bombing in Afghanistan.

At Franklin's request, Mercer is staging a one-time performance, Adventures in Canadian Television: An Evening with Rick Mercer, at the Winspear on Sunday in support of the Northern Alberta Amputee Program. Franklin will also speak at the event.

"All I'm doing is helping a friend out, really," says Mercer. "The cause is great and this is going to be a fun, positive night.

"I kind of equate it to if a friend of yours asked you to move. There are certain people you'll help move, and he's one of them."

Mercer got to know Franklin in Afghanistan before the Edmonton soldier was seriously wounded on tour. The two bunked together on a Canadian military base with a bunch of other guys who were "early 20s and playing PlayStation," Mercer says. Both men loved politics and comedy. They hit it off and stayed in touch. Franklin even sent Mercer souvenirs and postcards from overseas.

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"The fact that he's walking at all is tremendous," he said. "Quite frankly, I can't even imagine the inner strength it would take."

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Realpolitik shifts Afghan objectives; Realpolitik shifts Afghan objectives

IDNUMBER: 200709080049
PUBLICATION: Edmonton Journal
DATE: 2007.09.08
EDITION: Final
SECTION: Ideas
PAGE: A19
ILLUSTRATION: Photo: AFP/Getty Images, file / A Canadian soldier : fromCharles Company, The Royal Canadian Regiment plays on a homemade chess set, constructed from cardboard, at their fortified position in volatile Panjwaji district, Kandahar province. ;
KEYWORDS: 0
BYLINE: Gar Pardy
SOURCE: The Edmonton Journal
WORD COUNT: 934

The government is slowly and crabbedly sidling towards a decision on Canada's future military role in Afghanistan. Defence Minister Peter MacKay told a television audience a few days ago "the signal that has been sent already (to NATO) is that our current configuration will end in February, 2009."

However, a DND spokesman later clarified the minister's statement by saying this was not a new or recent signal, but rather "there will be a vote in Parliament to decide the way forward after that."

These statements, which were echoed by Foreign Minister Maxime Bernier but not the prime minister, suggest the government is accepting the reality, evident for well over a year, that Afghanistan is not a place that can be put right by an undermanned, poorly led and disparate foreign military intervention force.

Canada, with the highest casualty rate of any contributing country, illustrates the inequality of the NATO deployment. In Uruzgan province to the north of Kandahar province, with a much smaller territory and population, the Dutch and Australians with an equal number of troops to Canada have had 11 deaths to Canada's 70.

The lack of air transport and bomb clearing equipment today illustrates Canada's inability to provide troops with equipment appropriate for the fight. The ebb and flow of "captured" territory in Kandahar province is but the latest evidence of a doomed mission.

Equally, these recent ministerial statements represent an acknowledgement that there is insufficient political or public support in Canada for a continuation of the current military mission. The tenuous political scene and inability or unwillingness of the government to create a national consensus is merely a subplot to the evolving tragedy of Afghanistan. Bumper stickers on municipal service vehicles are a poor substitute.

Needless to say, the government is now caught between the dog and fire hydrant, and the situation is largely of its own making. While it inherited a policy made by previous governments, it has made the current mess its own by divorcing the reality of Afghanistan from hoped-for electoral benefits at home. In the meantime, more Canadians will die without seriously affecting the outcome.

The continued lack of political progress in Afghanistan, the worsening military situation in the southwest and elsewhere and the refusal of allies to improve on their military commitments paints a dismal context for Canadian decision-making. The built-in deadline for the current Canadian military commitment provides a soft option that will be exercised by the government at the appropriate time.

Nor is there any succour to be had from other key countries.

The Americans are totally preoccupied with their danse macabre that is Iraq. To suggest that Afghanistan will receive appropriate attention and consideration in its ever-lengthening presidential selection process is as far-fetched as February grass in Newfoundland.

As for Pakistan, its perennial shift from military to civilian government offers no help on Afghanistan. While Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif appear as attractive alternatives to Gen. Pervez Musharraf, their history demonstrates that they are regional, parochial politicians who will do little to lead a deeply fractured and troubled state out of its decades-long miasma. They will make many of the same compromises that the generals made in order to obtain and maintain power.

Pakistan from its earliest days copied the British policy of ensuring a weak and fractured Afghanistan on its artificial northern border. That is as close to a national policy as Pakistan has and there is no reason to believe the periodic retreat of the generals to their barracks will alter that primordial element in Pakistani politics. The Taliban is as much Pakistani as it is Afghan.

The increasing ability of the Taliban to take foreign hostages is another depressing aspect of the downward spiral. Equally troublesome was the reaction of Foreign Affairs Minister Bernier who gratuitously criticized the Korean government for negotiating with the terrorists. "We do not negotiate with terrorists, for any reason," the minister's statement read.

How short the memory. In 1996 the Canadian ambassador to Peru, Tony Vincent, directly negotiated with the Tupac Amaru Revolutionary Movement in order to obtain the release of hostages at the residence of the Japanese ambassador.

Many years earlier the Canadian government negotiated with the FLQ to end the kidnapping of the British trade representative in Montreal. In the intervening years Canada used any number of intermediaries (the Catholic Church and the Red Cross) to obtain the release of kidnapped Canadians.

There is a dilemma in such situations. However, Canada, along with all other members of the G8 where the "no negotiations policy" originated, equally accepts that the safety of the hostages is paramount and, where necessary, Canada has been prepared to sup with the devils. The only question is one of how long the spoon.

In this increasingly bubbling cauldron, no thought is being given to other than a military solution for Afghanistan centred on foreign troops. There are occasional references to low-level contacts between the government and the Taliban, but these appear to be little more than will-o'-the-wisps.

Afghanistan, as with the vast majority of post-Second World War insurgencies/civil wars, will only be resolved by a political deal between the contending parties. Maybe not enough people have yet died to bring home that reality.

If Northern Ireland and Palestine are susceptible to negotiated settlements, surely Afghanistan is worth a try. It is more than time for Canada to exercise the third "D" of its Afghanistan policy, and give Diplomacy a hard push, given the failure of Defence and Development.

Gar Pardy is former Canadian director of consular affairs. He retired from the Foreign Service in 2003.

Achieving real results

IDNUMBER 200709080068
PUBLICATION: Calgary Herald
DATE: 2007.09.08
EDITION: Final
SECTION: Q: Queries – Quibbles – Quirks
PAGE: A29
COLUMN: Inbox: Your Space – Your Time
KEYWORDS: 0
BYLINE: Robert Greenhill
SOURCE: Calgary Herald
WORD COUNT: 279

Afghanistan – Re: "Development efforts in Afghanistan criticized; Canadian cash comes under fire from think-tank," Aug. 30

Canadian aid efforts are making a positive difference in the lives of the Afghan people. Unfortunately, the Senlis Council has presented an inaccurate view of our development activities in Afghanistan.

Afghanistan is a country ravaged by decades of war. Its people are poor and its hospitals are not up to Canadian standards. But they are getting better. When I visited Mirwais Hospital, I saw children being vaccinated against polio and measles thanks to Canadian aid. With Canada's help, UNICEF has trained health-care workers and is working to build a maternal waiting home.

Not only are services at that hospital improving, we are helping to improve the health of Afghans across Kandahar. Polio cases are down 77 per cent this year. Since the fall of the Taliban, child mortality across Afghanistan has dropped over 20 per cent, saving 40,000 children a year.

In Kandahar, week after week, real successes are being realized. More than 190 km of rural roads have been repaired and more than 1,200 new wells installed. More than 5,600 people are receiving literacy training and some 200,000 people have benefited from food aid. In addition, more than 420,000 square metres of land have been cleared of mines since March 2005, benefitting more than 10,000 people.

We are achieving real results in Kandahar by working closely with experienced and respected agencies such as the World Food Program, the World Health Organization and UNICEF. Together, we are helping the Afghan people build a better future for themselves and their families.

Robert Greenhill,

Ottawa

Robert Greenhill is president of the Canadian International Development Agency

Afghan police lose ground won by Canadian troops; Taliban overrunning checkpoints

IDNUMBER 200709080033
PUBLICATION: Calgary Herald
DATE: 2007.09.08
EDITION: Final
SECTION: News
PAGE: A15
ILLUSTRATION: Photo: Andrew Mayeda, CanWest News Service / Canadiansoldiers build a new security outpost this week in the remote Afghan village of Howz-e-Madad. With few men and little firepower, the Afghan National Police have had their hands full with a group of about 20 Taliban fighters believed to have found refuge in the village. ;
KEYWORDS: WAR; TERRORISM; BOMBINGS
DATELINE: HOWZ-E-MADAD, Afghanistan
BYLINE: Andrew Mayeda
SOURCE: CanWest News Service
WORD COUNT: 690

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The operation prompted the governor of Kandahar to declare that the Taliban had been "eliminated" from Panjwai and parts of neighbouring Zhari district to the north.

Meanwhile, Canadian Forces set up police checkpoints along Highway 1, a well-travelled road that links Kandahar with Kabul to the northeast and Herat to the northwest.

But many of the checkpoints have either been abandoned by the Afghan National Police or overrun by the Taliban. At Howz-e-Madad, for example, British and Canadian soldiers built a checkpoint last winter that was to be manned by the ANP.

But Ullah, the deputy police chief, said his small team of 15 officers has struggled to hold the Taliban at bay.

"I have only one magazine, and when I reach for the second I have nothing. I cannot provide security in this way," he said through an interpreter.

With few men and little firepower, the police have had their hands full with a group of about 20 Taliban fighters believed to have found refuge in the village.

Ullah said the situation is comparable at many of the checkpoints along Highway 1. He said seven police at a nearby checkpoint were recently killed -- some of them kidnapped and beheaded -- by the Taliban.

"Some of the checkpoints were lost. There were so many of them with so few ANP, and that probably caused them to be lost," said Capt. Daniel Morin, second in command at Patrol Base Wilson, a forward operating base further east toward Kandahar City.

As a result of the collapse of the ring of security along Highway 1, Canadian Forces have launched Operation Garanday Zmarny (Strong Lion). Under the operation, Canadian soldiers have been reinforcing checkpoints in the region that were lost or abandoned.

This week, engineers here began building an encampment that will serve as a small Afghan National Army base.

Canada's top military commander in Afghanistan, Brig.-Gen. Guy Laroche, said recently the checkpoints will eventually be protected by a combination of Afghan police, soldiers and Canadian troops.

The hope is that the operation will choke off the Taliban's freedom of movement in the district and prevent it from staging attacks on Kandahar City.

But the need for joint checkpoints is a troubling admission of the ANP's inadequacy at a time when NATO troops are already stretched thin.

The Canadian military has been training and mentoring the Afghan National Army for some time, and military commanders say the ANA has made progress toward becoming a reliable force.

By contrast, the Afghan National Police is widely seen as under-equipped, incompetent and corrupt.

Canadian commanders say the goal is to eventually hand over the country to Afghan forces, but refuse to say when that might happen.

The Canadian operation comes as the chiefs of defence staff of NATO's 26 nations meet this week in Canada to discuss the distribution of troops throughout Afghanistan.

NATO has roughly 40,000 troops on the ground, but some analysts believe that considerably more will be needed to stabilize the country.

Countries such as Germany, France and Italy have imposed "caveats" that prevent their troops from being deployed to the more dangerous regions.

That has left countries such as the United States, Britain and Canada to handle much of the heavy combat. Most of Canada's roughly 2,300 troops are based in Kandahar, one of the most volatile provinces.

Canada's military commitment here ends in February 2009. Prime Minister Stephen Harper has said he will seek the consensus of Parliament before extending the mission.

Comic drawing laughs to help soldier; Edmontonian lost legs after bombing in Afghanistan

IDNUMBER 200709080032
PUBLICATION: Calgary Herald
DATE: 2007.09.08
EDITION: Final
SECTION: News
PAGE: A15
ILLUSTRATION: Photo: Rick Mercer; Photo: Paul Franklin ;
BYLINE: Elizabeth Withey
SOURCE: Edmonton Journal
WORD COUNT: 336

Rick Mercer has a gift for making people laugh. It's a gift he wants to share with his friend, Master Cpl. Paul Franklin, who lost his legs in 2006 after a suicide bombing in Afghanistan.

At Franklin's request, Mercer is staging a one-time performance, Adventures in Canadian Television: An Evening with Rick Mercer, Sunday in Edmonton in support of the Northern Alberta Amputee Program. Franklin will also speak at the event.

"All I'm doing is helping a friend out, really," says Mercer.

"The cause is great and this is going to be a fun, positive night. I kind of equate it to if a friend of yours asked you to move. There are certain people you'll help move, and he's one of them."

Mercer got to know Franklin in Afghanistan before the Edmonton soldier was seriously wounded on tour.

The two bunked together on a Canadian military base with a bunch of other guys who were "in their early 20s and playing Play Station," Mercer says.

Both men loved politics and comedy. They hit it off and stayed in touch.

Franklin even sent Mercer souvenirs and postcards from overseas.

"I left him 100 bucks U.S. and he really stretched it out. Every two months a package would show up with a book in it, or a prayer rug, or a clock that does the Muslim call to prayer every two hours."

Mercer's one-hour show is a mix of stand-up and storytelling featuring video clips of his illustrious television career, including This Hour has 22 Minutes, Talking to Americans and The Rick Mercer Report.

Edmonton Journal writer Liane Faulder recently wrote a book about Franklin's accident and recovery. The Long Walk Home: Paul Franklin's Journey from Afghanistan was published in August. Franklin will be signing books at Mercer's show.

Mercer calls Franklin a perfect example of the human spirit's ability to triumph over adversity.

"The fact that he's walking at all is tremendous," he says.

"Quite frankly, I can't even imagine the inner strength it would take."

The television star is adamant about his support for the troops.

"It has everything to do with the individuals I've met," Mercer says.

"To me they personify public service. If we're going to have a Canadian Forces and we're going to ask them to go to the worst places on Earth and do the hardest jobs on our behalf, we have to support them."

Season five of the Rick Mercer Report starts Oct. 2, and Mercer's new book, Rick Mercer Report: The Book, comes out Sept. 25.

The work is a compilation of material from his television show and blog.

"It's funnier than Paul's book," jokes Mercer.

"We both have a book out, but mine's funnier. His may -- may -- be more inspirational."

Stretch of Ont. highway renamed to honour soldiers killed in Afghanistan

DATE: 2007.09.07
KEYWORDS: DEFENCE POLITICS
PUBLICATION: cpw
WORD COUNT: 127

TORONTO (CP) _ A stretch of Ontario highway that's become a sombre repatriation route for soldiers felled in Afghanistan, drawing impromptu gatherings of mourners saluting that sacrifice, was officially renamed in their honour on Friday.

A 170-kilometre stretch of Highway 401 between the eastern Ontario airbase where the flag-draped coffins of fallen soldiers arrive and the forensics centre in Toronto that receives them has been dubbed the Highway of Heroes.

The name change was prompted by an electronic petition to officially rename that stretch of highway.

James Forbes, 22, was behind the petition and has said he was surprised it got so much attention.

Forbes, a London, Ont., resident, said last month he received a lot of feedback from military families who've travelled along Highway 401 following repatriation ceremonies at CFB Trenton.

Since the mission began in 2002, 70 Canadian soldiers have been killed in Afghanistan.

Take a good look down, says Canadian soldier sweeping Afghan road for bombs

DATE: 2007.09.07

KEYWORDS: INTERNATIONAL DEFENCE

PUBLICATION: cpw

WORD COUNT: 114

SPERWAN GHAR, Afghanistan (CP) _ In war-torn Afghanistan, almost anything on the road can be a bomb.

And for Canadian soldiers trying to secure the most dangerous districts, there is no way to avoid the threat.

Capt. Bryan Ouellet says the troops can't be in a vehicle all the time; they must make contact with the local people, let them know Canadians are there to help.

So Ouellet and four of his comrades are on a dusty village road sweeping for any roadside bombs that threaten the convoy of vehicles behind them.

For 700 very long metres, they walk from side to side, looking for any sign of the improvised explosive devices that have killed 38 Canadian soldiers and thousands of Afghans.

Ouellet says the threat is there: you just have to be aware of it and take a good look down at the ground.

Two NATO soldiers, 40 insurgents killed in southern Afghanistan

DATE: 2007.09.07
KEYWORDS: INTERNATIONAL DEFENCE POLITICS
PUBLICATION: cpw
WORD COUNT: 373

KABUL, Afghanistan (AP) _ Police and villagers hunted Friday for 13 mine-clearing workers kidnapped in a restive part Afghanistan, a day after two NATO soldiers and more than 20 insurgents were killed in fierce fighting.

The de-miners, all Afghans working for a UN-funded land mine-clearance agency, were kidnapped Wednesday in eastern Paktia province on the border with Pakistan, said provincial deputy police chief Ghulam Dastager.

“We have nothing to do with politicians, the people of the area asked us to come,” said Kefayatullah Eblagh, the head of Afghan Technical Consultants, the de-mining agency.

In the past, Taliban insurgents have abducted de-miners and occasionally killed them, but Dastager said it was too early to speculate on the identity or motives of the kidnappers, noting criminal gangs also frequently take hostages for ransom.

The Taliban recently released 19 South Koreans held for almost six weeks after an unprecedented deal with the Seoul government, and vowed to carry out more abductions of locals and foreigners.

Dastager and Ebalgh said police and villagers were hunting for the crew, which were travelling in two vehicles.

Insurgent violence is running at its highest level in Afghanistan since the 2001 U.S.-led invasion, exposing the weaknesses of the central government and straining the multinational forces supporting it.

The two NATO soldiers were killed in two separate bomb blasts Thursday in southern Afghanistan, the International Security Assistance Force said in a statement. It gave no more details, including the nationalities of the troops.

Also Thursday, Afghan and U.S.-led coalition forces killed “more than 20” insurgents in an eight-hour battle that saw coalition aircraft bombing and strafing enemy positions in Kandahar province, the coalition said in a statement.

Taliban spokesmen were not immediately available for comment and it was not possible to independently confirm the death toll.

Afghan and coalition forces claim to have killed about 200 Taliban insurgents in central and southern Afghanistan in recent weeks. The Taliban have admitted some losses, but say many of the dead were civilians _ a charge denied by the coalition.

The Taliban ruled most of Afghanistan from the mid-1990s until 2001, imposing an extreme version of Islam and providing refuge for al-Qaida leaders and thousands of other Muslim militants from around the world.

They were ousted by a U.S.-led coalition following the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks on the United States, but are now leading an increasingly bloody campaign against the country's Western-backed government.

While NATO generals meet, demonstrators plot protest strategy

DATE: 2007.09.07
KEYWORDS: DEFENCE INTERNATIONAL
PUBLICATION: cpw
WORD COUNT: 379

VICTORIA (CP) _ The North Atlantic Treaty Organization serves no useful purpose in the role it plays today and protesters this weekend will stress that point, a spokesman for a protest coalition said Friday.

“We're saying it no longer has any rationale for its existence the way it's being used these days,” said Phil Lyons, a spokesman for a coalition of peace groups.

While NATO leaders plot strategy this weekend in Victoria, the protesters plan a mass rally starting at noon in front of the legislature, a short distance from the meeting.

“Remember it's their forces that usually create the violence . . . it's not necessarily, and very seldom, the people protesting that create violence.”

Lyons also had an ominous warning if the protesters aren't allowed to demonstrate peacefully.

“If the police decide they're going to clear people up, they're going to fight back.”

NATO's military committee of 26 generals gather for what spokesman Lt.-Col. Tony White said will be a session discussing the organization's current and future operations.

White said Afghanistan will be a topic on the agenda but it's not the main item. The focus this weekend is larger than any single war zone, he said.

“The discussions are going to be very strategic. It's going to be about how does NATO prepare itself and have the right capabilities for today, but more importantly, for future operations.”

Lyons predicted “bus loads” people would gather at the legislature grounds for the “No to NATO” rally.

The coalition wants NATO to disband because it claims it is no longer a defence force, but is instead a puppet of the U.S., he said.

“NATO, which had some reason perhaps when it was first formed, some defensive reason, is no longer a defensive force. Its a force that uses its strength to follow the Americans' dictates in their attempts to build an empire.”

NATO forces have been responsible for much human suffering throughout the world, he said.

“Essentially, they're using some of the worst armaments that have ever come along in terms of damaging the civilian populations of those countries,” he said, referring to Kosovo and Afghanistan.

The meeting takes place in the midst of a growing tension over the increasingly bloody war in Afghanistan.

Gen. Ray Henault, chairman of NATO's military committee and former chief of Canada's defence staff, said the alliance has not received formal notice from the federal government that it intends to end its combat commitment as scheduled in February 2009.

He said the alliance anticipates there will be changes but has not begun the formal process of scouting out replacement nations.

Last week Defence Minister Peter MacKay said Canada's current mission in its current ``configuration" will be over in 2009.

Thousands protest at APEC; minor scuffles but mostly peaceful

DATE: 2007.09.07

KEYWORDS: INTERNATIONAL JUSTICE POLITICS ECONOMY

PUBLICATION: cpw

WORD COUNT: 348

SYDNEY, Australia (AP) _ Police said two officers were injured Saturday and three people were arrested at a protest rally near a summit of Pacific Rim leaders.

Police did not provide any details of the circumstances in which the injuries occurred. A police spokeswoman, who gave the information on customary condition of anonymity, said one of the officers was being treated for a head injury.

There were no signs of widespread violence at Saturday's protest, in which about 3,000 people marched along a heavily fortified route from Sydney's Town Hall to nearby Hyde Park, several blocks from the summit site.

Protesters had a hodgepodge of issues, from the Iraq war to gay rights and global warming.

Protesters waved banners emblazoned with union logos and slogans against U.S. President George W. Bush and Australian Prime Minister John Howard. "George Bush Not Welcome," one placard read; and another: "End the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan."

A group of around 10 people calling themselves "Billionaires for Bush" dressed in evening wear and carried signs saying "Blood for Oil" and "Clean Air, Can't Sell It, Who Needs It."

Police buses blocked side streets along the march route, and hundreds of riot police lined up to keep protesters from spreading to other streets. Police officers on mountain bikes also lined the route after the city's 36 police horses were placed in quarantine last week because of a statewide outbreak of equine flu.

Demonstrators irritated by the heavy police presence chanted "This is not a police state," as they moved through the streets.

For weeks, officials expressed concern that Saturday's demonstration could degenerate into a full-scale riot after violent street protests marred a meeting last year in Melbourne for finance ministers and central bankers from the Group of 20 leading economies.

Protest organizers insisted they wanted only peaceful demonstrators to attend. On Friday, two people were arrested after scuffles broke out with police at a protest outside a hotel where some APEC delegates are staying.

Earlier this week, a Sydney court rejected the protesters' bid to march near a five-kilometre-long police barricade _ dubbed "The Great Wall of APEC" by local media _ saying it would compromise safety.

Soldier–Funeral

DATE: 2007.09.07
KEYWORDS: DEFENCE INTERNATIONAL
PUBLICATION: bnw
WORD COUNT: 83

HAMILTON -- A rifle salute will punctuate silence outside a downtown Hamilton church tomorrow morning as Major Raymond Ruckpaul is honoured with a full military funeral.

The 42-year-old Hamilton native was found shot in his barracks in Kabul, Afghanistan, on August 29th and died shortly after.

No information on the circumstances surrounding the major's death has been released.

Ruckpaul began his military career with the Royal Hamilton Light Infantry and was serving with the Royal Canadian Dragoons.

He had been based in Heidelberg, Germany, for the past few years where he lived with his wife and two young children.

(Hamilton Spectator)

pc

Afghan–Violence

DATE: 2007.09.07
KEYWORDS: INTERNATIONAL DEFENCE POLITICS
PUBLICATION: bnw
WORD COUNT: 125

KABUL — Police and villagers are searching for 13 mine-clearing workers kidnapped in a restive part of Afghanistan, a day after two NATO soldiers and more than 20 insurgents were killed in fighting.

The mine-removal workers are all Afghans working for a U–N–funded landmine clearance agency. They were kidnapped yesterday in eastern Paktia province on the border with Pakistan.

In the past, Taliban insurgents have abducted mine-clearing workers and occasionally killed them, but a police official says it's too early to speculate on the identity or motives of the kidnappers.

He notes criminal gangs also frequently take hostages for ransom.

The Taliban recently released 19 South Koreans held for almost six weeks after an unprecedented deal with the Seoul government, and vowed to carry out more abductions of locals and foreigners.

(AP)

RvA

Safety comes first in Lonely Planet's guide to Afghanistan

IDNUMBER 200709080100
PUBLICATION: Times Colonist (Victoria)
DATE: 2007.09.08
EDITION: Final
SECTION: Travel
PAGE: C4
SOURCE: Times Colonist
WORD COUNT: 155

Lonely Planet has issued its first guide to Afghanistan. This is not the typical guidebook for the typical tourist; it is meant for those visiting the country on business or working there with nongovernmental organizations, as well as for armchair travellers and the few independent ones who are up for the challenge.

The book (\$18.19 at www.lonelyplanet.com) includes an essay about women in Afghanistan and several chapters on history and culture, along with a special feature on the 1960s and '70s, when Afghanistan was a popular spot on the "hippie trail." But the most important section, according to author, Paul Clammer, is the safety chapter.

"It's the absolute key to the book," he said, stressing the importance of staying on top of the news. "Everything else, whether that's cultural background or hotel listings, is secondary to being aware of what's happening in the country when you visit."

NATO talks here likely to centre on Afghanistan

IDNUMBER 200709080008
PUBLICATION: Times Colonist (Victoria)
DATE: 2007.09.08
EDITION: Final
SECTION: News
PAGE: A3
BYLINE: Judith Lavoie
SOURCE: Times Colonist
WORD COUNT: 247

Lessons from Afghanistan will shape talks in Victoria this weekend as NATO's top generals get together.

Officially, the topics are operations, training and resources, but, inevitably, that means looking at Afghanistan, where there are 33,000 NATO troops.

"The lessons learned from Afghanistan will help inform our discussions," said Col. Brett Boudreau, NATO public information adviser.

Stretching the military resources of countries is an acknowledged problem, especially when they may also be involved in peacekeeping efforts and contributing to some of the other six NATO missions, such as Kosovo, Darfur or the training mission in Iraq, Boudreau said.

There are also questions about how to make it easier for countries to work together when training and equipment may be vastly different.

"In Afghanistan, there are 37 countries, and each rotates in and out of theatre at different times, so how do you take all those bits and pieces and get them together?" Boudreau said.

"It's very complex, with a lot of moving parts, and we can probably do that better."

Col. Tony White, a Canadian information adviser with NATO, stationed in Brussels, said talks will centre on capabilities, training and resources such as how NATO can better prepare for operations.

"Some of it is because we realize that Afghanistan is a long-term operation ... and so we're trying to look at ways of taking a longer-term approach," he said.

However, opposition to the operation is not likely to be part of the conversation.

Heads of state of the 26 NATO nations recently reaffirmed their long-term commitment to helping Afghanistan stand on its own feet, and that political commitment translates into military commitment, White said.

The chiefs of defence staff get together three times a year — twice in Brussels and once in a member country.

Protesters rally today for abolition of 26-country alliance

IDNUMBER 200709080002

PUBLICATION: Times Colonist (Victoria)

DATE: 2007.09.08

EDITION: Final

SECTION: News

PAGE: A1 / FRONT

ILLUSTRATION: Colour Photo: John McKay/TC / Security tight as NATO comes to town: A military vehicle-search team looks for signs of explosives under a car going into Grand Pacific Hotel parking lot yesterday. Security crews were busy getting ready for emergencies and demonstrations as NATO's top generals arrived in Victoria to begin a two-day gathering at the downtown hotel. ;

BYLINE: Judith Lavoie

SOURCE: Times Colonist

WORD COUNT: 413

Tall men in bulky suits, with wires sprouting from their ears, leaned against trees on Quebec Street, anxious-looking Canadian soldiers bustled around with clipboards and briefcases, and clutches of Victoria police hung out on street corners yesterday as NATO's top generals arrived in Victoria.

The two-day gathering is at downtown's Hotel Grand Pacific and involves people from 26 countries. Security crews were in abundance, readying for emergencies and demonstrations.

The only demonstrator in sight yesterday was a lone marcher protesting against protesters while showing his support for NATO. A demonstration, calling for abolition of NATO, is planned for noon today.

"What does it look like for tomorrow?" asked Col. Brett Boudreau, public information adviser to Gen. Ray Henault, head of NATO's military committee.

Not that anyone in NATO is against demonstrations, he hastened to add. "It's democracy and democracy is what we are fighting for in Afghanistan." On the street, at the back of the hotel, plastic barricades directed vehicles entering the hotel parkade into an area where a military vehicle-search team looked for signs of explosives.

"Everything's gone great. People have been good," said a lieutenant, who would not give his name. "We made one person late for yoga and she wasn't very happy and there's some people who say they don't know how to pop the hood," he said, wielding a giant mirror to search under a car and then peering into the engine and trunk.

The vehicle searchers, clad from head to toe in navy blue, have special tools.

"This is the Sabre 4000," said the lieutenant. "It picks up particles in the air. This one is programmed for explosives, but it can be drugs or chemicals." His holster carried a pistol and special loops carried a baton and pepper spray, while his leg pocket contained a first aid kit.

He also wore body armour.

Despite the multitude of multicoloured uniforms, only Canadian police and military security personnel are carrying weapons, said Col. Tony White, a member of the NATO communications staff.

Looking for bombs was also the job of Max, the Victoria explosives detection dog -- a chocolate Lab who whiled away the time snuffling bushes and wagging his tail at passersby.

Tourists were fascinated by the activity. "Who's in town?" was the most common question fielded by police.

Robert Stannard of Sydney, Australia, a guest at the Grand Pacific, said the added security is interesting. "There's been no inconvenience," he said.

Hotel Grand Pacific general manager Reid James said all non-NATO guests were warned in advance and there have been no complaints.

For today, Victoria police have control of the street and military police have control of the hotel, James said. Protesters are not allowed on the property, he said.

Ontario

IDNUMBER 200709080208
PUBLICATION: The Toronto Star
DATE: 2007.09.08
EDITION: Met
SECTION: News
PAGE: A23
COPYRIGHT: © 2007 Torstar Corporation
WORD COUNT: 493

Stretch of 401 renamed to honour soldiers

A stretch of Ontario highway that's become a sombre repatriation route for soldiers felled in Afghanistan, drawing impromptu gatherings of mourners saluting that sacrifice, was officially renamed in their honour yesterday.

A 170-kilometre stretch of Highway 401 between the eastern Ontario airbase – CFB Trenton – where the flag-draped coffins of fallen soldiers arrive and the forensics centre in Toronto that receives them has been dubbed the Highway of Heroes.

The name change was prompted by an electronic petition to officially rename that stretch of highway. Since the mission began in 2002, 70 Canadian soldiers have been killed in Afghanistan.

New chief coroner

to take over Sept. 17

Ontario's deputy chief coroner of inquests has been appointed chief coroner for the province, effective Sept. 17. Dr. Bonita Porter is appointed to the post for a period of up to one year. Dr. Barry McLellan, the current chief coroner, is leaving the post to become president and CEO of Sunnybrook Health Sciences Centre in Toronto.

British Columbia

Inquest ordered into murder-suicide deaths

British Columbia's chief coroner yesterday announced a public coroner's inquest into the murder-suicide deaths of five people, including a 6-year-old boy, in the Victoria suburb of Oak Bay.

Peter Lee, 38, stabbed his wife, son, and mother- and father-in-law to death before killing himself Tuesday. Lee had been ordered to stay away from his family while facing an accusation that he deliberately tried to kill his wife, Sunny.

He was granted bail after a July 31 incident where he was charged with deliberately trying to hurt his wife when he crashed the family vehicle into a power pole.

New review of polygamy charges in Bounty

B.C. Attorney General Wally Oppal has asked for another review of whether to charge members of a B.C. polygamist colony. Lawyer Leonard Doust is being asked to review an earlier probe that concluded there wasn't enough evidence to charge members at the breakaway Mormon sect in Bountiful, B.C., with sexual offences.

Special prosecutor Richard Peck concluded in a report released in August that the provincial government should ask the Supreme Court of Canada to rule on the constitutional validity of federal laws against polygamy.

Alberta

Mental health agency

to be set up in Calgary

Federal Health Minister Tony Clement says Calgary will be the official home of Canada's new Mental Health Commission, created to help erase the stigma attached to mental illnesses.

The commission will initially be funded by \$55 million in federal money over five years, but may also look for cash from the provinces and private sector.

Prince Edward Island

Man jailed seven days for drunk-driving death

A 21-year-old who struck and killed another man while under the influence of alcohol and marijuana has been sentenced to seven days in jail. Jeffrey Attema of Stratford, P.E.I., was also fined \$1,000.

Attema was originally charged with impaired driving causing the death of William Tyler Henderson of Hampton, N.B., but the Crown stayed the charge after concluding there was no reasonable chance of getting a conviction.

Supreme Court Justice Gordon Campbell accepted the conclusion of an RCMP expert that a sober driver placed in the same scenario would also have struck Henderson, who was wearing dark clothing and was standing on the road when he was struck.

From the Star's wire services

Mercer brings his sardonic humour to the stage for amputee program

IDNUMBER 200709080156
PUBLICATION: The Ottawa Citizen
DATE: 2007.09.08
EDITION: Final
SECTION: Arts
PAGE: F2
ILLUSTRATION: Photo: Rick Mercer;
DATELINE: EDMONTON
BYLINE: Elizabeth Withey
SOURCE: The Edmonton Journal
WORD COUNT: 358

EDMONTON – Rick Mercer has a gift for making people laugh. It's gift he wants to share with his friend, Master Cpl. Paul Franklin, who lost his legs in 2006 after a suicide bombing in Afghanistan.

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"It's funnier than Paul's book," jokes Mercer. "We both have a book out, but mine's funnier. His may, may be more inspirational."

Held hostage by Afghanistan; We negotiate with terrorists all the time, and we should again -- it may be the only way to resolve the conflict with the Taliban

IDNUMBER 200709080068
PUBLICATION: The Ottawa Citizen
DATE: 2007.09.08
EDITION: Final
SECTION: News
PAGE: B7
COLUMN: Gar Pardy
ILLUSTRATION: Photo: Finbarr O'Reilly, Reuters / The built-in deadline for the current Canadian military commitment in Afghanistan provides a soft option that will be exercised by the government at the appropriate time. ;
BYLINE: Gar Pardy
SOURCE: Citizen Special
WORD COUNT: 965

The government is slowly and crabbedly sidling towards a decision on Canada's future military role in Afghanistan. Defence Minister Peter MacKay told a TV audience a few days ago "The signal that has been sent already (to NATO) is that our current configuration will end in February, 2009." However, a DND spokesman later clarified the minister's statement by saying that this was not a new or recent signal but rather "there will be a vote in Parliament to decide the way forward after that."

These statements, which were echoed by Foreign Minister Maxime Bernier but not the prime minister, suggest the government is accepting the reality, evident for well over a year, that Afghanistan is not a place that can be put right by an undermanned, poorly led and disparate foreign military intervention force.

Canada, with the highest casualty rate of any contributing country, illustrates the inequality of the NATO deployment. In Uruzgan province to the north of Kandahar province, with a much smaller territory and population, the Dutch and Australians with an equal number of troops to Canada have had 11 deaths to Canada's 70. The lack of air transport and bomb clearing equipment today illustrates Canada's inability to provide troops with equipment appropriate for the fight. The ebb and flow of "captured" territory in Kandahar province is but the latest evidence of a doomed mission.

Equally, these recent ministerial statements represent an acknowledgement that there is insufficient political or public support in Canada for a continuation of the current military mission. The tenuous political scene and inability or unwillingness of the government to create a national consensus is merely a subplot to the evolving tragedy of Afghanistan. Bumper stickers on municipal service vehicles are a poor substitute.

Needless to say the government is now caught between the dog and fire hydrant, and the situation is largely of its own making. While it inherited a policy made by previous governments, it has made the current mess its own by divorcing the reality of Afghanistan from hoped-for electoral benefits at home. In the meantime, more Canadians will die without seriously affecting the outcome.

The continued lack of political progress in Afghanistan, the worsening military situation in the southwest and elsewhere and the refusal of allies to improve on their military commitments paints a dismal context for Canadian decision-making. The built-in deadline for the current Canadian military commitment provides a soft option that will be exercised by the government at the appropriate time.

Nor is there any succour to be had from other key countries.

The Americans are totally preoccupied with their danse macabre that is Iraq. To suggest that Afghanistan will receive appropriate attention and consideration in its ever-lengthening presidential selection process is as far-fetched as February grass in Newfoundland.

As for Pakistan, its perennial shift from military to civilian government offers no help on Afghanistan. While Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif appear as attractive alternatives to Gen. Pervez Musharraf, their history demonstrates that they are regional, parochial politicians who will do little to lead a deeply fractured and troubled state out of its decades-long miasma. They will make many of the same compromises that the generals made in order to obtain and maintain power.

Pakistan has, from its earliest days, copied the British policy of ensuring a weak and fractured Afghanistan on its artificial northern border. That is as close to a national policy as Pakistan has and there is no reason to believe the periodic retreat of the generals to their barracks will alter that primordial element in Pakistani politics. The Taliban is as much Pakistani as it is Afghan.

The increasing ability of the Taliban to take foreign hostages is another depressing aspect of the downward spiral. Equally troublesome was the reaction of Foreign Affairs Minister Bernier who gratuitously criticized the Korean government for negotiating with the Taliban. "We do not negotiate with terrorists, for any reason," the minister's statement read.

How short the memory. In 1996, the Canadian ambassador to Peru, Tony Vincent, directly negotiated with the Tupac Amaru Revolutionary Movement in order to obtain the release of hostages at the residence of the Japanese ambassador. Many years earlier the Canadian government negotiated with the FLQ to end the kidnapping of the British trade representative in Montreal. In the intervening years Canada used any number of intermediaries (the Catholic Church and the Red Cross) to obtain the release of kidnapped Canadians.

There is a dilemma in such situations. However, Canada, along with all other members of the G8 where the "no negotiations policy" originated, equally accepts that the safety of the hostages is paramount, and where necessary Canada has been prepared to sup with the devils. The only question is one of how long the spoon.

In this increasingly bubbling cauldron, no thought is being given to other than a military solution for Afghanistan centred on foreign troops. There are occasional references to low level contacts between the government and the Taliban but these appear to be little more than will-o'-the-wisps.

Afghanistan, as with the vast majority of post-Second World War insurgencies/civil wars, will only be resolved by a political deal between the contending parties. Maybe not enough people have yet died to bring home that reality.

If Northern Ireland and Palestine are susceptible to negotiated settlements, surely Afghanistan is worth a try. It is more than time for Canada to exercise the third "D" of its Afghanistan policy, and give Diplomacy a hard push, given the failure of Defence and Development.

Gar Pardy is former Canadian director of consular affairs. He retired from the Foreign Service in 2003.
E-mail: garp@rogers.com.

Enough to Taliban

IDNUMBER 200709080055
PUBLICATION: The Ottawa Citizen
DATE: 2007.09.08
EDITION: Final
SECTION: News
PAGE: B5
BYLINE: Philip Carl Salzman
SOURCE: The Ottawa Citizen
WORD COUNT: 110

If we say enough is enough about our mission in Afghanistan, who is going to say enough to the Taliban? Enough of the terrorism of Taliban clients who killed thousands and Canadians in the World Trade Center. Enough of Taliban murdering teachers and burning schools. Enough of Taliban denying education to girls. Enough of Taliban undemocratically imposing theocratic rule over the Afghan people.

Do not we have a duty to ourselves to say "enough" to the Taliban? Or was Osama bin Laden right when he said that we are too decadent and weak to stand up to them and to defend ourselves?

Philip Carl Salzman, Ottawa

Help for Afghans

IDNUMBER 200709080053
PUBLICATION: The Ottawa Citizen
DATE: 2007.09.08
EDITION: Final
SECTION: News
PAGE: B5
BYLINE: Robert Greenhill
SOURCE: The Ottawa Citizen
WORD COUNT: 272

Re: All eyes on Kandahar, Sept. 3.

Canadian aid efforts are making a positive difference in the lives of the Afghan people. Unfortunately, the Senlis Council has presented an inaccurate view of our development activities in Afghanistan.

Afghanistan is a country ravaged by decades of war. Its people are poor and its hospitals are not up to Canadian standards. But they are getting better. When I visited Mirwais Hospital, I saw children being vaccinated against polio and measles thanks to Canadian aid. With Canada's help, UNICEF has trained health-care workers and is working to build a maternal waiting home.

Not only are services at that hospital improving, we are helping to improve the health of Afghans across Kandahar. Polio cases are down 77 per cent in Afghanistan this year. Since the fall of the Taliban, child mortality across Afghanistan has dropped over 20 per cent, saving forty thousand children every year.

In Kandahar, week after week, real successes are being realized. More than 190 km of rural roads have been repaired and more than 1,200 new wells installed. More than 5,600 people are receiving literacy training and some 200,000 people have benefited from food aid. In addition, more than 420,000 square meters of land have been cleared of mines since March 2005, benefiting more than 10,000 people.

We are achieving real results in Kandahar by working closely with some of the strongest, most experienced and respected agencies in the world, such as the World Food Program, the World Health Organization and UNICEF. Together, we are helping the Afghan people build a better future for themselves and their families.

Robert Greenhill, Ottawa

President, Canadian International Development Agency

Taliban dislodge Afghan police from highway checkpoints; Canadian commanders say the Afghan National Army is making reasonable progress, Andrew Mayeda reports, but the police are seen as under-equipped, incompetent and corrupt. They need reinforcement at a time when NATO troops are stretched thin.

IDNUMBER 200709080038
PUBLICATION: The Ottawa Citizen
DATE: 2007.09.08
EDITION: Early
SECTION: News
PAGE: A12

ILLUSTRATION: Photo: Andrew Mayeda, the Ottawa Citizen / Canadian soldiers build a new security outpost this week in the remote Afghan village of Howz-e-Madad. Last December, Canadian Forces rolled into this sparse, but strategically located, village without much resistance from the Taliban. But now, residents and police officials say, a small cell of Taliban fighters has entrenched itself in the grape fields behind the crumbling mud walls. ;

DATELINE: HOWZ-E-MADAD, Afghanistan
BYLINE: Andrew Mayeda
SOURCE: The Ottawa Citizen
WORD COUNT: 651

HOWZ-E-MADAD, Afghanistan – Leaning on his rickety bicycle at the side of the road, Ainadeen shrugs when asked where the explosions came from. All he knows is that they kept coming, which is why he and other villagers fled to the relative calm of the desert.

"The police couldn't provide security here," said Ainadeen, who, like many Afghans, goes by a single name.

Around last Christmas, Canadian Forces rolled into this sparse, but strategically located, village without much resistance from the Taliban.

But now, residents and police officials say a small cell of Taliban fighters has entrenched itself in the grape fields behind the crumbling mud walls.

As recently as last month, in fact, the black-and-white flag of the Taliban could be seen flying above the village. Until Canadian combat engineers arrived this week to build a new security outpost, Taliban fighters and police engaged in daily gun battles, said the village's deputy police chief, Hafiz Ullah.

The failure of Afghan security forces to hold villages such as Howz-e-Madad underscores the challenges that Canada and its NATO allies face as they try to pacify the unruly southern province of Kandahar with a limited number of troops.

During last fall's Operation Medusa, the biggest and bloodiest offensive that Canada has fought in Afghanistan, Canadian troops flushed the Taliban out of its stronghold in Panjwaii district, west of Kandahar City.

The operation prompted the governor of Kandahar to declare that the Taliban had been "eliminated" from Panjwaii and parts of neighbouring Zhari district to the north.

Meanwhile, Canadian Forces set up police checkpoints along Highway 1, a well-travelled road that links Kandahar with Kabul to the northeast and Herat to the northwest.

But many of the checkpoints have either been abandoned by the Afghan National Police or overrun by the Taliban. At Howz-e-Madad, for example, British and Canadian soldiers built a checkpoint last winter that was to be manned by the ANP.

But Ullah, the deputy police chief, said his small team of 15 officers has struggled to hold the Taliban at bay.

"I have only one magazine, and when I reach for the second I have nothing. I cannot provide security in this way," he said through an interpreter.

With few men and little firepower, the police have had their hands full with a group of about 20 Taliban fighters believed to have found refuge in the village.

Ullah said the situation is comparable at many of the checkpoints along Highway 1. He said seven police at a nearby checkpoint were recently killed -- some of them kidnapped and beheaded -- by the Taliban.

"Some of the checkpoints were lost. There were so many of them with so few ANP, and that probably caused them to be lost," said Capt. Daniel Morin, second in command at Patrol Base Wilson, a forward operating base further east toward Kandahar City.

As a result of the collapse of the ring of security along Highway 1, Canadian Forces have launched Operation Strong Lion. Under the operation, Canadian soldiers have been reinforcing checkpoints in the region that were lost or abandoned.

This week, engineers here began building an encampment that will serve as a small Afghan National Army base.

Canada's top military commander in Afghanistan, Brig.-Gen. Guy Laroche, said recently the checkpoints will eventually be protected by a combination of Afghan police, soldiers and Canadian troops.

The hope is that the operation will choke off the Taliban's freedom of movement in the district and prevent it from staging attacks on Kandahar City.

But the need for joint checkpoints is a troubling admission of the ANP's inadequacy at a time when NATO troops are already stretched thin.

The Canadian military has been training and mentoring the Afghan National Army for some time, and military commanders say the ANA has made progress toward becoming a reliable force.

By contrast, the Afghan National Police is widely seen as under-equipped, incompetent and corrupt.

Canadian commanders say the goal is to eventually hand over the country to Afghan forces, but refuse to say when that might happen.

Taliban dislodge Afghan police from highway checkpoints; Canadian commanders say the Afghan National

The Canadian operation comes as the chiefs of defence staff of NATO's 26 nations meet this week in Canada to discuss the distribution of troops throughout Afghanistan.

NATO has roughly 40,000 troops on the ground, but some analysts believe that considerably more will be needed to stabilize the country.

Countries such as Germany, France and Italy have imposed "caveats" that prevent their troops from being deployed to the more dangerous regions.

That has left countries such as the United States, Britain and Canada to handle much of the heavy combat.

Try, try again becomes new motto of Canadian soldiers; The inability of Afghan police to hold villages the Canadians had successfully secured against the Taliban underscores the challenges NATO allies face in trying to pacify the unruly southern province of Kandahar when troops are stretched thin, writes Andrew Mayeda .

IDNUMBER 200709080037
PUBLICATION: The Ottawa Citizen
DATE: 2007.09.08
EDITION: Final
SECTION: News
PAGE: A12

ILLUSTRATION: Photo: Andrew Mayeda, the Ottawa Citizen / Canadian soldiers build a new security outpost this week in the remote Afghan village of Howz-e-Madad. Last December, Canadian Forces rolled into the sparse, but strategically located, village without much resistance from the Taliban. But now, residents and police officials say, a small cell of Taliban fighters has entrenched itself in the grape fields behind the crumbling mud walls. ;

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BYLINE: Andrew Mayeda
SOURCE: The Ottawa Citizen
WORD COUNT: 650

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Alberta. Comedian's show to help wounded soldier's cause

IDNUMBER 200709080022
PUBLICATION: The Ottawa Citizen
DATE: 2007.09.08
EDITION: Early
SECTION: News
PAGE: A7
SOURCE: The Ottawa Citizen
WORD COUNT: 96

Comedian Rick Mercer is staging a one-time performance tomorrow in support of the Northern Alberta Amputee Program and Master Cpl. Paul Franklin, who lost his legs in 2006 after a suicide bombing in Afghanistan. Mr. Mercer met Master Cpl. Franklin in Afghanistan before the Edmonton soldier was seriously wounded on tour. The two bunked together on a Canadian military base. They hit it off and stayed in touch. Master Cpl. Franklin even sent Mr. Mercer souvenirs and postcards from overseas.

GLAD TO BE HOME What I won't miss about Afghanistan Grim conversations, close quarters, fearful locals, constant dehydration: The dust isn't all that gets under your skin

PUBLICATION: GLOBE AND MAIL

IDN: 072510214

DATE: 2007.09.08

PAGE: A23 (ILLUS)

BYLINE: CHRISTIE BLATCHFORD

SECTION: Comment Column

EDITION: Metro

DATELINE:

WORDS: 920

WORD COUNT: 878

CHRISTIE BLATCHFORD As you read this, I will be back in Toronto, undoubtedly wrapped about the world's greatest bull terrier, or more probably throwing a tennis ball for him again and generally being retrained as a worthy owner.

But I wrote from Kandahar, which I left Wednesday, the dust of southern Afghanistan still on my clothes and under my skin.

In total, I've spent about five of the past 18 months in that place, and between trips three and four, wrote a book about the experiences of some of the Canadian soldiers I met there. So in a whole lot of ways, I feel as though I've been there longer than I really have.

I always miss the same things – chiefly the feeling, like nothing else, of living on the edge. I'm not an adrenalin junkie by any stretch of the imagination. My life has hardly been about pushing limits. But in Afghanistan, whether you seek it or not, you're acutely aware of how fragile life is, how quickly and brutally it can end and how dearly you treasure your own.

Partly I suspect because of that, we scum of the press are always particularly congenial, and tend to behave better than usual (well, the fact that Kandahar Air Field is a dry base may also have something to do with it), with less petty scrapping than is normal. Just as soldiers form enduring friendships in a theatre of war, so do we, I think.

But maybe because it feels as though I've been here so much, there are some things I won't miss at all.

Afghanistan is catching unsolicited and unwanted snatches of whispered conversations about the grim manner in which someone died on the way to lunch, or the bathroom or to the Tim Hortons. Was it two legs that guy lost, or an arm and a leg? Did the fellow beside him get thrown out of the vehicle or not? Was that third person disemboweled? These aren't malevolent conversations, only natural ones, born of normal human curiosity. But all that said, I won't miss overhearing them.

Afghanistan is rarely being alone.

Like soldiers, whether at bases big or small, reporters share communal work and sleeping tents, with only a zippered flap between you and the next guy, so that your snoring is effectively in his face and vice versa. And in the women's loo closest to my sleeping tent, for instance, the curtained shower stalls are directly across from the curtained toilet stalls, with the clash of both function and form that you might imagine.

Yet, as reporters, you are also almost always alone, if not in a physical sense, then always apart from the men and women in uniform you are there to write about. This is absolutely proper, as it should be, but there are times when the sting of not quite belonging can be acute, even as you are in the middle of a crowd.

Afghanistan is also never really knowing what anyone who is Afghan really thinks or means.

This isn't just because for the embedded reporter everything goes through interpreters who are usually accompanied by the armed-to-the-teeth soldiers with whom they work, though that doesn't help. Some 'terps are excellent; you can tell by their body language and the effort they make to capture the mood of both question and answer. Some are not.

But the real difficulty is Afghans themselves.

This country has been so often invaded or taken over, its people have lived under repression or occupation or with stark naked fear for so long, that telling others what you think they want to hear has become reflexive, as if in the genes. I'm not suggesting Afghans are inherently dishonest; of course they aren't. But they have had to survive by their wits for so long, and speaking anything approaching truth has been so fraught with peril, that they are wary and tend to err on the side of protective dissembling.

In Kandahar province, it seems no matter what you ask a local – about his life or situation, his prospects or lack of them, his family or the weather – his first and second and third response is, "We are very happy for the Canadians." In Uruzgan, they undoubtedly say similar things about the Dutch; in Helmand, about the British.

Oddly, the only really spontaneous praise I've heard has come from Afghan police or army officers, who generally speak with genuine warmth about the Americans who have worked with them and to whom they are grateful.

I will be glad for public bathrooms that are not posted with signs that read "Check your urine!" and that come with a colour-coded chart so that you might measure your state of dehydration, or not.

I will be glad to drink water only when I am actually thirsty, and not as a heat-exhaustion prevention measure. I will be glad not to have to line up for lunch or to have to pass inspection by the civilian guards at the dining halls, checking for bare toes, too-short shorts or God forbid, too much of an exposed arm.

There is much I will miss, and I plan to come back, but mostly I will be glad to be with my dog, in my house, in my bed, in my bathtub, in whatever is left of my garden. I will be glad to be back.

cblatchford@globeandmail.com

ADDED SEARCH TERMS:

GEOGRAPHIC NAME: Afghanistan; Canada

SUBJECT TERM: strife; journalism

ORGANIZATION NAME: Armed Forces

GLAD TO BE HOME What I won't miss about Afghanistan Grim conversations, close quarters, fear of locals

NATO AND AFGHANISTAN Cheering from the sidelines

PUBLICATION: GLOBE AND MAIL

IDN: 072510186

DATE: 2007.09.08

PAGE: A24

BYLINE:

SECTION: Editorial

EDITION: Metro

DATELINE:

WORDS: 452

WORD COUNT: 480

There is something faintly patronizing about having a senior German government official implore Canadians to stay the course in Afghanistan and flatter this country as "a really important role model for others." In an interview in Berlin with The Globe's Doug Saunders, Eckart von Klaeden, foreign policy spokesman for German Chancellor Angela Merkel, said there would be "consequences for the whole alliance and for the whole Western world" if Canada were to pull out of Afghanistan.

But Germany, of course, could also serve as such a role model. Instead, it is one of Canada's reluctant allies in Afghanistan, a member of NATO – an alliance that declared Afghanistan its "number one priority" – but a country that is fighting well below its weight.

General Ray Henault, a Canadian who chairs NATO's military committee, suggests a lack of soldiers has harmed efforts to hold ground captured from Taliban insurgents. "We are aware of instances where we have not had sufficient troops in a particular region ... to maintain those gains," he said Thursday. Germany, as much as any other NATO member, is responsible for that situation, a fact that should dominate meetings of the military committee currently underway in this country.

The military mission in Afghanistan is not some imperialist misadventure.

The International Security Assistance Force was created in direct response to the events of 9/11. NATO countries realized that their own interests depended on Afghanistan's development and success in building a stable democracy. And as Governor-General Michaëlle Jean reminded NATO's top military leaders when they gathered this week in Ottawa: "There is no development without security." Germany can blame its restrictive constitution, but it is not alone. Most of the 26 NATO member countries (plus 11 other allies), including major powers like Italy and France, have either made only token commitments, often of a non-combat nature, or have confined their activities to relatively stable areas such as Kabul and the northern regions of the country. They are content to allow soldiers from a few countries, including Canada, Britain, the Netherlands and the United States, to do the heavy lifting in the war-ravaged south. Canada is arguably in the most troubled region of all. It has not escaped the notice of anyone here that while its mission to Kandahar may have earned it respect from German officials, it has not inspired them to emulate Canada's example.

The faltering political resolve behind the mission in this country is not helped by cheerleading from the sidelines. Mr. von Klaeden is right: A Canadian retreat would have consequences for the world.

It would certainly betray the hopes of Afghanistan's long-suffering people. Canada could use a little help.

ADDED SEARCH TERMS:

GEOGRAPHIC NAME: Afghanistan; Canada; Germany

SUBJECT TERM: strife; foreign relations; foreign policy

PERSONAL NAME: Eckart von Klaeden; Angela Merkel

ORGANIZATION NAME: North Atlantic Treaty Organization; Armed Forces

DEFENCE NATO a puppet for U.S. agenda, protesters say Peace groups to rally today against military committee meeting in Victoria

PUBLICATION: GLOBE AND MAIL

IDN: 072510123

DATE: 2007.09.08

PAGE: A10

BYLINE:

SECTION: National News

SOURCE: CP

EDITION: National

DATELINE: Victoria BC

WORDS: 472

WORD COUNT: 431

Canadian Press VICTORIA The North Atlantic Treaty Organization serves no useful purpose in the role it plays today and protesters this weekend will stress that point, a spokesman for a protest coalition said yesterday.

"We're saying it no longer has any rationale for its existence the way it's being used these days," said Phil Lyons, a spokesman for a coalition of peace groups.

While NATO leaders plot strategy this weekend in Victoria, the protesters plan a mass rally starting at noon in front of the legislature, a short distance from the meeting.

"Remember it's their forces that usually create the violence .

. . it's not necessarily, and very seldom, the people protesting that create violence." Mr. Lyons also had an ominous warning if the protesters aren't allowed to demonstrate peacefully: "If the police decide they're going to clear people up, [people are] going to fight back." NATO's military committee of 26 generals are gathering for what spokesman Lieutenant-Colonel Tony White said will be a session discussing the organization's current and future operations.

Col. White said Afghanistan will be a topic on the agenda but it's not the main item. The focus this weekend is larger than any single war zone, he said.

"The discussions are going to be very strategic. It's going to be about how does NATO prepare itself and have the right capabilities for today, but more importantly, for future operations." Mr. Lyons predicted "bus loads" of people would gather at the legislature grounds for the "No to NATO" rally.

The coalition wants NATO to disband because it says it is no longer a defence force, but is instead a puppet of the United States, he said.

"NATO, which had some reason perhaps when it was first formed, some defensive reason, is no longer a defensive force. It's a force that uses its strength to follow the Americans' dictates in their attempts to build an empire." NATO forces have been responsible for much human suffering throughout the world, he said.

DEFENCE NATO a puppet for U.S. agenda, protesters say Peace groups to rally today against military committee meeting in Victoria

"Essentially, they're using some of the worst armaments that have ever come along in terms of damaging the civilian populations of those countries," he said, referring to Kosovo and Afghanistan.

The meeting takes place in the midst of a growing tension over the increasingly bloody war in Afghanistan.

General Ray Henault, chairman of NATO's military committee and former chief of Canada's defence staff, said the alliance has not received formal notice from the federal government that it intends to end its combat commitment as scheduled in February, 2009.

He said the alliance anticipates there will be changes but has not begun the formal process of scouting out replacement nations.

Last week, Defence Minister Peter MacKay said Canada's current mission in its current "configuration" will be over in 2009.

ADDED SEARCH TERMS:

GEOGRAPHIC NAME: Canada; Victoria

SUBJECT TERM:demonstrations; war; peace; statements

PERSONAL NAME: Phil Lyons

ORGANIZATION NAME: North Atlantic Treaty Organization

IN BRIEF Search is on for workers abducted by Taliban

PUBLICATION: GLOBE AND MAIL
IDN: 072510008
DATE: 2007.09.08
PAGE: A21
BYLINE:
SECTION: International News
SOURCE: AP
EDITION: Metro
DATELINE: Kabul AFGHANISTAN
WORDS: 102
WORD COUNT: 116

AP Kabul Police and villagers hunted yesterday for 13 mine-clearing workers abducted in a restive part of Afghanistan.

The workers, all Afghans with a UN-funded land-mine clearance agency, were abducted Thursday in eastern Paktia province on the border with Pakistan, the provincial deputy police chief said.

Also yesterday, several suspected insurgents were killed in Kandahar province, bringing to more than 235 the number of Taliban killed in daily fighting in the region since Aug. 27, the U.S. military said in a statement. Taliban spokesmen were not immediately available for comment. It was not possible to independently confirm the death toll.

ADDED SEARCH TERMS:

GEOGRAPHIC NAME: Afghanistan

SUBJECT TERM: strife; kidnapping

ORGANIZATION NAME: Taliban

On the road to a safer country

SOURCETAG: 0709080403
PUBLICATION: The Toronto Sun
DATE: 2007.09.08
EDITION: Final
SECTION: News
PAGE: 5
BYLINE: DENE MOORE, THE CANADIAN PRESS
DATELINE: SPERWAN GHAR, Afghanistan
WORD COUNT: 290

In this war-torn land, almost anything can be used as a roadside bomb.

For Canadian soldiers trying to secure the most dangerous districts of Afghanistan, there is no way to avoid the danger.

"You can't just be in a vehicle," says Capt. Bryan Ouellet, 27, of the Royal 22nd Regiment's 3rd Battalion battle group. "We need to have contact with the local people so they know we're here to help, not just to find Taliban but to bring security to the local population."

And so, with a warning that there could be hidden explosives on the dusty village road to the forward operating base at Sperwan Ghar, Ouellet and four of his soldiers got out on foot to sweep for bombs that threaten the convoy behind.

For 700 long metres, they walked from side to side in search of any sign of the improvised explosive devices — or IEDs — that have killed 38 Canadian soldiers and thousands of Afghans.

RE-ESTABLISH PRESENCE

Sperwan Ghar is a remote outpost in the Panjwaii district, southwest of Kandahar city. The journey of 6 km takes 45 minutes because of the frequent need to sweep for IEDs.

The Taliban took advantage of the changeover of Canadian regiments this summer to re-establish a presence in several areas. Now the Royal 22nd Regiment, known as the Van Doos, are trying to win back the local population and re-establish their presence.

At Sperwan Ghar, Lieut. Marie-Christine Alamy said a lot of that has been done. The base, rimmed by villages in the shadow of Khyber Mountain, has been quiet.

"We go into the village to speak to the villagers, to ask if there's been any strange activity and if there are things we can do," she said. "If someone is sick, we help them. We also give crayons to the children."

However, back at a base at Masum Ghar for the night, the soldiers didn't even have time to take off their vests before a rocket attack happened. One rocket whistled in over their heads, landing about 30 metres away.

KEYWORDS=WORLD

Leisure earned in a hostile environment

SOURCETAG 0709080402

PUBLICATION: The Toronto Sun

DATE: 2007.09.08

EDITION: Final

SECTION: News

PAGE: 4

BYLINE: MARTIN FORGUES

DATELINE: KANDAHAR science major at Concordia University in Montreal, and a serving member of the Canadian Army Reserve since 1999 at the Montreal-based Regiment de Maisonneuve. He's in Afghanistan as a member of the Provincial Reconstruction Team, based at Camp Nathan Smith in Kandahar City.

WORD COUNT: 525

Members of the Provincial Reconstruction Team spend most of their time outside the wire, whether they are negotiating contracts, implementing crime prevention or just patrolling the area looking for information.

However, they are still able to enjoy some quiet time, having access to a number of installations, which procure them a surprisingly high quality of life, considering the hostile immediate environment.

Keeping in touch with friends and family is a crucial condition to maintain good troop morale, as well as to reassure those we leave behind at the home front. Phones are thus available 35 minutes a week, allowing PRT'S civilian and military personnel to warm their ears -- and spirit -- to the tune of a loved one's voice. For those patient enough to hold their phone urges a little longer, these minutes are cumulative, giving one the possibility to indulge in hour-long conversations, provided anyone home is forgiving enough to put aside such a long silence.

In addition, eight Internet stations allow us to check e-mail and engage in sometimes endless chatting sessions with multiple people. Two webcams are available for video-conferences in separate booths, a thin curtain being the only severance device between the user and several other not-so-discreet computers users. Respect always prevails, although often one cannot avoid the proverbial wisecrack upon hearing an irate comrade trying to profess his paternal love amidst Internet lagging hell.

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CURIOSITY ABOUT HOCKEY

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But the PRT's hidden gem remains Camp Nathan Smith swimming pool, a unique feature among Canadian Forces' camps in all of Afghanistan. There's nothing like getting some healthy Afghan sun after playing some water sports following a whole week spent patrolling Panjwayi district.

In such a hostile environment, where all of us must remain alert at all times, all those facilities are far from being a luxury.

But one can't have everything ; Kandahar Air Field still owns Tim Hortons ... KEYWORDS=CANADA

It was a gold medal day Trenton rallies troops; Highway of Heroes official

SOURCETAG: 0709080401
PUBLICATION: The Toronto Sun
DATE: 2007.09.08
EDITION: Final
SECTION: News
PAGE: 4

ILLUSTRATION: 4 photos 1. photo by Stan Behal, Sun Media Rodney Travers–Griffin, with wife Helen, holds medals from his time in the British military that were recovered yesterday after he saw them being auctioned off on a website. 2. 3 photos by Joe Warmington, Sun Media The stretch of Hwy. 401 between Trenton and Toronto is now officially called the Highway of Heroes. 3. Bob Quin, Jaelyn Grimmon and Betty Quin are organizers of the Red Friday Rally in Trenton. 4. Firefighters Alan Carruthers and Dave Reid on an overpass along the Highway of Heroes where they have been saluting the fallen.

BYLINE: JOE WARMINGTON
DATELINE: TRENTON
WORD COUNT: 564

His medals were missing for almost 40 years and he got them back.

The provincial government officially commemorated the Highway of Heroes and another great community put on a spectacular show of support for the fine Canadian troops in a Red Friday Rally. It doesn't happen often but that was a gold medal day for the men and women who wear the uniform to defend freedom and our precious way of life.

You certainly won't get any argument from Rodney Travers–Griffin, a 75–year–old veteran who was sure his service medals from his time in the British military were lost forever. After all they were gone for nearly 40 years. To tell this story you have to go back to the Santa Claus Parade in 1967.

"We had just come back from it," he said from his Beaches area home. "I knew something was wrong."

Burglars had just left with all sorts of stuff — specifically his military medals.

"It was upsetting," he said.

Funny how things come around.

"I was reading about an estate auction," he laughed.

In the flyer and available for sale were his medals. "I couldn't believe it," he said.

He immediately called the estate dealer, Jeffrey Hoare, with the news.

"Turns out they were already sold," he laughed again.

But owner Wendy Hoare got on the horn to the buyer and told him of the situation.

"The buyer immediately returned them," Travers–Griffin said with a happier laugh.

And the smile on his face was even bigger Wednesday when a package arrived with his long lost medals. "It was great," he said. "I really appreciate Wendy getting them back. She did it all in less than a week."

No one knows where they have been all these years and how they ended up in that estate. But with a robust market for military medals they have probably been bought and sold a few times before they finally showed back up.

Good for Wendy and thanks to Rodney for his service. He doesn't need medals to honour his commitment but it sure is nice he got them back for his family to savour for years to come.

You know families of soldiers are an important part of the military and when one member serves the whole family does. In Trenton they know all about this — perhaps even more than any Canadian community since so many young men and women have come home in caskets from Afghanistan and landed here at CFB Trenton.

"We really feel it here," said Jaclyn Grimmon, one of the organizers of the Red Friday Rally in Trenton, which sadly has had so many ceremonies in the last few years.

APPRECIATED

"It is a family," said veteran Bob Quin, who with wife Betty helped co–ordinate the rally to kick off the Scottish–Irish Festival here last night.

Anything people can do to support the troops is appreciated and just a couple of kilometres away from that rally on Hwy. 401 there is a new sign which officially announces the stretch of road from there to Toronto as the Highway of Heroes.

I stood there and looked at it and was so proud. It represents every soldier who ever donned a uniform for this country and, maybe, will show the families of those lost in Afghanistan that we really do care. And people do.

People like London, Ont., native Jay Forbes and Toronto Sun freelance journalist Pete Fisher, who spearheaded a petition to make it happen and people like Northumberland MPP Lou Rinaldi who pushed to see it happen.

And also people like Almieck–Haldimand firefighters Alan Carruthers and Dave Reid, who have been on their fire trucks saluting the fallen every time they have passed along that route. Many police and fire services, and regular civilians, have come out spontaneously to show their respects and say thank you for the ultimate sacrifice.

As my pal Billy Ray Cyrus says so well, "All gave some, but some gave all."

The Highway of Heroes came out of a grassroots emotion from people who appreciate that. There are not many good days, it seems, when a country is at war. Friday, Sept. 7 was definitely one of them.

Enjoy your free weekend, thanks to the people who have fought and do fight for our freedoms. Take a drive out and check out those signs. Scrawler out! KEYWORDS=CANADA

Protesters question NATO's role

SOURCETAG 0709080200
PUBLICATION: The London Free Press
DATE: 2007.09.08
EDITION: Final
SECTION: News
PAGE: A8
BYLINE: CP
DATELINE: VICTORIA
WORD COUNT: 216

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization serves no useful purpose in the role it plays today and protesters this weekend will stress that point, a spokesperson for a protest coalition said yesterday.

"We're saying it no longer has any rationale for its existence the way it's being used these days," said Phil Lyons, a spokesperson for a coalition of peace groups.

While NATO leaders plot strategy this weekend in Victoria, the protesters plan a rally starting at noon in front of the legislature, a short distance from the meeting.

"Remember it's their forces that usually create the violence. . . . It's not necessarily, and very seldom, the people protesting that create violence."

Lyons also had an ominous warning if the protesters aren't allowed to demonstrate peacefully.

"If the police decide they're going to clear people up, they're going to fight back."

NATO's military committee of 26 generals gather for what spokesperson Lt.-Col. Tony White said will be a session discussing the organization's current and future operations.

White said Afghanistan will be a topic on the agenda but it's not the main item. The focus this weekend is larger than any single war zone, he said.

Lyons predicted "bus loads" of people would gather at the legislature grounds for the "No to NATO" rally.

The coalition wants NATO to disband because it claims it is no longer a defence force, but is instead a puppet of the U.S., he said.

"NATO, which had some reason perhaps when it was first formed, some defensive reason, is no longer a defensive force. Its a force that uses its strength to follow the Americans' dictates in their attempts to build an empire."

NATO forces have been responsible for much human suffering throughout the world, he said.

Hockey night in Kandahar Life with the Provincial Reconstruction Team

SOURCETAG 0709080685
PUBLICATION: The Edmonton Sun
DATE: 2007.09.08
EDITION: Final
SECTION: News
PAGE: 50
WORD COUNT: 621

OUR MAN AT THE FRONT: Master Corp. Martin Forgues is a 26-year-old journalism and political science major at Concordia University in Montreal, and a serving member of the Canadian Army Reserve since 1999 at the Montreal-based Regiment de Maisonneuve, holding the rank of Master Corporal. Having previously served in Bosnia-Herzegovina in 2002, he's currently in Afghanistan as a member of the Provincial Reconstruction Team, based at Camp Nathan Smith in Kandahar City. An infantry soldier, he is part of the Force Protection Company, charged with the PRT's security and will do so until returning home in March 2008.

MASTER CPL. MARTIN FORGUES

Special to Sun Media

KANDAHAR, Afghanistan — Members of the Provincial Reconstruction Team spend most of their time outside the wire, whether they are negotiating contracts, implementing crime prevention or just patrolling the area looking for information.

HIGH QUALITY OF LIFE

However, they are still able to enjoy some quiet time, having access to a number of installations, which procure them a surprisingly high quality of life, considering the hostile immediate environment.

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FORCE PROTECTION

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But one can't have everything – Kandahar Air Field still owns Tim Hortons. KEYWORDS=NATIONAL; WORLD

Remorseful thief returns slain soldier's picture

SOURCETAG 0709080675
PUBLICATION: The Edmonton Sun
DATE: 2007.09.08
EDITION: Final
SECTION: News
PAGE: 33
BYLINE: CP
DATELINE: OTTAWA
WORD COUNT: 140

The portrait of a slain Canadian soldier has been returned to its Ottawa gallery a month after it was stolen -- along with an apology note, CTV News reports.

The portrait was of Sgt. Christos Karigiannis, who was killed in Afghanistan in June along with two other members of the Edmonton-based 3rd Battalion Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry.

CTV says the painting, slightly chipped, arrived at the Dale Smith Gallery on Wednesday, returned by the repentant thief through express post.

A one-line, hand-written note was scrawled on the box: "Je m'excuse," French for "I'm sorry."

Ottawa artist Heidi Conrod painted portraits of three fallen soldiers after reading about their deaths in the newspaper.

Karigiannis' portrait was stolen in August, just before it was to be picked up by a friend of the Karigiannis family.

Police are still investigating the theft.

CTV said it included a return address, but gallery owner Dale Smith suspects the address is not that of the thief.

"I opened it up and it was like a treasure, seeing it in the bubble wrap in the box. It was a wonderful feeling," Smith told CTV.

"I never thought I'd see it again." KEYWORDS=NATIONAL

Soldiers honoured on 401

SOURCETAG 0709080670
PUBLICATION: The Edmonton Sun
DATE: 2007.09.08
EDITION: Final
SECTION: News
PAGE: 26
ILLUSTRATION: file photo A 170– km stretch of Highway 401 between the eastern Ontario airbase and the forensics centre in Toronto is named the Highway of Heroes.
BYLINE: CP
DATELINE: TORONTO
WORD COUNT: 116

A stretch of Ontario highway that's become a sombre repatriation route for soldiers felled in Afghanistan, drawing impromptu gatherings of mourners saluting that sacrifice, was officially renamed in their honour yesterday.

A 170–kilometre stretch of Highway 401 between the eastern Ontario airbase where the flag–draped coffins of fallen soldiers arrive and the forensics centre in Toronto that receives them has been dubbed the Highway of Heroes.

The name change was prompted by an electronic petition to officially rename that stretch of highway.

James Forbes, 22, was behind the petition and has said he was surprised it got so much attention.

Forbes, a London, Ont., resident, said last month he received a lot of feedback from military families who've travelled along Highway 401 following repatriation ceremonies at CFB Trenton.

Since the mission began in 2002, 70 Canadian soldiers have been killed in Afghanistan.

KEYWORDS=NATIONAL

Notes from the field -- the hockey field

SOURCETAG 0709080560
PUBLICATION: The Calgary Sun
DATE: 2007.09.08
EDITION: Final
SECTION: News
PAGE: 35
BYLINE: MASTER CPL. MARTIN FORGUES
WORD COUNT: 414

Master Cpl. Martin Forgues is a 26-year-old journalism and political science major at Concordia University in Montreal and a serving member of the Canadian Army Reserve since 1999.

He is currently in Afghanistan as a member of the Provincial Reconstruction Team.

* * *

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But one can't have everything : Kandahar Air Field still has the Tim Hortons. KEYWORDS=NATIONAL

Anti-NATO rally set Protesters gather in B.C.

SOURCETAG 0709080542

PUBLICATION: The Calgary Sun

DATE: 2007.09.08

EDITION: Final

SECTION: News

PAGE: 20

ILLUSTRATION: photo by Deddeda Stemler, CP Lorenzo Bouchard demonstrates yesterday in front of Hotel Grand Pacific in anticipation of NATO meetings in Victoria this weekend while tensions over the Afghan war grow.

BYLINE: CP

DATELINE: VICTORIA

WORD COUNT: 176

NATO serves no useful purpose in the role it plays today and protesters this weekend will stress that point, a spokesman for a protest coalition said yesterday.

"We're saying it no longer has any rationale for its existence the way it's being used these days," said Phil Lyons, a spokesman for a coalition of peace groups.

While NATO leaders plot strategy this weekend in Victoria, the protesters plan a mass rally starting in front of the legislature.

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Lyons also had an ominous warning if the protesters aren't allowed to demonstrate peacefully.

"If the police decide they're going to clear people up, they're going to fight back."

NATO's military committee of 26 generals gather for what spokesman Lt.-Col. Tony White said will be a session discussing the organization's current and future operations.

Afghanistan will be a topic on the agenda but it's not the main item.

"The discussions are going to be very strategic," White said. "It's going to be about how does NATO prepare itself and have the right capabilities for today, but more importantly, for future operations."

Lyons predicted "bus loads" of people would gather at the legislature grounds for the rally. The meeting takes place in the midst of a growing tension over the increasingly bloody war in Afghanistan.

KEYWORDS=NATIONAL

Ruckpaul: A mantra of duty, service Major; Raymond Ruckpaul, a Hamilton native serving with the Royal Canadian Dragoons who died in Afghanistan on Aug. 29, will be honoured today with a military funeral at Church of the Ascension in Hamilton. His friend and former Canadian Forces colleague Andrew Zdunich will be among the mourners.

IDNUMBER 200709080049

PUBLICATION: The Hamilton Spectator

DATE: 2007.09.08

EDITION: Final

SECTION: Opinion

PAGE: A19

ILLUSTRATION: Photo: Photo Courtesy of Andrew Zdunich, Special to the Hamilton Spectator / Major Ray Ruckpaul, second from left, with colleagues at a Canadian Forces field exercise. The soldier on the left is from Estonia, the other two soldiers are Canadian Forces colleagues. ;

BYLINE: Andrew Zdunich

SOURCE: The Hamilton Spectator

COPYRIGHT: © 2007 Torstar Corporation

WORD COUNT: 1080

Ray Ruckpaul came home today.

Exactly how is tragic for many reasons: The first, of course, is that he returned to his native soil and hometown on the shoulders of brethren acting as his pallbearers. There is no more heart-wrenching spectacle for the military community, the extended family of every person who dons the uniform and flag of our country.

That we are joined now by our fellow citizens spontaneously lining roadways and overpasses, standing in silent support at memorial services or making gestures of support and accommodation in an effort to share the weight of this emotion, leaves those of us who serve or have served speechless and honoured.

The second tragic reason, at least from my own standpoint, is the sparse coverage that has been afforded to Ray's life, thereby preventing Canadians knowing, as many of us did, who this remarkable person was.

The undeniable truth is that how Ray Ruckpaul lived his life renders the still-to-be-confirmed circumstances of his death considerably less relevant.

Ray was an example to everyone, not just because he wore our flag on his sleeve with such distinction, but also because — as for most of us — things did not come easily. Through hard work, determination and perseverance, he made a difference. There seems something truly Canadian in this.

The biography of Ray is much more than the oft-cited but considerably stale dates and facts that inevitably accompany an obituary. These details are for others to contribute; I do not know them, for my path crossed Ray's later in his life, at a time when he had found his calling, both in his profession as an officer and leader, and, of course, as a family man. As such the details of his education and growing up are before my time, and any comment on the family man that was Ray is best and most appropriately left to those dearest to him, near and far.

To me, however, Ray Ruckpaul was a friend, a term I am quite selective in using. To have the privilege to claim him as such reflects much better on me than him, and the reasons for that are quite personal and directly related to the fine person he was.

There are many, many stories and pictures that attest to some wonderful times spent in his company, but again those are private and likely understood only by those who were there and so should remain as private memories.

What I do feel comfortable in sharing — perhaps representing the many officers and soldiers who had the good fortune to serve with or know him as I did — is the professional face of the man, seen from the perspective of a peer. This aspect is one that families, unfortunately, do not often get to see; a shame since, particularly in Ray's case, the high esteem with which he was regarded would make any family member proud.

A consummate professional, Ray's reputation as an exceptionally proficient officer and dynamic leader through his early service preceded him on each assignment; the Army is one of those small communities in which one can become acutely aware of and familiar with a colleague without even meeting them. Such was the case for me before encountering then-Captain Ruckpaul on one long but significantly rewarding staff course in the fall of 1999, a time which in my mind epitomizes the calibre of man he was and when — unknown to him — he provided me with an example to emulate.

Ray was a little more seasoned than the majority of the student body, and had a proven track record as an organizer and team builder. The college staff saw him as the individual best suited to be selected as the course's leader — a wildly thankless, peer-based and overtime job piled on to the already onerous student workload.

In retrospect, it could not have been any other way: none of the 70-odd pupils would have been able to so adeptly and positively wade through the countless issues the way Ray did, showing the effectiveness, efficiency, humour and level-headedness all of us were striving for. He was our collective rock, the man with the solution who would just as easily stand solidly behind the one with the chosen plan.

Despite the extra travails, his attitude remained consistently and unwaveringly positive. From his standpoint, Ray was simply doing his duty in trying to make the course a better and more enjoyable place, being part of the solution rather than a problem; it was not his way to burden others with his own issues — his goal was always to enable, in whatever manner.

This sentiment is the common thread that spans his career and is likewise what I remember most of him: dedicated to others above self, determined, knowledgeable and dependable.

An ambassador of our country on several international exercises, missions and postings, his example was consistently of the highest standard, and his conduct had as its foundation the mantra of "duty and others before self" which permeated the very fibre of his being.

Ray was serious without taking himself too seriously, he made people laugh while laughing at himself, and he always wanted to ensure those around him felt validated and appreciated. In anyone's book, he was a fine

Ruckpaul: A mantra of duty, service Major; Raymond Ruckpaul, a Hamilton native serving with the 88 Royal Ca

example not just of an officer, but also of a human being.

Heartbreakingly, Ray, like the other 70 souls we have lost in Afghanistan, was introduced to the people of this country he loved and dedicated his life to only because he left us while on service in a foreign land.

Our loss as a nation is not just because he perished in Kabul, but because he proudly represented us in some of the most trying situations and locations worldwide for over 20 years of his life, fully cognizant of – indeed, relishing – the task of representing the best of our land, with the Maple Leaf prominent on his shoulder.

The military is one of those unique professions in which, despite the constant distances and lengthy spans of time one may go without seeing a friend with whom a bond was created, some remain at the forefront of thought even if communication are sparse.

Knowing that paths cross so often and that the military world is so small reassures many that although good and special people come and go, they do eventually come back thus making farewells that much easier.

Ray Ruckpaul returned home today, into the embrace of his band of brothers: A remarkable man, friend, colleague and son of our nation.

That his path will not cross ours again is the ultimate tragedy.

Andrew Zdunich is retired from the Canadian Forces and is CEO of Catalyst Capabilities International in Perth, Ont.

Museum honours dogs of war; Handlers believe canine heroes saved 10,000 soldiers in Vietnam

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PUBLICATION: The Hamilton Spectator
DATE: 2007.09.08
EDITION: Final
SECTION: Canada/World
PAGE: A8
ILLUSTRATION: Photo: Irfan Khan, Los Angeles Times / Marine Sergeant MikeMcKelroy, who was a dog handler in Vietnam, touches the statue at the West Coast War Dog Memorial at the March Field Air Museum in Riverside, Calif. ;
BYLINE: Jonathan Abrams
SOURCE: Los Angeles Times
COPYRIGHT: © 2007 Torstar Corporation
WORD COUNT: 862

The small group of veterans gathers at March Field Air Museum in Riverside, Calif., once a year, travelling from all corners of the country, to mourn forgotten heroes of battle.

They come to honour the dogs that saved lives by detecting booby traps and watching over military camps, dogs that became trusted friends in times of loneliness.

The meeting point is the nearly five-metre tall West Coast War Dog Memorial, which holds a bronze statue of a soldier and his German shepherd.

For years, veterans have sought to have the contributions of war dogs recognized with a national monument.

The West Coast memorial, designed by Denver-area sculptor A. Thomas Schomberg, was to have been placed at Riverside National Cemetery, but a national Veterans Affairs advisory committee argued that doing so would be disrespectful. The museum agreed to take it, and the veterans to meet there every year on the Sunday before Memorial Day.

"It honours another aspect of the military that is forgotten," said Patricia Korzec, the museum's executive director. "Man's best friend truly turned out to be man's best friend on the battlefield."

Legislation currently weaving through Congress would establish a national memorial at Fort Belvoir, Va. It is included in the House's 2008 defence authorization bill and is waiting to be heard in the Senate. If passed, it could be signed into law as early as November.

The tribute could not come sooner for many war dog handlers, most of whom were forced to leave their dogs behind when they returned to the United States after the Second World War, the Korean War and the Vietnam War.

John Burnam, a Vietnam veteran who spent countless days with his German shepherd, Clipper, credits the dog with saving his life several times. One time, on combat patrol, Clipper stopped, his muscles tensed and ears perked to the sky. Burnam, who always followed the dog's lead, ducked to the ground as machine gunfire killed a soldier in front.

Burnam said he and Clipper played dead for 10 minutes before help arrived. If not for Clipper, he said, he would have died. "We were basically leading combat patrols, and the dogs, with their natural abilities, were leading us."

Burnam now travels the country, advocating for a national war dog monument. He and others proposed generating the \$3 million needed for the monument through fundraisers. "We aren't equating them to humans, but we are saying ... there are families that have grandkids as a result of these dogs being deployed," said Burnam, author of the book, *Dog Tags of Courage: Combat Infantrymen and War Dog Heroes in Vietnam*.

The Vietnam Dog Handler Association estimates dogs saved 10,000 soldiers' lives during the Vietnam War. They would alert handlers to tripwires blowing in the breeze or the otherwise undetectable scent of buried explosives. Depending on their level of aggressiveness, the dogs were sent to two camps to hone their skills before deployment. Scout dogs were trained at Fort Benning, Ga., and sentry dogs at Lackland Air Force Base in Texas, one of the country's largest dog training facilities.

The scout dogs learned to alert handlers to foreign scents and sniff out landmines, snipers, enemy sentries and patrol camps.

Sentry dogs learned to stand guard and protect bases, airfields, ammunition dumps and fuel dumps.

The dogs are said to have lessened the chance of an ambush while on combat patrol and lifted soldier morale. The federal government, fearing that such dogs could not be rehabilitated after the war, classified them as equipment. They were euthanized at the end of battle, to the dismay of their handlers.

Of the estimated 4,000 dogs used in the Vietnam War, only about 200 returned to the United States.

In 2000, legislation that allowed handlers to adopt war dogs and bring them home was signed by President Bill Clinton. Today, canine corps are deployed in Afghanistan and Iraq and are used to secure bases and guard prisoners. Some of those dogs wear backpacks equipped with radios and are given radio commands from soldiers in protected areas.

"These dogs have been serving our country and on the battlefield in every war," Burnam said. "They've been doing it and saving American lives with valour."

The military first started using canine scouts and messengers in the First World War.

After meeting a war dog handler at a Memorial Day event, North Carolina Congressman Walter B. Jones agreed to sponsor a bill for the national monument. "It's a love that is hard to define," he said. "These comrades crawled in the jungle at nighttime to find where the enemy was and sniffed out enemies. They need to be recognized as an intricate part of our national security."

At the base of the memorial in Riverside, which was dedicated in 2000, paw prints and messages relay the bond between the veterans and the dogs. "My friend, Bingo. Leaving you was sad and wrong," said one. "To my rebel protector and friend," said another.

"If not for Dusty, I wouldn't be home."

One recent morning, Mike McKelroy, who served as a dog handler in Vietnam for 18 months, visited the memorial with Ken, his 7-year-old German shepherd. The dog has the same name as the one who served alongside him in Vietnam -- the one who saved McKelroy's life on a dusky morning when trees blocked a hidden enemy camp from his sight, but not from his dog's nose.

"This is so lifelike," he said, gazing at the sculpture. "You live, breathe and sleep with your dog, and he becomes a part of you."

Stretch of 401 officially named 'Highway of Heroes'

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A stretch of Ontario highway that's become a sombre repatriation route for soldiers felled in Afghanistan, drawing impromptu gatherings of mourners, has been officially renamed in their honour.

A 170-kilometre stretch of Highway 401 between the eastern Ontario airbase where the flag-draped coffins of fallen soldiers arrive and the forensics centre in Toronto that receives them was officially dubbed the Highway of Heroes yesterday.

The name change was prompted by an electronic petition to officially rename that stretch of highway.

James Forbes, 22, was behind the petition and has said he was surprised it got so much attention.

Forbes, a London, Ont., resident, said last month he received a lot of feedback from military families who've travelled along Highway 401 following repatriation ceremonies at CFB Trenton.

Since the mission began in 2002, 70 Canadian soldiers have been killed in Afghanistan.

In the line of fire, Part 3

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ILLUSTRATION: 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
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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.

Fifty bullets spit out in the first second in a distinctive burping sound, 70 every second thereafter. That's 10 revolutions of the spinning gun barrels each second.

"You cannot mistake the sound of that gun," said Lobb. "There is nothing in this world that is like that gun."

The American A-10s were part of the USAF's 455th Air Expeditionary Wing, which was located at the Bagram Air Force Base, near Kabul, about 500 kilometres northeast of Kandahar.

Once the pair of A-10s reached the airspace around Ma'Sum Ghar, Myler would recite the target co-ordinates to the pilots by radio.

Myler would give the pilots some of the target information, and the pilots, once they were within sight of the area, would feed back more info to him.

"It's give and take between the both of us," said Myler. "I give him some target description, but not all of it, because I need to save something for him to give back to me to be sure that he has the exact area."

To Myler, the pilots were faceless radio call signs flying above. In four months directing hundreds of aircraft during his Afghanistan tour, Myler only ever met two pilots.

The usual routine would have the A-10s fly in tandem over the target area.

The lead plane would drop a bomb, and the second plane would follow behind on a strafing run to pick off any enemy on the ground attempting to flee. Sometimes, the trailing plane was there to provide cover for the lead bomber.

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."

At one end of the line of armoured vehicles, Myler was inside his LAV working the radio, juggling two pairs of A-10s that were making runs across the Arghandab River.

The sky was clear, and light was just beginning to spill over the horizon, but the valley below was still blanketed in the dark shadows cast by the Ma'Sum Ghar mountainside.

On the second-to-last bombing run of the morning, one of the A-10 pilots told his wingman that he had just removed his night vision goggles because of the increasing light.

That simple action would have fatal consequences.

For the final run of the morning, both pairs of A-10s were going to make passes over the target and then peel off for the flight back to Bagram.

Myler provided the co-ordinates and the four pilots were already aware that the enemy was on the north side of the river and friendly positions were stationed on the south side.

The first pair dropped a 500-pound bomb on the target, which detonated successfully with a puff of smoke and fire.

The second pair of A-10s were then going to follow, identify the target that had just been hit and then both trailing planes would strafe around it.

At 0524, the lead A-10 from the final pair came rumbling over the top of the mountains that ring the Ma'Sum Ghar area.

The plane was travelling from the southwest toward the northeast, straight into the growing light just before sunrise.

The transition period from night to day is the most difficult for pilots because their night vision goggles become ineffective. But once the goggles are removed, it also takes the pilot's eyes some time to adjust to the light. At the same time, the lighting of the cockpit instrumentation has to be adjusted.

Less than a minute had passed from the time the pilot removed his goggles until he made his final strafing run of the morning.

Ahead, the horizon was light but the river and valley below were washed out in darkness.

The pilot became disoriented and looked out his cockpit window, trying to identify the fire and smoke from the bomb that had detonated seconds earlier.

On the pilot's cockpit targeting pod, the correct co-ordinates for the White Schoolhouse were on display.

But the pilot ignored the display on his screen and looked out the cockpit window instead.

He saw the garbage fire at Charlie Company's position, mistakenly thought it was the White Schoolhouse bomb site, and pointed his plane in that direction.

Then he pulled the trigger.

One second.

Two seconds.

Three seconds.

Enough time for more than 200 rounds of high-explosive ammunition to rain down on Charlie Company, most of it in a line along the back of 8 Platoon's LAVs.

"If he had checked his (display)," the government inquiry concluded, "he would have noticed the discrepancy between where his plane was pointed and the real target.

"That discrepancy should have caused him to abort that attack."

A year later, Myler still can't understand how the pilot could have made such a mistake.

"I had just worked these airplanes for almost three hours and we had continuously hit the targets time and time again," said Myler, with a hint of frustration in his voice. "He's already dropped a couple of bombs, he's already strafed it. I know that he knows where it is.

"I really don't know what was going through the poor man's head."

It's been a heavy burden on Myler's shoulders, even though the government report concluded the pilot was solely responsible for the tragedy.

"There still isn't a day that I don't think about what went down," Myler said quietly, "still not a day passes that I don't think about Mark or the guys."

As soon as the A-10's burst rang out, Myler hit the deck and dropped his handset. After a few seconds, he realized what was happening and grabbed his radio.

"Abort! Abort! Abort!" he yelled to the A-10 pilots above.

Myler's quick actions probably saved the lives of dozens of Canadian soldiers.

The second A-10 was following about 30 seconds behind, preparing to unleash another strafe.

When the second pilot saw the lead plane strafing a target, he assumed that his own instruments were wrong and rejiggered his path to follow the same line toward Charlie Company.

"He was beginning to press the trigger as (Myler) yelled 'Abort, abort, abort,'" said Hiltz.

"If we didn't have him, there's probably a lot less of us who'd have come home."

At the same time, the lead pilot realized he'd made a horrible mistake and acknowledged the error over his radio. The two American pilots quickly radioed for medical assistance to come to the aid of Charlie Company.

On the ground, there were screams of panic and pain.

"They were making another pass and we didn't know if they knew that they shot the wrong target," said Lobb.

He had been standing next to his LAV, shirtless, boots undone, brushing his teeth, when the A-10 spat out its burst of ammo. He was just a couple of metres from the garbage fire at the time.

By the time the bursts were exploding, Lobb was already throwing himself to the ground.

He was hit by shrapnel in three places, including a piece on his spine, and immediately, he could feel boiling metal on his back and left leg.

"I knew my back was hit instantly because, like a reaction, I grabbed for it and my fingers fell right inside my back," said Lobb.

Matthew Sprague, the company commander, had just stepped out of his LAV at the time. He was going to toss a piece of paper into the garbage fire when the explosions rang out.

He knew instantly that the troops were being pelted with friendly fire.

"I knew right away from the sound exactly what it was," said Sprague. "It's quite amazing to see how devastating it is."

Sprague took shrapnel pieces to both sides of his head, his arm, his back and buttocks. The blasts knocked his glasses right off his face, and he was covered from head to toe in blood.

"The only way I can describe it is like someone put a whole bunch of blue sparklers in the air and starts beating the living bejesus out of you with a baseball bat," Sprague said.

Next to him, a medic had taken shrapnel in the shoulder. Sprague grabbed the medic's shoulder, the medic grabbed Sprague's head and the two of them tried to hold each other up awkwardly and crab-walk back to the LAV to find bandages.

Chad Kinden was in the back of his LAV when the A-10 fired.

"When we heard it in the LAV, we were like, 'Whoa, that was close, he must have fired right over our heads,'" Kinden said. "Then all of a sudden people are yelling and screaming, 'They're shooting at us, they're shooting at us.'"

Mark Graham was standing next to the fire, getting ready to extinguish it when a piece of shrapnel tore through his chest and pierced his aorta, the major artery that exits the heart.

He never had a chance.

Within a couple of seconds, two platoon mates were at his side, but there was nothing they could do to save him.

"I believe that when they found Mark, he was just taking his last breath," said Kinden.

After the initial panic, the scene turned quiet as the soldiers went about the business of tending to the injured.

"There were some guys there with some pretty bad injuries, and guys who'd probably never seen blood before in their lives took care of these boys," Kinden said.

About 30 seconds after the attack, Hiltz ran past the fire and checked quickly on Graham, who was stretched out flat on the ground.

"There was absolutely no response from him at all," said Hiltz. "Eventually we grabbed a blanket and put it over top of him, and later on we were able to move him."

Within minutes, a mass casualty call went out to the Kandahar airbase, and four choppers began making the 10-minute flight to Ma'Sum Ghar to take the wounded out.

By 0550, all medical staff had been called to duty at the Kandahar military hospital.

Sprague was placed on a stretcher and taken to Kandahar, where he was rushed into surgery because one of the shrapnel pieces had punctured his skull. After a CT scan, the pieces of shrapnel were removed.

"I got a couple of pieces of it, but right now, I don't where they are," he said. "They could have just found a couple of pieces of metal off the floor, for all I know."

Sprague was transferred to the U.S. military hospital in Landstuhl, Germany, along with other severely

wounded soldiers, and then sent back to Canada.

Lobb, too, was flown to Kandahar but it was overloaded with casualties, so he was sent on to the Dutch military base at Tarin Kowt.

Lobb was soon returned to Canada, his tour of duty over after just a month. He's still not healed and has surgery scheduled Sept. 19 for his leg.

After all of the wounded were removed, Graham's body was flown to Kandahar.

All together, 35 Canadian soldiers were injured in the friendly fire incident, 13 seriously enough that they were returned to Canada.

Coalition forces continued their offensive in the area of the White Schoolhouse for another two weeks, reducing the target almost to rubble. NATO indicated in published reports that more than 500 Taliban insurgents were killed during Operation Medusa.

A day after the tragedy, nearly 1,000 people gathered at Kandahar airbase for a solemn, tear-filled ceremony as five flag-draped coffins were carried on to a C-130 Hercules.

Some of Charlie Company's injured soldiers hobbled on crutches up the ramp into the plane, others were pushed in wheelchairs, so they could share a final, private moment with their fallen comrades.

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.

"He would have liked all the fanfare that a military funeral provided for him."

A year has passed, but Mark Graham is certainly not forgotten.

An online condolence book in his memory contains hundreds of entries, including a couple of birthday best wishes in May, and new entries continue to trickle in.

Many of the entries are addressed directly to him, as if he's sitting at a computer somewhere on the other end.

There's a message from a Grade 10 student in Markham who learned about Graham as part of a Remembrance Day project in class.

There's one from Amy Rodgers of Streetsboro, Ohio. She's the sister of Traci Luther, Mark Graham's longtime girlfriend and the mother of his daughter, Shae-Lynn.

"It seems like just yesterday you were sitting in my living room with my husband happily singing all 23 verses of There's A Hole In My Bucket, Dear Liza, Dear Liza," Rodgers wrote. "Now, as I am writing this, there is a hole in my heart. I want to thank you for walking into my sister Traci's life."

There's one from Jeremy White of Hamilton, who says that Mark gave him his nickname, JBone, and one

from Adam White of Petawawa, who says he was so inspired by Mark's favourite biblical verse that he had it tattooed on his arm.

It was Joshua 1:9. "Be strong and of good courage. Be not afraid, neither be thou dismayed. For the Lord thy God is with thee whithersoever thou goest."

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."

"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

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: 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 : Afghanistan ;
BYLINE: Steve Buist
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"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

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.

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.

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."

Continued on next page

Continued from previous page

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."

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 Part 1

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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 ;

BYLINE: Steve Buist
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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

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 Panjwaii 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

Afghanistan file tops the agenda Canada's role past 2009 an issue

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CP Wire Murray Brewster OTTAWA -- NATO's top generals have arrived here to map out strategy amid growing strain in the alliance over the war in Afghanistan.

The protracted battle to put down the Taliban insurgency has Canada and the Netherlands both questioning their deployment of combat troops in the volatile region.

Gen. Ray Henault, chairman of NATO's military committee and former chief of Canada's defence staff, said the alliance has not received formal notice from Ottawa that it intends to end its combat commitment as scheduled in February 2009.

He said the alliance has not begun the formal process of scouting out replacement nations.

"A lot of things happen in 18 months," he said.

"We're certainly hopeful Canada will find a way to continue to operate in Afghanistan." The Liberals and Bloc Quebecois want Canadian troops pulled out of Kandahar when the mandate of the mission expires in 2009. The NDP has long demanded an immediate withdrawal.

Henault said he hopes Canada will stay because progress is being made, but added that the final decision rests with the government.

He said there's currently no way to say when NATO will achieve its objectives in Afghanistan.

"There isn't a date you can set on that. It's an end state." The more immediate concern for NATO is the bellwether decision expected within weeks by the Netherlands, which has combat troops, helicopters and aircraft operating in Uruzgan province, north of Kandahar.

The Dutch are expected to say whether their forces will remain in southern Afghanistan -- a decision that could trigger a domino effect, and some fear the collapse of NATO's effort.

The Australians, who are not members of NATO but have nonetheless contributed almost 1,000 support troops and combat engineers for reconstruction, have said they will not stay if the Dutch leave.

Such an exodus combined with the reluctance of some NATO members -- Germany, Italy and France -- to commit their combat forces already in Afghanistan to fighting the Taliban could make a tenuous situation dangerous.

"Shortfalls do create additional risks," Henault said.

But he quickly added NATO planners are always spinning different troop rotation scenarios.

