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CHRISTIE BLATCHFORD KANDAHAR With the now-usual bow to British author and former Tony Blair press secretary Alastair Campbell, whose marvellous diary-style book sets the standard far beneath which I toil, I present The Afghan Years, Part 3 – this week, The Celebrity Embed.

MONDAY, AUG. 27 Approx. 10 a.m. To paraphrase from the fictional Lieutenant-Colonel Bill Kilgore, played by Robert Duvall in the 1979 movie Apocalypse Now , I love the smell of envy in the morning.

The big guns of Radio-Canada have arrived at Kandahar Air Field – cameraman Gilbert Drouin, producer Bruno Bonamigo and the star anchor of Le Telejournal , Bernard Derome.

Being a filthy anglophone (though Quebec-born and raised), I may be the only person around who has never heard of Mr. Derome, a 60-something fellow with a classic Gallic cast to his face. I wouldn't know him if I tripped over him.

But no need: He is recognizable by the crowd – a general or two usually hovering about and at least one and sometimes a gaggle of army Public Affairs Officers, or PAFOs – which follows him and the moon dust of excitement kicked up as they go.

Poor Mr. Derome; he has arrived to a crabby group of colleagues, and if none of it is his fault, there is, shall we say, a history here.

The background is that journalists with the CBC's French-language service already were getting the kid-glove treatment before the big boys even landed.

The first Rad-Can crew arrived the week previously and had such awful luck – reporter Patrice Roy and cameraman Charles Dubois were in a light armoured vehicle that hit a mine, killed two soldiers and an interpreter and saw Mr. Dubois lose a leg below the knee – our bleating about their special treatment in Kandahar was somewhat stilled.

But there had been problems.

The two, as well as a CanWest reporter, had been secretly given seats on a convoy taking the soldiers of the 3rd Battalion Royal 22nd Regiment out on their first offensive proper.

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None of the other reporters here, including those working for organizations like The Globe and Mail which have staffed the Canadian mission here non-stop regardless of which province the soldiers hail from, were even told there was a combat operation under way – a gross departure from the way things are normally handled.

More significant, probably, was that the army's senior PAFO, who is in charge of handling embedded reporters here, baldly told the CTV correspondent that "Quebec is our target" audience now that the Quebec regiment is here, and suggested there would be a French-language crew going out on every mission.

A day or so later, in a meeting with reporters, the PAFO admitted making the comment, which was immediately denounced by his superior as absolute nonsense.

So Mr. Derome has arrived to a po-faced gang, roiling with discontent.

Approx. 1 p.m. I spot an enormously competent PAFO I met in Afghanistan on Roto 1 last year, when the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry were here. She's not due back so soon, I think.

I make a few inquiries and find out that she's been assigned to handle Mr. Derome and his crew for a couple of weeks. I am reminded that when The National and Peter Mansbridge were here, they, too, had a PAFO solely dedicated to their welfare.

If some of this is defensible – television is high maintenance, especially when anchors broadcast their shows from a war zone – it remains irritating to the rest of us. Martin Ouellet, a very funny francophone with the Canadian Press, immediately pretends to smell out an anti-Anglo conspiracy.

Approx. 9 p.m. We all bitterly complain about what we have come to call The Barbecue, which saw Mr. Derome and gang enjoy a private meal with Brigadier-General Guy Laroche, commander of Canada's Joint Task Force Afghanistan, and other brass. The delightful Hugo Meunier of La Presse discovered them in flagrante delicto when he literally followed his nose – the fragrant smell of roasting meat wafting over the work tents.

TUESDAY, AUG. 28 Approx. 10 a.m. A bunch of us watch forlornly as Mr. Derome gets a ride in an RG-31 with the boss of the so-called OMLT, Canada's Operational Mentoring and Liaison Team, and other soldiers. The vehicle is one of the best-protected in the Canadian fleet, and the Rad-Can folks are merely going to the Afghan army's base nearby.

Evilly, I relish the sight of Mr. Derome being helped with his seatbelt by a soldier, conveniently forgetting the breadth of my own wide-ranging incompetence, as when for instance, while interviewing the friends of a soldier killed in a bombing, I meant to ask if they'd talked about the awful possibility that some of them might not return, might be killed in Kandahar. Instead, in my merde –like French I asked, "Did you talk much about getting the chance to kill over here?" WEDNESDAY, AUG. 29 Approx. 3 p.m. We gather for a briefing with a bright young and magnificently bilingual young major. One by one, we introduce ourselves and shake hands. Mr. Derome extends his without a word, properly confident the major will know who he is. And the major does.

Later, alone in our work tent, we bitterly rehash The Barbecue.

"It's part of the conspiracy," Mr. Ouellet says, though by now, I forget which one he's pretending to believe in – the anglophone one, or the francophone one.

THURSDAY, AUG. 30 1 a.m. I learn from a non-Rad-Can colleague who works in the Rad-Can tent that later in the morn, Mr. Derome and his posse are to go back out with Brig.-Gen. Laroche for a helicopter tour

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of the area of operations.

In our tent, we rage against the injustice. We, too, have two seats on a chopper, but not General Laroche's – the one behind it.

And we weren't even told the general would be anywhere in the vicinity.

I determine, I think, that the real conspiracy here may be against the scum of the written press.

1:15 a.m. I phone the PAFO who didn't tell us about the general and wake him up, just, I'm afraid, for the pleasure of it.

*** ** MEA CULPA In last Saturday's diary, I misattributed a line of poetry to In Flanders Fields by Canadian John McCrae; it was from the English poet Laurence Binyon's For the Fallen . I knew better, but forgot to correct my copy. Thanks to the many of you who wrote to correct me.

I blame one of the conspiracies.

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