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Canadian soldiers in Afghanistan encouraged to face mortality issue

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GUNDY GHAR, Afghanistan - Soldiers from Valcartier, Que., took a course before they're deployed to Afghanistan - it's called "The Warrior and Death."

It's mandatory. Like it or not, they have to confront the question of mortality. Talking about death may be tabooed but it's a fact that Canadians are being killed in Afghanistan.

At the forward operating base in Gundy Ghar, about 40 kilometres west of Kandahar Airfield, death could be around every corner.

Rocket attacks and ambushes from the Taliban are commonplace.

The biggest threat of all comes from improvised explosive devices, or IEDs, that can engulf an armoured vehicle in a huge ball of flame within seconds because, as one military official put it: "You can always build a bigger bomb."

It's the mournful skirl of the bagpipes that Canadian soldiers dread the most. It marks the end of the road for a friend and comrade, an unmistakable sign that the battles against the Taliban have claimed another life.

When they are deployed to Afghanistan, the men and women from Canada leave behind loved ones half a world away and face the possibility that they may not return home. "The Warrior and Death" is intended as a way to help them deal with the issue.

"It's the first time at Valcartier that we have done training for all of our soldiers on the issue of death," explained Maj. Pierre Bergeron, the padre at Kandahar Airfield. "That means the potential of our own death, the death of our friends or those we may bring death to in the theatre of war."

It's a struggle though.

Bergeron said the course discusses the link between life and death, some of the taboos and the correlation between the profession of being a soldier and death. But the soldiers themselves are not keen to discuss the subject.

"There's a little bit of superstition that if we talk about it, it might happen. But others see it that it is evident that we are in Afghanistan and we will continue to lose soldiers," he said. "Any one of us who steps outside the gate could find death, so it's important to be honest with our families."

But the reality of talking about death and living with it are two different matters, according to some soldiers.

"We talk about it but not too much," shrugged Cpl. Anthony Drosou.

"In infantry there's a culture that we are tough guys. The guys want to keep this inside so we can't be weak."

Sapper Mathieu Pilon splits his time between being a gunner in the heavily armoured RG-31 and driving the Husky, a vehicle that detects IEDs on the roads.

"We try not to talk about that a lot because it's not a good thing," Pilon said. "I don't talk about it at home. I don't say anything to my mom or my dad about what will happen if I am hurt or something."

But some of the veterans serving in Afghanistan recognize there is a need to share concerns and feelings.

Sgt. Sylvain Latulippe, who regularly travels through the dangerous and dusty Panjwai and Zhari districts where Taliban fighters still roam, encourages his men to talk.

"We talk a lot about it - the feeling of it," said Latulippe.

"Some people cry. I've got some of my guys who cry because they've got a few guys they know very well who died. I told them to cry is good and not to keep it inside."

Those at the Canadian Tactical Operations Centre at Kandahar Airfield are the first to hear when soldiers are killed or wounded.

"It's essential that we talk about it," said Maj. Eric Laforest.

"It's unfortunate when it happens but I think everyone grows through even the most painful events."

"I've seen grown men cry and grown women cry as well. It's normal. It's good."

It's not known whether "The Warrior and Death" will be extended to future troop rotations. But officials say one thing is clear: it's not "if" but "when" death will come calling.