

THE AFGHAN MISSION

Canadian soldier dies days before tour's end in Kandahar

Convoy was struck by Taliban bomb

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WITH A REPORT FROM DAWN WALTON AND THE CANADIAN PRESS

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KANDAHAR -- From inside an army outpost carved into a craggy mountainside this winter, Trooper Michael Hayakaze reflected on the smiles of Afghan children. He said that whenever he saw them, it made him feel optimistic.

"When the kids come running up to the road and they smile, it's the best," the 25-year-old soldier told a Washington Times reporter in December.

"When we first showed up, you know, they used to run and hide, or they would throw stones at our tanks," he explained.

"And you know they get that from their parents. So if they're not afraid of us, that means it's getting better."

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Trooper Hayakaze was just days away from returning home when he was killed yesterday by a roadside bomb.

Part of the Lord Strathcona's Horse regiment based in Edmonton, he was part of the outgoing rotation of troops due to finish by mid-month. He is the 79th Canadian soldier killed in Afghanistan.

The explosion hit a convoy driving supplies to an Afghan army outpost, about 45 kilometres southwest of Kandahar city.

The attack occurred near a cluster of villages known as Mushan - a battleground since Canadian troops pushed the Taliban away from the area last winter.

Insurgents recaptured the area last spring before the latest rotation of Canadian troops took it back. The Canadians have been stocking the post with food, water and ammunition in hopes that Afghan forces will hold the position through anticipated battles this coming spring.

Road convoys ferry in the supplies because Canada is the only country engaged in major combat that has no helicopters in Afghanistan. Brigadier-General Guy Laroche said yesterday the Taliban "are still using the IED [improvised explosive device], their weapon of choice, and we have seen another example of that today."

Betsy Pisik, a Washington Times reporter, yesterday recalled spending eight hours in a tank with Trooper Hayakaze and his fellow soldiers, just a couple of days before Christmas.

"He was convinced of the mission," she said in an interview. She said "Kaze" was amused to learn his abbreviated name would've sounded like *qasi* to the local inhabitants - a term for an Islamic judge versed in *sharia* law.

Ms. Pisik said Trooper Hayakaze didn't seem to mind the privations of living at a hardship outpost, and that he could find humour in Afghanistan - he was amused, for example, by the fact the citizens grew eight-foot-tall marijuana plants and carted them around unrepentantly. But she also said he was a sharp-eyed soldier who was deadly serious whenever he popped his head outside a tank's hatch, to scour the countryside for possible threats.

"He would see stuff with his naked eye long before I ever did," she said.

Canadian commanders have recently portrayed the security situation in Kandahar's core districts as improving. On Friday, a military official even described recent trends as indicating "the end of the reign of the Taliban."

But the number of Taliban attacks climbed to 197 in southern Afghanistan as of Feb. 24, compared with 135 during the same period last year, according to a private consultant's report. Last year, more than 6,500 people, mostly insurgents, were killed in Afghanistan's violence, compared with roughly 4,000 in 2006, and 1,000 in 2005.

While the number of attacks against Canadians has been relatively low, Afghan forces and civilians associated with the government have been heavily targeted. Two more humanitarian workers, local Afghans, were kidnapped in Arghandab district last week, even as unconfirmed reports indicated that the kidnapping of U.S. aid worker Cydney Mizell and her driver have ended with their deaths in captivity.

Corporal Jonathan Ouellet, who is also part of Lord Strathcona's Horse, said Trooper Hayakaze was deployed to Afghanistan later than the rest of the regiment - just before Christmas - to replace a driver who had been injured. Cpl. Ouellet met Trooper Hayakaze when the trooper joined the regiment less than a year ago.

Trooper Hayakaze was a little nervous about being sent overseas due to the short time he'd been in the army, Cpl. Ouellet said from Edmonton, where he is recuperating after being injured himself by an IED attack in the same region of Afghanistan where Trooper Hayakaze was killed.

"Like everybody, you know, he was scared. Didn't know exactly, because he was pretty much new to the whole deal, the regiment and everything," he said, adding his friend was eager to learn. "He was always there to listen, to learn anything new that would help."

Trooper Hayakaze had once lived in Japan and the two had planned to take a trip to Tokyo after his return from Afghanistan, said Cpl. Ouellet.

In 2007, just before deploying, Trooper Hayakaze was interviewed by a Toronto newspaper. At the time, he reflected on the deaths of fellow soldiers and expressed frustration about groups wanting to end the mission.

"When we hear of these tragedies, it's always depressing and always makes me go quiet and think about why we're really there," he said. "What happens to all those men and women who've died if we just leave?"

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