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Her son was killed near Kandahar last August, but the truth surrounding the incident still eludes a grieving mother

By MICHAEL PLATT

She knows more than any grieving parent probably should -- how moments before her son died, so many bullets were flying through the air that leaves were falling from the trees in a steady shower.

"The leaves were falling like rain, and they couldn't even raise their heads to fire their guns -- they had to throw grenades, for fear of being shot."

What Beth Figley doesn't know is who fired the bullet which killed Master Cpl. Josh Roberts, 29, on that fateful day last August, in a brutal skirmish near Kandahar City.

It's a question she won't stop asking, despite closure of the military police investigation, and the official answer from the Department of National Defence: Roberts was shot by an Afghan insurgent, case closed.

A cut-and-dry answer, unless you've already been told something else -- something that comes directly from a Canadian general, who discussed your son's death with you in meticulous detail.

"(Lt. General Andrew Leslie) told us Josh was involved in a firefight with insurgents and was killed by Compass Security," said Figley, of the meeting at CFB Trenton, just after her son's death.

Compass is one of the many Afghan-run security companies used to guard construction sites and the like.

Figley said that at the time, she and Gene Figley, Josh's stepdad, accepted that an accident had occurred, and that panicked security guards firing indiscriminately had killed Josh.

"We have been very straight with ourselves, and of course we were devastated, but our son was a soldier since the age of 17 and we knew this possibility always existed," said Figley, from her home in Saskatchewan.

"When General Leslie told us about the security company, we accepted that -- we didn't want our son to be dead, but we accepted the explanation."

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It wasn't just officials here at home blaming the skittish and trigger-happy security outfit for the death.

A news video recorded just after the Aug. 11 battle shows a man identified as Canadian Maj. Corey Frederickson blaming the shoot-first, ask-later security firm for Josh's death.

"Their normal contact drill is that as soon as they get hit with something, then it's 360, open up on anything that moves. We think that's probably what happened," says Frederickson in the video posted by Stars and Stripes, an independent news organization covering U.S. military.

The video shows Canadian and U.S. soldiers interrogating the heavily-armed security guards, with one frustrated American sergeant saying they can't get a straight answer from the evasive guards.

And yet a report by the Canadian military's National Investigation Service states without doubt that the fatal bullet was fired by an insurgent, and the security firm is innocent.

The Department of National Defence has declined to discuss the matter with the media, and no one was available to speak to the matter yesterday.

The 57-page report says that based on positions of guards and troops, the fatal bullet must have come from the insurgent side -- and yet, a coroner states that the trajectory of the shot is impossible to determine.

The final autopsy report has not been released to the family, despite repeated requests.

Talking to the soldiers who were with Josh that day hasn't helped either.

Figley said the men were not allowed to speak to the family without a senior officer present, and the general who originally told them about the security company later phoned to recant, while another officer listened in.

Just after Christmas, a comrade made an unsolicited phone call to the Figleys, telling them the shooting had been captured on helmet-mounted cameras, but the video was erased because it was too gruesome.

The whole experience, and difficulty getting straight answers, has Figley wondering whether the issue is political, or to cover for bumbling on the battlefield.

"What if my son died as a result of incompetent leadership?" said Figley.

"Getting answers is like talking to a big green wall."