

## THE AFGHAN MISSION

# Ouellet was 'proud to be a soldier'

**As fallen Canadian's body returns home, speculation builds over what killed him**

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QUEBEC -- Four days after Canadian soldier Jérémie Ouellet's body was found in the sleeping quarters at Kandahar Airfield in Afghanistan, his death remains a mystery.

Family members, still shocked by the sudden death, are searching for answers, while residents of Mr. Ouellet's hometown of Matane, Que., 400 kilometres east of Quebec City, can only speculate as to what might have happened.

The military has given no explanation for the death of the 22-year-old soldier except to say it had nothing to do with combat operations. Shrouded in secrecy, the death is currently being investigated by the Canadian Forces National Investigative Service.

"I know what some people are thinking and I can tell you he was not the type of person to commit suicide," said Jérémie's uncle, Alain Ouellet, who operates a gas station and convenience store in Matane.

**Print Edition - Section Front**



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Mr. Ouellet described his nephew as a big, strong man who, at 250 pounds, didn't drink alcohol or take drugs. He was disciplined and would never use physical force against anyone, Mr. Ouellet said.

"Was it an accident, was he manipulating his weapon, was he cleaning his gun? We don't know. All I can tell you is that he was proud to be a soldier and he was looking forward to being deployed in Afghanistan," Mr. Ouellet said, his voice shaking.

Bombardier Ouellet was a member of the 1st Regiment, Royal Canadian Horse Artillery based in Shilo, Man. He was among the latest rotation of soldiers replacing the Royal 22nd Regiment based out of Valcartier, Que., who have just completed a six-month tour of duty in Kandahar. Among the soldiers returning home was Jérémie's brother Michael, who had experienced the stress of military operations in Afghanistan.

"Talking with my nephew Michael I got the sense that it was like someone being asked to walk through a forest knowing that out of the last 30 people who did it, two were killed by wolves," Alain Ouellet said. "That's the kind of stress they lived over there. ... But I can tell you that Jérémie knew how to control that kind of stress. He was calm, bright and very positive about life."

The dead soldier's father, Denis Ouellet, was expected to attend the arrival of his son's body yesterday at the Canadian Forces Base in Trenton, Ont.

"We will miss him a lot as will his friends," the family said in a statement issued yesterday by the Defence Department. "Jérémie will remain in our hearts and we will continue to think of him."

Mr. Ouellet was the 80th soldier to die in Afghanistan. The last time a Canadian soldier was killed on the base was in March of 2007. Most of the casualties were the result of improvised explosive devices during military operations conducted in Kandahar region.

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