

THE AFGHAN MISSION: MACKAY, HILLIER DEFEND MILITARY'S RESPONSE TO INCIDENT

After Somalia, Forces prove 'open and transparent'



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For all the facile comparisons to the odious Somalia debacle the latest news out of Kandahar already has brought, it appears the senior leaders of the Canadian Forces have learned the central lesson out of that sorry mess almost 16 years ago - that is, you do not hide from bad news, nor do you hide it from the Canadian people.

I refer, of course, to the terse announcement yesterday from the Canadian Forces National Investigation Service, the military equivalent of the major-crime unit of a civilian police force, that an officer, Captain Robert Semrau, has been charged with second-degree murder in connection with the Oct. 19, 2008, death of an unarmed Afghan, described in an official press release as "a presumed insurgent."

Capt. Semrau was among a small group of Canadian soldiers, members of the Operational Mentor and Liaison Team or OMLT who had accompanied the Afghan National Army battalion they had been training into neighbouring Helmand Province, an area under British control. The shooting of the Afghan man apparently occurred during the course of or about the same time as heavy fighting near the province's largest city, Lashkar Gah, which was under attack from three sides. The fighting lasted several days.

Capt. Semrau was charged just a week after the CFNIS was first called in to investigate allegations of what was described, a few days later, as "inappropriate conduct" relating to the man's death.

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While questions remain about the two-month-long delay between the date of the man's death and the date that senior commanders in Kandahar learned of the allegations, it seems clear that once informed, they acted swiftly and with transparency.

In fact, Defence Minister Peter MacKay, who was in Kandahar during the Christmas break, was at a base in a Middle Eastern country awaiting the casket carrying a Canadian soldier with Chief of Defence Staff General Walter Natynczyk when the general was approached by Brigadier-General Dennis Thompson, the commander of Task Force Afghanistan, and informed of the investigation.

Mr. MacKay said yesterday in a telephone interview that he could tell from the look on Brig.-Gen. Thompson's face that something serious had happened, and his first fear was that Canadian troops, who had just lost three soldiers in two days, had suffered another casualty.

But when he asked Gen. Natynczyk about it a few minutes later, Mr. MacKay was told there was a probe under way involving serious allegations against a Canadian. "That was all I heard until I got back to Canada," Mr. MacKay said.

That was Dec. 27, the very day that Colonel Jamie Cade, the deputy commander in Kandahar, later told reporters he had first learned of the allegations against Capt. Semrau.

It was also on that day that Col. Cade called in the NIS, which was established in 1997, in part as a result of recommendations stemming out of the Somalia affair.

What happened in the spring of 1993 in Somalia, when on March 16 teenager Shidane Arone was tortured and beaten to death by two members of the now-disbanded Canadian Airborne Regiment there on a difficult peace-making mission, remains the single greatest stain in the history of the Canadian Forces.

But while it was two rank-and-file soldiers who were criminally charged and publicly vilified, an abbreviated inquiry into the incident, as well as knowledgeable military observers, held that the young man's death was really the result of an out-of-control culture fostered by lax and unaccountable senior leaders who later tried to whitewash and cover up the magnitude of what had happened - a validation of the old army creed which holds that there are no bad soldiers, only bad officers.

In the current case, unlike with Shidane Arone's death, the news did not leak out in dribs and drabs from courageous soldiers and dogged reporters, but rather was presented to the press by the senior command on Dec. 31 - just four days after the command itself had learned of the allegations and called in the appropriate authorities.

As former chief of defence staff, retired general Rick Hillier, said yesterday from Texas, where he is on vacation: "We do manage violence on behalf of the people of Canada. That is a heavy responsibility, and we have to have those checks and balances." Gen. Hillier emphasized that he "is out of the loop" and has read only some media reports, but said that two months for the allegations to make their way up the chain of command is "phenomenally quick."

Mr. MacKay acknowledged the enduring stain of Somalia, but said, "This is a different Canadian Forces. I think that those hard, hard lessons learned from Somalia do ring in the ears of anyone who was around then..."

"The culture now is to be open and transparent," he said, "and they live and breathe in that culture. ...They are supremely professional, absolutely dedicated to what they do - and what they do first and foremost is the right thing."

In truth, no one more welcomes accountability in all its forms - whether through Rules of Engagement, which require that troops use force lawfully, or the Code of Conduct or NIS investigation - than the good soldier. An army is only as professional as the discipline of its troops and officers and their collective willingness to play by the rules. As one writer wrote recently on The Torch, a blog about the Canadian military, "Nobody who's thought about it for any length of time wants soldiers freelancing as to how they apply force. That makes them no better than an armed gang. The fact that they are controlled by a lawful government authority is what makes the violence they apply morally acceptable."

That is the standard to which the Canadian soldier must be held. As Colonel Ian Hope once told a group of the troops under his command, this almost three years ago at a hideous little base called Gumbad, "We need discipline and we need to keep up our professionalism," he said. "That's what distinguishes you from every other guy with a gun in this country."

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