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## Germany gets thank-you note from Canadian IED survivor

By Murray Brewster, THE CANADIAN PRESS

OTTAWA - A Canadian officer in Afghanistan sent a personal thank you to the German government after he and his crew rumbling along in a tank borrowed from the NATO ally survived a powerful Taliban roadside bomb blast.

"My crew stumbled upon an (improvised explosive device) and made history as the first (crew) to test the (Leopard 2A6)M-packet," said the unidentified officer in an email to German defence officials about the specially-designed battle tank.

"It worked as it should."

The crew of four was battered by the blast and the driver broke a hip, but otherwise they were fine.

The note, passed to Berlin through a Canadian defence attache, has been quoted in the German media, but Canada's Defence Department was loath to acknowledge its existence.

Interview requests with both army and defence officials in Ottawa were denied and in what has become a troubling pattern for the department, it released only a series of written answers to questions about the incident posed by The Canadian Press.

The 13-line note failed to explain the unprecedented secrecy surrounding the incident.

A defence analyst said Canadian officials' silence mystifies him when they have an opportunity to trumpet such a success, particularly since the tanks' formidable presence has helped contribute to a decline in civilian casualties in their areas of operation.

"The Leopards are an extremely accurate direct fire weapon, far more accurate than air strikes," said Alain Pellerin, a retired colonel, and executive director of the Ottawa-based Conference of Defence Associations.

"Civilian casualties is a major issue for both Canadians and Afghans and the tanks are proving their worth."

In deploying the army's older Leopard C1 tanks in the fall of 2006, former defence minister Gordon O'Connor faced accusations in the House of Commons that the Conservatives were escalating the war.

The Conservatives' insisted that tanks, sometimes by their very presence, save lives.

The unidentified tank officer, part of a contingent of 2,500 Canadian soldiers serving in the volatile Kandahar region, told the Germans there likely would have been casualties among the crew had they been in any other type of vehicle.

The majority of the 73 soldiers killed in Afghanistan have died because their vehicles have run over improvised explosives, including seven casualties in the current rotation.

Despite three days of repeated requests, the Canadian military refused to shed much light on the incident.

It acknowledged the tank was damaged during the recent battle of Arghandab, which took place in early November, north of Kandahar, and that one tanker was injured.

A stipulation of borrowing the 42-tonne iron monsters from the Germans was that they be returned in the same condition.

Although the tank was nowhere near wrecked, a German Army official who was not authorized to speak on the record, said the Canadians will likely keep vehicle and pay out its roughly C \$6.4 million cost.

Canadian officials refused to say whether that is the case.

Last spring the Conservative government announced it was going to borrow 20 modern Leopard C2A6 tanks to meet immediate combat needs in Afghanistan. The existing Leopard C1s were deemed too old to withstand the rigours and oppressive heat of the Afghan desert.

The German tanks - borrowed at no cost - were upgraded with anti-mine protection and began arriving in Kandahar in mid-August along with the latest rotation of infantry from the Royal 22nd Regiment.

Over the long-term, the Conservatives plan to replace the borrowed tanks with relatively new ones purchased from the surplus stock of 100 Dutch Leopards.

Pellerin said it is imperative that National Defence follow through on intention to upgrade those tanks with the latest mine-resistance armour kits.

The government was supposed to take delivery of the Dutch tanks this fall, but the department has refused to say what the status of the project might be.