

## A soldier's valour

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**Pte. William Salikin was one of three Edmonton-based soldiers injured in the January 2006 suicide bombing in Kandahar that killed Canadian diplomat Glyn Berry. (CP Photo/Jason Scott)**

Will Salikin admits he romanticized the role of the Canadian soldier.

His purpose was simple: To help the downtrodden, bring ravaged villages back to life, and establish peace where, for decades, there was none.

They were missions that aligned perfectly with his former life as a non-ordained clergyman with the United church.

Like the 100 soldiers who died before him in the mysterious will that is fate, Pte. Salikin signed up for the army to give his young, hollow life a clear mandate. While the church gave him something to believe in, the army would give him a "more direct" route to life purpose. Prior to joining, he was 21 years old, rose at 11 a.m. and worked at a retail electronics store.

"My main concern was about number one," he says in a phone interview from his home in Penticton, B.C.

But, like the dichotomy of a bible-preaching clergyman now bearing arms, his story is laced with contradiction and little ironies.

Salikin was one of three Edmonton-based soldiers injured in the January 2006 suicide bombing in Kandahar that killed Canadian diplomat Glyn Berry. The men were returning to their base when a suicide bomber swerved into the convoy and struck their armoured jeep.

The impact broke his arm and his thumb. A bubble formed in his spinal neck, his left lung collapsed, he was put on a breathing machine, and he suffered "a big mess of a concussion."

Despite nearly being killed, Salikin, now 25, says he would return to the battlefield "in a heartbeat" if he could. His injuries, however, prevent it.

"I get the itch to do something," Salikin says. "Here I am, talking to a reporter, when our guys are fighting out there."

It's a war that has taken the lives of 100 Canadians since our troops were first deployed to Afghanistan in early 2002. Appetites for the war wanes with every death. But it's all about perspective, says Bob Butt of the Royal Canadian Legion, as we've lost a total of 117,000 Canadians in military conflicts since the birth of our country.

"Don't forget we lost more than 500 lives in the Korean war in three years," he said.

Unlike other conflicts, this is the first time we've returned bodies back to Canada under a microscope of media lenses and cyberspace, Butt adds.

"We're a lot more connected electronically."

Connection is also what Salikin craved, which is why he signed up as an infantryman. People told him his smarts could be used elsewhere within the ranks. But he was resolute, Salikin said, because he wanted to be out front on enemy lines, close to the action.

In trading his bible for a gun, Salikin sought the physicality of combat over the spiritual and intangible.

"The cataclysmic moment for me would have been the friendly fire incident," he says. "I was thinking of applying before that but it solidified my desire to join. I watched the funerals and felt incredible pride."

Four soldiers were killed in an incident of friendly fire when an American fighter jet mistakenly bombed Canadians in a pre-dawn training exercise in 2002.

"These guys were four men who died for a reason even though there was no enemy fire," Salikin says. "They had purpose. And that's probably what I was searching for all my life."

Salikin's conversation mirrors his approach to service: Both are thoughtful, candid, and tinged with an earnest naivete.

Instead of hiding his Russian ethnicity, Salikin chose to tell Afghan soldiers and interpreters up front. The Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in 1979 in a war described as the Soviets' equivalent of the Vietnam war.

"It's my belief that if people see that I'm being open, they'll be open as well," he says. "If I'm concealing things, they'll conceal as well."

The older Afghans, who remembered the conflict which lasted until 1989 and killed one million of their people, whispered amongst themselves, Salikin says, but he was never abused.

"I dearly love the Afghan people," he says. "I love their sense of duty and their devotion to family. We don't have their level of commitment to family in Canada. They are a totally different society of people."

Salikin's insatiable curiosity pushed him to befriend Afghan policemen and interpreters in a quest to better understand his mission. He recalls with fondness the day he sat an Afghan interpreter down and taught him how to play chess. The two exchanged a frank, open talk, grilling each other

about their respective societies.

"We were talking openly. He was curious about what society was like in Canada, like marriage and I asked about their religion."

What came out of that exchange was a greater understanding of a religion previously shrouded in mystery, Salikini says.

"The number one misconception the Western world has on Afghanistan is their religion. It's a very loving religion and people."

Salikin must be a good teacher, because when asked, he admits with a chuckle his new protege won the game.

"Beginner's luck," he laughed.

War has changed Salikin. He admits he now has a volcanic temper.

"I have a problem with anger. I've had a few tussles."

It's a character trait that's "100% attributable to the accident," he says.

"I explode and try to keep the fire ignited as long as I can. I find things to get angry about."

He goes to occupational therapy five days a week, and suffers chronic headaches. Life, now, is painfully "lackadaisical."

In a strange way, Salikin was once lost, but found himself in the war. Now that he's out, he sounds lost again.

Two relationships have failed since returning from war, and he refuses to think beyond five years into his future, as life has no longer become a "macro event."

"My view has matured. I had a romantic idea we were going over there to help people. Now I think it's much more of a dynamic situation than that."

So has public perception matured, Salikin says.

"One thing I've seen as a soldier since coming back is that Canadians are differentiating between the soldier and the government. They understand they can still support the troops and at the same time stand against government policy ... I've been given more respect than I ever wanted."

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