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A soldier's story

'Did we push her too much?'



Days after arriving in Kandahar, Major Michelle Mendes, a smart and driven analyst, committed suicide. Now some of her colleagues say several red flags should have tempered her fast rise in the ranks

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In the oppressive late-afternoon heat of April 23rd at the sprawling air base outside Kandahar, Major Michelle Mendes made the dusty walk to her living quarters.

Inside a sparse room, the 30-year-old sat down on her bed with service pistol in hand, and shot herself in the head.

It was the last in a long line of firsts for the young woman who had landed in Kandahar just four days earlier with a hefty reputation as someone who might one day command Canada's intelligence branch.

The pretty analyst with the prodigious intellect was the first Canadian female soldier to commit suicide in Afghanistan.

"You always demand more of the best people," said Colonel Christian

In Pictures

Rousseau, who was the top intelligence officer in the branch during most of Major Mendes's service. "Did we push her too much? Obviously we did, because of what happened."

Yet it isn't obvious at all.



Major Michelle Mendes.

A two-month Globe and Mail investigation reveals a deep division among those who knew and loved Major Mendes about whether her meteoric rise played any role in her death, and whether the handful of red flags strewn along her career path should have tempered her ascent.

The Globe has learned that a year before she was deployed to Kandahar, Major Mendes suffered a physical and emotional breakdown – in the language of the modern army, an "operational stress injury" – that saw her take about five months off, see a civilian therapist and go on anti-anxiety medication.

While the army's National Investigation Service continues to probe her death, The Globe investigation reveals no easy answers.

Any suicide is opaque, and unravelling the cause is akin to piecing together a battle after the fact, in that each person may understand only a small slice of what happened.

If Major Mendes killed herself under the stress of working in a war room – and it remains a big if – she, with her insatiable drive and enormous expectations, was complicit in it.

THE RED FLAGS

Suicide is rare among female members of the Canadian Forces – from 1995 to 2009, only seven women have killed themselves, compared with at least 145 male members over the same period. The rate for both groups is lower than in the civilian population.

Major Mendes, or "Mic" (pronounced 'Mick') as she was known to friends, is the only woman to have done so on an overseas deployment.

Her ascent to top prospect was so swift: In six jam-packed years, Major Mendes had become a star.

As evidence of her complex drive, she was known for her big brain, work ethic and the home-baked goodies she brought to the office. She never let up on herself: Even in the weeks before she flew to Kandahar, she made extra time for friends and left "others special treats they knew were crafted by her hand and assembled for them," her proud family told The Globe.



A fond farewell
Remembering Major Michelle Mendes

[View](#)

When she landed at the airfield in mid-April, she was set to become the inaugural operations officer at the Kandahar Intelligence Fusion Centre, or KIF-C, the international unit tasked with providing intelligence for the most volatile six southern provinces. The prestigious position had been offered to Canada by NATO for the first time just six weeks before, giving the nation a seat at an important table.

Intelligence is vital to military operations in Afghanistan, giving troops on the ground critical information on enemy whereabouts and necessary context for top-level war planners.

It was a high-pressure slot for which Major Mendes had been promoted early to major.

“Did we push her too much? Obviously we did, because of what happened.”

— Colonel Christian Rousseau

That raised eyebrows in the branch, as had other incidents in her stellar career, some of them seen now with the wisdom of hindsight as red flags that she was having trouble coping.

Among them: The breakdown in early 2008 that forced her to quit the critical Army Operations Course that all officers must take to move up the ranks; Eighteen months earlier, Major Mendes had to abandon her first tour to Kandahar after less than two weeks due to a mysterious illness she told friends was never diagnosed; In 2003, despite roaring academic success, she so struggled with battlefield artillery training that she left the trade.

The sum of these parts is that Major Mendes had no field experience whatsoever. She spent her entire career either in academia or cloistered in “the Puzzle Palace,” the soldiers’ nickname for the two concrete towers in Ottawa that are National Defence Headquarters.

With her new big job at the KIF-C, Major Mendes wasn’t working alongside fellow Canadians, with all the comfort that implies, but rather would have been among top NATO intelligence officers in theatre and the second-in-command.

“I think people who she was working for wanted to do her a favour, and off she went to Kandahar,” said a senior intelligence source. “To be suddenly thrust in the middle of something, and be expected to lead, organize, administer, command, direct ... it must have been absolutely terrifying.

“Especially if the people who put you there are saying, ‘Look, she’s going to do a great job.’ “How do you phone them up and say, ‘I can’t do this?’”

That wasn’t in her nature.

RURAL CHILDHOOD

She was a model child – the small-town background in Grafton, Ont., with the wholesomeness that conjures up, from apple-farm playground, Brownies and Girl Guides, church camp, honour-roll student to talented athlete. Major Mendes emerged as a particularly dogged, almost maniacal, multitasking sort of girl.

As her family told The Globe in a lengthy letter responding to an interview request, “She even combined her two passions for reading and fitness by figuring out how to read a book while swimming laps.” They didn’t say how she did this, but rather offered it up as an anecdote of her “typical” rural childhood.

Being sent to Brazil as an exchange student in high school opened her

eyes to the broader world and set her searching for a career where she could "make a difference." That led her to Kingston's Royal Military College, where she met her husband Victor and was introduced to Lieutenant-General (Retired) Roméo Dallaire, thus cementing her "commitment to serving in uniform," her family said.



Peter Cheney/The
Globe and Mail

The Mendes home in Kingston.

Yet Major Mendes came to understand there was a gaping hole on her checklist – a successful deployment.

Junior officers who want to do well always have such a checklist, but with Canada in its sixth year in Afghanistan, a Kandahar tour has become a necessity. The army tribe is divided into those who have gone, and those who haven't: The spoils go to the former.

As the senior intelligence source said, "Baking cookies is nice, and pink cards with flowers on them is absolutely loveable.

"But if you choose the profession of arms, you have to develop the warrior side."

But, before she got her big chance, Major Mendes was sent to take the AOC in early 2008.

This course is so tough that on almost every one, an officer is taken off because of stress.

Students are cautioned not to expect top marks. "That was waving a red flag for Mic," said Captain (Navy) (Retired) Alan Okros, a friend and former mentor. "She was extremely determined and set very high standards for herself in everything she did."

While students normally hunker down in residence at Kingston's Fort Frontenac to focus, for Major Mendes this was a homecoming.

She and her husband Victor, a former pro soccer player she met when he coached her varsity team, had been living apart – she in Ottawa, he in Kingston.

So while her peers were concentrating on their studies, Major Mendes resumed a hectic home life, and, social animal that she was, immersed herself in a busy calendar.

Her time crunch worsened when her husband sustained a career-threatening broken leg in a soccer game in Peterborough. Not only did Major Mendes rush up to retrieve him, but also began ferrying him to physiotherapy.

She had taken on too much, and just weeks into the course, stumbled.

Capt. Okros said she was at home when the incident occurred. "What she described to me was that she got herself to a state of physical and emotional exhaustion, with significant sleep deprivation," he said.

"She told me she had not attempted to take her life, but had choked on vomit, which had aspirated into her lungs, which was life-threatening. I'm not sure if Vic had to actually resuscitate her or just help her with her breathing.... I believe it was touch-and-go for a while."

Now a teacher at the Canadian Forces College in Toronto, Capt. Okros said Major Mendes also told him that part of her difficulty was a reaction to prescription medication that had "slowed down her thinking."

So sharp was she, he joked, "Now you know how the rest of us feel."

"She was extremely determined and set very high standards for herself in everything she did."

— *Captain (Navy) (Retired) Alan Okros, a friend and former mentor*

After being released from hospital, Capt. Okros said, "She did see a civilian therapist and worked on strategies to cope with stress and anxiety so that she didn't push herself to exhaustion again." She was also put on anti-anxiety drugs.

Her immediate superior at NDHQ, Chief of Staff Colonel David Marshall, drove down to Kingston to see her himself, part of what Capt. Okros described as the branch doing "its due diligence. The idea that people were not paying attention is wrong," he said. "It was done quietly, but there was consistent contact."

The powers that be were watching her recovery particularly because she had been felled before.

It was late August of 2006 when Captain Mendes, as she then was, landed in Kandahar to an escalating war and summer heat that transforms outside door handles into scalding hazards.

She'd been given a plum posting as the unit's deputy commanding officer in the All-Source Intelligence Centre, the hub which supplies intelligence to Canadian troops in the field and higher-ups.

But days into the job, Afghan workers building a memorial to fallen Canadian soldiers discovered the petite blonde lying unconscious on a path. They began yelling for help.

"She was literally laying motionless and face down in the gravel," said one soldier who was at the scene.

Medics rushed Capt. Mendes to the base hospital, and there she remained for several days before being airlifted for more testing in Landstuhl, Germany, then home.

"She really hated other people making the decision that she should come back," said Capt. Okros, an industrial psychologist who retired as the director of the Canadian Forces Leadership Institute and first met Major Mendes when she was a student at RMC.

"She desperately wanted to figure out what was wrong with her and to continue. My own view is that she was pushing herself too hard." She told him and others in a group e-mail from Germany that "There's something wrong with my blood, and I'm coming back." Just before her collapse, she had buckled during a sombre nighttime ramp ceremony held on the sweltering airfield tarmac. "She momentarily fainted, but she quickly regained her footing," said a soldier who was at the ceremony. "It happens. Nobody stopped and said, 'Wait - we've got a ...'"

problem here.”

But there were signs Capt. Mendes was overwhelmed.

She specifically said so to a couple of her peers, one of whom told The Globe, “She had the deer-in-the-headlights look in her eyes.”

Until 2006, her only failure on record was at artillery school in Gagetown, N.B., but even that was controversial.

Before she moved to intelligence, she was an artillery officer or “gunner.” But when she went for the final leg of her training – Phase 4 it’s called – she’d been away from the field for 18 months, getting a master’s degree at Carleton University.

Partway through the course, Second Lieutenant Mendes, as she was then, was summoned to a dreaded Progress Review Board, a fate suffered only by failing students. Waiting for the meeting, she saw Captain Kevin Smith, then a warrant officer and instructor and began to “cry uncontrollably.

“But this isn’t what I want to do,” she had told him. “She thought people rated her too high and it was too much pressure, but she hoped people could see she had so much to offer too.”

He told her to be truthful, “and that big grin of hers came on.”

Major Mendes realized by then she wasn’t cut out for artillery, but wanted to finish the course; she wasn’t allowed.

Still, with the help of Capt. Okros and others, she ultimately won a spot at intelligence. As one retired colonel who went to bat for her said to the branch brass, “Why miss the chance at this gem?”

‘A MOMMY FOR EVERYONE’

At NDHQ, Major Mendes got noticed fast, as she always had been. Her potential and enormous capacity for work quickly separated her in the eyes of superiors from the rest of the pack.

That nurturing Martha-Stewart streak saw her regularly bring home-baked cookies and muffins into the Puzzle Palace for her bosses and deliver them homemade greeting cards. Behind her back, peers referred to her as “an office pet.”

For the year leading up to her second deployment to Afghanistan, Major Mendes was working as a staff officer – gatekeeper – for Col. Marshall, the No. 2 guy in intelligence.

The job gave her legitimate special access, but propelled the caretaker quality of her character into overdrive – she even rearranged the items on Col. Marshall’s desk every morning.

Sources close to him suggest she was so overtly maternal that he was almost embarrassed.



Class photo from Advanced Combat Intelligence Course at CF School of Military Intelligence in Kingston in 2003. Maj. Mendes is in the centre, fifth from left.

But as with other senior officers before him, Col. Marshall learned it was wiser to yield to the force of nature that was Michelle Mendes. Padre Major Steve Moore told the story at her funeral of how Col. Marshall asked, "Who is this young captain who is running my life?" before realizing, "It was the best thing I ever did, letting her take over."

"She was a mommy for everybody," Col. Rousseau told The Globe.

But she was not exempt from stereotypical inferences about her relationships with senior officers. As Col. Rousseau said, "That is crap ... she was beautiful. There's no doubt about that. But if she was not performing, she wouldn't have stayed where she was."

Her first big test came when she took a course meant for reservists and aced it – and the next two courses she took, including one in the U.K.

Her job there was really to evaluate the British course, but she "topped" it anyway, Col. Rousseau told The Globe in a telephone interview from Paris, where he is posted at the Canadian embassy.

"You could see right there she had huge [promise]. ... I saw her essentially as a potential future leader of the branch. She could have been a colonel."

Major Mendes had a knack for making friends in high places.

"She got far more high-level attention than a normal RMC grad would get," said a now-retired senior officer who once lobbied for her. But then, he said, she deserved it – she was trilingual (English, French and Portuguese), and she had that marvellous intellect and work ethic.

After she recovered from her AOC collapse, Col. Marshall personally arranged for her to be "attach-posted" to the school of military intelligence in Kingston. Senior sources described this as his kindly "quid pro quo" for her careful care of him.

As a result, she was able to remain in familiar surroundings and start chalking up the successes again.

She completed an army run; check.

She was a successful teacher; check.

She mentored the junior officers and even started studying Arabic; check, check.

"She seemed to have the work/life balance sorted out," the senior

officer said.

In September of last year, though her superiors cautioned her not to rush into it, Major Mendes was offered one of the few intelligence spots at the Army Operations Course, and attacked it again.

Capt. Okros remembered, "It was a completely different experience... She was in the field, practising an assault over a river in rubber rafts, and it was a revelatory minute for her. 'First,' she said, 'if I'm in charge of an assault on a river in rubber rafts, we're in real trouble. Second, I don't have to excel at this stuff. That's not what I do.'"

She was happy with her C-plus, a good sign Capt. Okros thought, because it suggested her quest for perfection was under control. He thought she'd also learned to take what he called "Me time."

Another senior officer said, "I could see the glow back on her face. After her collapse, she had seemed a very tired girl, very unfocused. You could see something was seriously wrong. What I couldn't see was into her head."

She finished the course last December, at which point Col. Marshall offered her another deployment, this time as a captain, in a senior analyst's role, at the KIF-C, the NATO unit. She was hell-bent on going, too. "There was many a junior officer, to her left and her right, who had already gone out the door to Afghanistan," one former superior said. And, as Capt. Okros noted, "If someone had stepped in and said you can't go ... it would have been devastating to her."

Six weeks before she was due to leave, along came the offer of the new seat at the big KIF-C table.

To do it, she would have to be promoted, and it was Col. Marshall, with the blessing of Chief of Defence Intelligence Major-General Matthew Macdonald, who arranged the temporary jump in rank. If she was a logical choice – she stood 18th out of 125 intelligence officers and was on schedule to be promoted this year anyway – she was also, because of her lack of operational experience, a controversial one.

"The reputation of the intelligence branch was on her shoulders," another former colleague said. And Major Mendes knew it; she was at a briefing this spring where the new role was described as just that big.

"I remember turning to a peer," this officer said, "and saying, 'That's the last thing she needs to hear.'"

GOING-AWAY PARTY

Michelle Linda Mendes, nee Knight, threw her own farewell party at the Portuguese Hall in Kingston on April 15.

She made the invitations, of course, with a picture of her and Victor, a pink border and little sparkles. She handed out self-addressed envelopes so people could write her in Kandahar. She had a picture of the building where the KIF-C was located; she brought along her desert camos, with the new major's insignia on the sleeve.

In her speech, she talked of her pride in going, asked people to stay in touch and thanked everyone, weeping when she mentioned her family.

And whenever she addressed the Mendes clan, it was in Portuguese, of course.

"She had that party partly to show she was strong enough," Capt. Okros said. "And she knew folks around her, some of us, were thinking about [the breakdown] and she reassured us in her speech ... it was in her subtle use of words. She was telling us, 'I'm good to go.'"

Her family saw it that way, too.

To their letter, signed by her parents Dan and Diana Knight, sister

in their letter, signed by her parents Ron and Dianne Knight, sister Melissa and husband Victor, they said, "We ... remain confident that the Canadian Forces exercised all of its responsibilities in selecting and preparing Mic for her deployment.

"...you are seeking a rational explanation for an irrational act and have decided to portray a vulnerable person pushed into crisis," they wrote.

Capt. Okros got e-mails from her when she stopped en route to Afghanistan, and again when she landed in Kandahar: Everything was fine.

But for those superiors she had promised to e-mail, there was only silence. "I remember realizing I hadn't heard from her," one of them said, "and thinking, 'That's not like her.'"

Days later, word of her death came in the various ways that such news travels in the military.

Major Helga Grodzinski, a former mentor at RMC, saw Major Mendes's face on a giant TV screen and literally fell to her knees. Capt. Smith saw it on the news in Ottawa: "It was really a blow.... I'd hoped against hope she hadn't committed suicide, and it might have been a result of training too hard or something like that." A former colleague said, "I remember thinking to myself and telling others that the branch was going to break Michelle. I never imagined she would take her own life."

"You cannot believe how she was a star," Col. Rousseau remembered. "I guess we always abuse the good people, in a certain way, because they're so good, it's always easy to rely on them. And I guess they don't want to disappoint the people around them. So they put a lot of pressure on themselves. They hide it very well.

"Michelle, at the end, only knows why she did it."

Al Okros said once that "at the core of Mic was grit," but there was something else too, something softer, and in places where no one could see, she came undone.

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