



WEBNEWS

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Remembrance Service at Trinity Village Care Centre



Nov 10th, 2007

A service of Remembrance was held on Saturday, November 10, 2007 at Trinity Village Care Centre.

Padre Joan Lee officiated, Dave Davidson, Branch 50 President gave the Remembrance Address, Cadet John Jacobs and his father, Cadet Leader Gerry Jacobs read "In Flanders Fields", and Caleb Hallman, Eastwood Secondary School, played 'The Last Post and Reveille' on his bugle.

Staff members and Residents of Trinity Village Care Centre also participated in the annual Remembrance Service.

Sunday, November 11, 2007
Gloria McKibbin, PRO
Section: Executive

Relatives of fallen soldiers visit Kandahar base



Gaetan Dallaire, whose son Kevin died a year ago, chats with a soldier upon arrival at Kandhar Air Field Saturday.

Family members of five fallen soldiers arrived at Kandahar Air Field aboard a C-130 Hercules transport plane on Saturday to tour the Canadian base in southern Afghanistan and mark Remembrance Day.

They came to remember Pte. Kevin Dallaire of Calgary, Cpl. Matthew Dinning of Richmond Hill, Ont., Cpl. Christopher Reid of Truro, N.S., Cpl. Jason Warren of Montreal and Chief Warrant Officer Robert Girouard of Bathurst, N.B.

The eight Canadians wore helmets and flak jackets as they chatted with soldiers on a tour led by Commodore Paul Maddison, who said the families wanted to see the country where their loved ones served and died.

"These folks are seven parents of four of the fallen and one widow of one of the fallen who asked Gen. [Rick] Hillier if they could come here to Kandahar,

perhaps in and around Remembrance Day, to be close to where their sons and their husband last lived," Maddison said.

The families of the fallen soldiers also stopped by a memorial bearing the names of the 71 Canadians who have lost their lives since the combat mission against Taliban fighters began in 2002.

A ceremony at the memorial will be held on Sunday to mark Remembrance Day.

Maddison said the plan to bring the group to Afghanistan had been in the works for a few months at the request of Hillier, Canada's Chief of Defence Staff.

"They've known for a while they were coming here. I think now that they're here this is just a very personal, deep moment for them to finally arrive here," he told CBC News.

The five soldiers were all killed last year.

Pte. Dallaire, 22, and Cpl. Reid, 34, both died when their LAV armoured vehicle struck a roadside bomb. In a separate incident, the same kind of explosion killed Cpl. Dinning, 23, and four Canadian soldiers travelling in a G-wagon. Cpl. Warren, 29, and another soldier were killed when their Bison was struck by a suicide bomber.

Chief Warrant Officer Robert Girouard, 46, whose widow is visiting the base, died when a suicide bomber drove his vehicle into a Canadian military convoy.

Remembrance Day traditionally marks the end of the First World War in 1918, at the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month.

But it now stands for the more than 100,000 dead of all of Canada's wars, including the one being fought in Afghanistan.

Sunday, November 11, 2007
Bill Graveland, Canadian Press
Section: Afghanistan

Soldiers mark Remembrance Day in Afghanistan



The families of five Canadian soldiers killed in action last year spent Remembrance Day in Afghanistan, attending a ceremony at Kandahar Air Field.

"Remembrance Day is a time to give thanks not only to our fallen soldiers, but also to give thanks to our serving members," Lincoln Dinning told the assembled troops Sunday.

"We know you're doing good work. We support you and the mission 100 per cent. Come home safe and, from our family to you and yours, a great big thank you."

Lincoln Dinning's son -- Cpl. Matthew Dinning, 23 -- was killed by a roadside bomb in April 2006, along with three other Canadian soldiers.

Addressing both Canadian soldiers around the world and the more than 2,000 serving in Afghanistan, Dinning said it was important for the mourning families to show their support.

As Canadian and Afghan soldiers stood at attention, the family members laid wreaths at a memorial for the 71 soldiers who have been killed in Afghanistan.

Families who had lost loved ones shed tears alongside many of the soldiers who had lost friends and comrades as well.

Angela Reid, whose son Christopher died in Afghanistan last year, said she had a "thirst" to learn more about her son's life while serving in the country.

U.S. soldiers in Afghanistan are also marking their Veteran's Day ceremony.

At 11 a.m. on the 11th day of the 11th month in Canada, ceremonies across Canada will pause in silence to remember the more than 100,000 Canadians who have given their lives fighting for freedom and peace.

The largest Remembrance ceremony

will be held at the National War Memorial in Ottawa, where Governor General Michaëlle Jean will pay tribute to this year's National Silver Cross Mother.

Wilhelmina Beerenfenger-Koehler, from Embrun, Ont., was named this year's honoree by the Royal Canadian Legion. Her son, Cpl. Robbie Christopher Beerenfenger, was killed by a road-side bomb in Afghanistan on Oct. 3, 2003.

Sunday, November 11, 2007
CTV.ca News Staff
Section: Afghanistan

Tribute marks 90th anniversary of Passchendaele



PASSCHENDAELE, Belgium -- Federal Industry Minister Jim Prentice led a Canadian tribute and personal pilgrimage to the site of one of the First World War's bloodiest battles.

Accompanied by his wife, Karen, Prentice placed a photo of his great-uncle, Pte. Roy Urquhart, at the foot of a Canadian memorial on a ridge overlooking the Belgian village of Passchendaele on Saturday.

Urquhart fought and died during the opening hours of the Canadian offensive, on Oct. 26, 1917, which led to the end of the Passchendaele combat. He was 22 when he died.

The Battle of Passchendaele, which ended 90 years ago this weekend with the capture of a small village church, left 500,000 soldiers from Britain, Canada, Australia and New Zealand dead, wounded or missing.

Canadian troops ultimately succeeded where other Allied forces failed. They seized the Passchendaele Ridge and the nearby village of Passchendaele on Nov. 6, 1917, at a cost of 16,000 casualties, including more than 4,000 killed.

At the end, only eight kilometres of land had been gained. But the battle helped end the war by depleting German troop and machinery reserves.

Prentice stood near the spot where he believes his great uncle was killed, trying to reach a ridge where German machine guns cut down thousands of Commonwealth troops.

"He died in the opening hours of the battle and his body was never recovered," Prentice said in an interview.

"It's a remarkable story. The Canadians rise out of the trenches and march essentially up this hill and suffer 16,000 casualties in 10 days to capture this ridge that no one else was able to capture, and they do so under horrific circumstances ... marching essentially directly into the machine-gun fire."

From the time he was a small boy, Prentice had seen Urquhart's picture on the mantel at his grandmother's house.

"It's an important part of who I am," he said. "It's extremely emotional."

His uncle's name is listed among the 55,000 missing soldiers engraved on the walls of the arched limestone Menen Gate war memorial in nearby Leper, better known to the soldiers by its French name, Ypres.

A further 35,000 names of the missing are listed on memorial walls at the Tyne Cot military cemetery, which contains 12,000 graves -- the largest Commonwealth military burial site in the world.

Prentice and other Canadian officials unveiled a plaque at the memorial to mark the 90th anniversary of the end of the battle, which has also been commemorated by other Commonwealth leaders this year, including the Queen.

Experts believe 100,000 soldiers, including Canadians, remain unaccounted for.

Many of the 200,000 people who visit the 150 war cemeteries dotting Flanders Fields each year come to look for relatives with no known graves.

Officials anticipated more than 10,000 visitors this weekend.

Sunday, November 11, 2007
The Associated Press
Section: Veterans

Remembrance Day



OTTAWA

Canadians laid wreaths to honour those killed in battle and on peacekeeping missions at Remembrance Day ceremonies across the country Sunday.

An estimated crowd of 30,000 gathered under sunny skies at the National War Memorial in Ottawa.

Gov. Gen. Michaëlle Jean and Prime Minister Stephen Harper joined a host of dignitaries and veterans at the ceremonies across the street from the Parliament Buildings.

Both Jean and Harper laid wreaths before the throng of onlookers, which included one woman who held up a small sign with the words "thank you."

Members of the Ottawa Children's Choir, all dressed in red, sang "O Canada."

In his prayer, the military's Chaplain General, Brig Gen. Stanley Johnstone, noted Canada has been shaped by the sacrifices Canadians made in battles like Vimy Ridge in the First World War and Dieppe and Normandy in the Second World War.

"May the memory be forever strong of those who preceded us in wars past and may their own courage and readiness of spirit to secure our future and our world for a greater hope be also known and taught among us," Johnstone told a hushed audience.

In the footsteps of those who gave their lives in wars past, sacrifices are still necessary today in places like

Afghanistan in order to preserve peace and protect our way of life, Johnstone added.

"We are paying our own debt for the future of our children with bravery and determination that befits the duty, but never with exaltation," he said.

Afghanistan's ambassador to Canada, Omar Samad, was another one of the dignitaries who laid a wreath bearing his country's name at the base of the monument.

Calling the military mission in Afghanistan a "very noble cause," Samad said he and the Afghan people would remember the 71 Canadians who have died in the war-torn country.

"Afghanistan is a country that has suffered tremendously over the last 25 years. We have lost more than a million people as part of conflict. We have a very destroyed nation where millions of others had to flee their homes, many of whom have now returned and come back because they see there's hope for Afghanistan and there's a future for Afghanistan," he said.

During the ceremony, Rabbi Reuven Bulka, the honorary chaplain for the Dominion Command urged the crowd to chant "We love our troops."

Canada's top soldier, Gen. Rick Hillier, wasn't able to hide a wide grin as a smattering of applause snowballed into a thunderous ovation.

Later, in an interview, Hillier said the ceremony would be remembered for the reception that Bulka's line received.

"I think today, in particular, is going to be remembered for that line, which signifies in my view a coming awareness, a growing, increasing and now culminating awareness by Canadians of what their men and women in uniform do in service for them," he said.

When asked if he'd ever seen anything like Sunday's ceremony, Hillier replied, "Not in this country, that's for sure."

Opposition leaders were also on hand to pay their respects.

Both Liberal Leader Stephane Dion and New Democrat Leader Jack

Layton said that while their parties' views on the mission differ from the Conservatives', they're grateful for the troops' efforts abroad.

"We support our troops, we love our troops we have different views about how it should be managed, what should be the deadline to say that the combat mission is over. We have different views, but we are all Canadians today and we all love our troops," Dion said.

"They face a lot of difficult times, and they're willing to sacrifice for us. Our job is to make sure we decide what we ask them to do very, very carefully," added Layton.

In Halifax, several hundred people filled the space in front of the downtown cenotaph.

Charlotte Smith, whose son Private Nathan Lloyd Smith was killed in a friendly fire incident Afghanistan in 2002, was greeted by applause as she laid a wreath on behalf of all Silver Cross mothers.

In Saint John, N.B., that honour went to Laurie Greenslade, whose son, David, was killed by a roadside bomb in Afghanistan on Easter Sunday. She has been outspoken in her support for Canada's troops.

Defence Minister Peter MacKay told hundreds of people attending a rally Saturday in Shelburne, N.S., that Canadians are making a difference in the lives of Afghans

Monday, November 12, 2007
THE CANADIAN PRESS
Section: Poppy Campaign

In Memoriam - Edna Mohr



We are sorry to announce the death of Comrade Judy Morgenroth's Mother, Edna Mohr.

Edna passed away in the People-Care Health Care Centre in Tavistock on Friday, November 9, 2007.

The Funeral Service was held on Tuesday, November 13 in the Francis Funeral Home in Tavistock.

Tuesday, November 13, 2007
Vivian Peddle
Section: Births Deaths and Marriages

Please Check Your Coins

We have been receiving tokens and foreign coins from members instead of Canadian legal tender, so please check your coins when paying at the bar. This will speed up service for all.

Tuesday, November 13, 2007
Gerry DeVost, Chief Steward
Section: Canteen

Remembrance Day A Success



Hundreds of legionnaires visited Branch 50, following the Remembrance Day parade and wreath laying ceremony. Patrons were treated to an assortment of "homemade stews".

Many guests were quite touched by the display of thank you posters provided by Grade 4 children.

Howie Johannes provided music from 2 p.m. to 6 p.m. and a surprise visit from the piper corp was a real treat.

Wednesday, November 14, 2007
Gloria McKibbin, PRO
Section: Poppy Campaign

A very ordinary school... in Afghanistan



As part of a reconstruction and security activity, members of A Squadron, Battle Group visited a small school in the Spin Boldak district to distribute a few hundred school bags to students. Led by Major Pierre Huet, CF members gave out backpacks, pencils, notebooks and pencil cases to some 200 young Afghans. This was a happy surprise for children of all ages, all the more welcome because they have so very few school supplies, if any at all.

This school is different from those we see in North America; it provides instruction to about 300 boys and only 70 girls, who study in a separate wing. Classrooms are very small and modest. The paint on the walls is peeling and, even though the roof provides protection for the children, it also serves as a shelter for all kinds of birds. The only thing the building contains is a few desks and benches and a small chalkboard on the wall. In some rooms, children sit on the floor because there is no furniture. Classes, on subjects like Pushto, mathematics and religion, are only taught in the mornings, for 10-day periods, and Friday being a day off.

The purpose of the squadron's visit was mainly to distribute school bags, and to take stock of the school and the

surrounding area. To gain the trust of the people, the CF has to ensure their security. Less than a year ago, a bombing forced the school to close. Terrorists, in their efforts to kill teachers, destroyed one side of the building. Due to a lack of funds, the hole caused by the explosion still has not been repaired, so Civil-Military Cooperation (CIMIC) personnel will visit the school in the near future to assess the damage and make the necessary repairs.

School bombings are frequent in southern Afghanistan, which makes it difficult for the government to find teachers willing to work in conditions where they are regularly targeted, most notably because they teach girls. Unfortunately, the intimidation tactics are working, because there are currently very few teachers in the Spin Boldak schools.

A Squadron's visit to the school will help to stabilize the life of the children and teachers in the area.

Friday, November 16, 2007
Capt Catherine Larose - The Maple Leaf
Section: Afghanistan

A Soldier's Diary from Afghanistan : Part 1



Cpl. Brian Sanders joined the Canadian Forces 11 years ago while he was in college. Shortly after, he decided to become a full-time soldier and joined the Lord Strathcona's Horse (Royal Canadians) regiment. The 29-year-old native of Strathroy, Ont., has served in Kosovo and Bosnia. He is currently on duty in Kandahar, Afghanistan, where he drives an armoured ambulance.

March 13, 2006: Hoping for a good day with Sarah by my side

Not a good day today!

Outside over inside, outside over inside. Eleven years since basic training and every day starts the same. How to lace boots was a 45-minute lecture, and here I am 29 years old, halfway around the world, putting on my boots, reminiscing about that very day.

What a horrible sleep I had last night. Every hour I was up to the sound of snoring, and the occasional mumbling, coming from my fellow soldiers. God I miss my bed back home. Regardless of my lack of sleep, there is no "sleeping in" here. I grab my shower gear, walk out to the nearest pallet of bottled water and step out into this new world that I call home. Afghanistan.

I make my short journey to the showers, shave my face, brush my teeth, wondering what today has to offer. You don't really get much time to reflect on days gone by. You are always focused on this day. You never know what is going to happen in this country. Crap, my toothbrush fell on the floor.... Guess I have to buy a new one today. I don't trust anything on any floor over here. Oh well, off to see my baby... my Bison ambulance. My primary job over here is Sarah, the armoured ambulance I drive. I named her that because I have never met a Sarah I didn't like. She takes care of me too, as long as I take care of her. Every morning, I come out and see how she is doing, and make sure that she will be 100 per cent whenever we need her.

After a quick once over, it's off to breakfast. One thing I learned after being in this country for a month is to never turn down a meal. You are never guaranteed your next one. Just a few days ago at this time, I didn't even get my first bite before we were called out to the scene of a suicide bomber, who rammed his car full of explosives into the side of one of our LAVs (Light Armoured Vehicle).

Damn, now I am thinking about it again. What a scene of chaos. Twisted pieces of charred metal scattered in all directions. I will never forget the lifeless body of that suicide bomber who lay next to his smouldering engine block of his doomed vehicle. I can't help to think about the fact that this guy intentionally tried to kill us. His mission was to kill himself with the hope of killing one of us. He failed his mission. I remember a sergeant coming to me on the scene saying, "It's a good day today, none of our guys dead." Funny, I never thought that this is what I would picture a good day as being.

Anyway, enough daydreaming for one day. I wolf down breakfast and head to the UMS (Unit Medical Station) for orders. Not even two steps out the door to the mess, a scene of panic unfolds. All the guys are loading weapons and running to their vehicles. What is it today? I quickly load my side arm and run to Sarah. Ignition, engine stop, start. Comms check. It is all working. I ramp down and make sure my medics are in and ready to roll. The radio is jammed with chatter beginning to paint the picture of the scene I am about to see. My crew commander runs over and jumps in, "Follow him."

As I race through the streets of Kandahar, all I think about is how bad it is going to be this time. I swerve to miss vehicle after vehicle, driving like I was a stunt driver in a movie. After what seems like seconds, we arrive on a new scene of horror. A vehicle accident. One of our vehicles was cut off by an impatient vehicle and resulted in a horrific rollover. "Hey sergeant, is it a good day today?" He shakes his head no, and my stomach turns.

Two choppers lift off and fly into the sandy horizon. Four patients are being tended to by our medics. Before too long, we are on our way back to camp so they can be treated properly. Hours later, news slowly starts coming in. "We lost a brother... (another one died of his injuries days later). There is nothing we could do."

The camp is silent. No one shows up for supper. The phone room, which is usually crammed with soldiers talking to loved ones, is empty. Computer-animated soldiers and tanks in the gaming room lie silent, almost as if they were paying respects to our fallen heroes as much as we are. The sun slowly tucks itself behind the distant mountains as I go to my favourite hiding place to unwind. I light up a smoke and take a big sigh. Well Sarah, let's hope for a good day tomorrow.

Friday, November 16, 2007
Cpl Brian Sanders
Section: Afghanistan

A Soldier's Diary from Afghanistan : Part 2



April 3, 2006: Where the streets have no name ... or rules

When you turn 16 in Canada, the first thing on your mind is getting your driver's licence. That little piece of plastic grants you freedom to go and do whatever you want. It's the only test that makes you stay awake at night studying so you can pass with flying colours.

The driving rules are a little different when you're navigating a 13-tonne armoured ambulance along roads in Afghanistan, while constantly watching for suicide bombers and rocket-propelled grenades. And those rules must be followed not only for safe driving, but to save your life.

Let me paint you a little picture. The southern Afghan city of Kandahar, where the bulk of Canadian troops are stationed, has about one million people. There are no highrises, or freeways ... just dirt, and lots of it. The buildings look like sandcastles made at a beach during summer holidays. The smell of human waste lingers everywhere because there are no sewer systems. To top it all off, the streets are about the size of bike paths.

This brings me back to driving. Let's review a few rules:

Number 1: In Canada, we have lanes. In fact, some highways have four, eight, 12, even 20 lanes, all paved with those Pac-Man dots separating each one. Speed limits are posted. Intersections have stop signs and lights to ensure safe driving by all. However, Kandahar's streets are equipped with one lane, made of dirt. No dots separate directions of traffic and intersections are clearly marked – with absolutely nothing.

Number 2: Roads in Canada are designed for vehicles. All vehicles

pass various inspections to ensure they are safe for the road, and various checkstops are in place to inspect larger trucks on highways. On Kandahar's roads, though, you'll see much more than cars: donkeys toting carts, bicyclists pedalling aimlessly, flocks of sheep running rampant with shepherds close behind, huge "jingle trucks" transporting very top-heavy loads of cargo through the maze of streets and little tiny one-seater vehicles that resemble motorized ice-cream carts. Moreover, none of these vehicles are required to pass any sort of inspection. If the vehicle runs, it is fit for the road.

Now let's talk about my personal favourite, Number 3: I waited 16 years to get my freedom card, yes, the driver's licence. I passed on the first time I took the test. I had a little difficulty with parallel parking, but that's what parking lots are for. In Kandahar, there's only one requirement before you can drive a vehicle – you have to be able to reach the pedals. Everything else you learn through "On the Road" training. So kids as young as 13 enjoy the freedom of mobility, with no driving test to endure.

This brings me to rule Number 4: When I finally did receive my freedom card, and a worthy vehicle for the road, I learned very quickly about insurance. My personal thoughts about the prices of insurance are not relevant here, but the very fact of having insurance in case of damage or injury is comforting. In Kandahar, not only can you drive a vehicle at 13, but you can do so without the heavy burden of monthly insurance payments. Accidents are very common here, but if your vehicle can still drive after the bump – there is no problem.

Finally, Rule Number 5: We have the luxury in Canada of little chunks of spaces called parking spots. They are strategically placed to ensure you are well out of the way of moving traffic. For a small fee, they're yours for an hour. Once again, in Kandahar, this isn't the case. If you can find a spot at the side of the road, middle of the road or even across the road, go ahead and park. All other vehicles will manage to get around you. Stay there

as long as you want, five minutes or even five days – it doesn't matter here.

Now that you have learned the driving rules of Kandahar, let's bring the army back into the picture.

As soldiers in Taliban country, we have to be suspicious about everything. We're always under threat from enemies and, in the past month or so, have seen both suicide bombers and rocket-propelled grenade attacks. Navigating a 13-tonne vehicle while keeping these threats in mind makes it very difficult to be the friendly Canadian drivers we are. (...Well, except maybe in Toronto.) Speed is our protection against roadside bombs and grenade attacks, while warning shots are sometimes our protection against suicide bombers. Very specific rules of engagements must be met in order for us to consider a vehicle to be a suicide bomber and everything is taken into consideration before a single round is shot.

I know one thing for sure. The next time I'm back in Canada and driving down the Yellowhead Trail and a car swerves into my lane and nearly takes out my front bumper – I am just going to smile and wave. Because I will know he is not a suicide bomber. And by looking at my radar detector, I'll also know that the cop ahead is going to give him a speeding ticket.

Friday, November 16, 2007
Cpl. Brian Sanders
Section: Afghanistan

A Soldier's Diary from Afghanistan : Part 3



May 18, 2006: A holiday from war

In Afghanistan, there are many trades employed within the Forces. We have the infantry who sweat all day carrying their equipment through the roughest terrain anyone has ever seen; engineers, who everyday can be seen disarming improvised explosive devices, and clearing obstacles for easier movement; armoured guys, driving their eight-wheeled recce

vehicles, providing information on the battlefield ahead; and medics, fixing and repairing injuries sustained on the battlefield. As different as all of these trades are, we all share two things: a common goal (get rid of the Taliban), and something called HLTA.

HLTA is an acronym for Home Leave Travel Assistance. To us soldiers, it's a three-week vacation away from the sweaty, smelly lives we lead in the sweltering lands of the desert. Canadian soldiers are the envy of the world when it comes to HLTA. Canada is the only country I know of that offers a three-week pause in the war to allow soldiers to once again embrace loved ones at home or abroad. A sum of money is allocated to each soldier, to either go home and see family, or have a member of your family meet you in a third location.

Your HLTA begins about two weeks before your actual departure date. It starts in your mind. You can't help but think that in 14 days you are going to be home amongst friends and family, enjoying your time watching Edmonton slaughter Detroit in the first round of the playoffs, or seeing your girlfriend on the beaches of Cancun. At this point it's a fantasy, and all you can do is focus on the job at hand, praying the days go by quickly.

The day before your departure date things seem more real as you start packing up for your journey. I always forget my toothbrush, so this time I made sure I packed two. The day of departure, you are overwhelmed with briefings and clearing-out procedures. Everybody, it seems, in the army needs to have something signed showing that you are leaving the battle. It's not a bother to us, because we are going home, and won't see their smiling faces for another three weeks.

The next part of our journey sees about 60 guys crammed onto one of our Hercs. A Herc is a multipurpose plane that carries both passengers and cargo. Let me tell you this: it's designed more for cargo than passengers. A 45-minute combat flight out of the desert, tests the body's limits, especially its ability to keep down dinner and a box lunch from only hours ago. After what seems like forever experiencing positive and negative "Gs", we bolt into the air

enduring another three hours of flight, at a more comfortable altitude, to our staging base.

Once arriving at the staging base, a flurry of activity takes place. Weapons are turned in to the Company Quarter Masters, and the rest of our equipment and luggage is hauled to rooms where we will be spending the next few hours. After a quick meal, and some Graval to settle the stomach, we are rushed to another briefing, this time, to inform us of our flight times. It's hard to express the feeling you get when your name is announced and you are presented with your itinerary. At this point it is real, and you can start counting the hours to when you land at your final destination. For me, it's Edmonton, 36 hours 15 minutes and 20 seconds to go.

The next part of the journey home sees about 30 full-sized Canadian men packed on a bus designed to carry 20 short, skinny men. If there is one thing I've learned about the Middle East, it's that everyone here is short and skinny, and his or her mode of transportation is designed as such. It's about a 45-minute drive to the city airport and all of us use this time to snooze or listen to our favorite music on the MP3 player. Before too long, I find myself standing in front of the departure schedule: Amsterdam, Gate 61. Six hours later, I am looking at a Dutch board: Minneapolis, Gate 13. Twelve hours after that, I see: Edmonton, Gate 36. Finally, after 36 hours 15 minutes and 20 seconds I am here... Edmonton.

Now I can't speak for everyone, because we all share a different HLTA experience, but I will tell you this: three weeks spent at home, in the middle of a tour, is an unreal experience. One thing a soldier misses most when overseas is a fully functional washroom, complete with bathtub, porcelain toilet, and a sink that spews out fresh drinkable water. During my three weeks of leave, I enjoyed freshly home-cooked meals at various friends houses, smashing into cars at the local go-cart track, and watching Edmonton deliver a means of destruction to the Detroit Red Wings... Go Oil Go...

I think the hardest thing to get used to

is the fact that you are not in Afghanistan. For the past three months, I have navigated through Afghanistan with two weapons, a lot of bullets, and personal protective equipment to keep me safe. Now back in Edmonton, I feel naked without all my gear. It's just a psychological thing, and the thought of it only lasts for a few seconds.

Within a blink of an eye it seems, I am once again saying goodbye to friends and family. It will be another three months before I see Edmonton again. Hopefully, when I come back, I can say I am going home to see Lord Stanley's Cup sitting in our Oilers locker room.

Go Oil Go!

Friday, November 16, 2007
Cpl. Brian Sanders
Section: Afghanistan

A Soldier's Diary from Afghanistan : Part 4



June 21, 2006: Not enough help for everyone in Afghanistan

It's 4 a.m., an early start to the day. My body can't help but shiver uncontrollably as I lift the blanket because it's a frigid 30 C.

To some in Canada, that is a sweltering day, but for me it's a chilly day in the desert. The evening before, we receive orders that we will be conducting a village medical outreach in a small village called Maywan.

This is my first one, and it promises to be a long day. As I sit eating my runny eggs and toast, I am informed that today will be sweltering.

5 a.m.: I prepare my ambulance for the four-hour drive through the sun-parched desert. After spending 20 minutes ensuring my vehicle will survive the day, I grab eight cases of water and store them in a compartment in the back. I hope that

is enough to keep us from getting dehydrated.

Within a half an hour, my medics load their kit up with donated supplies from Canada: painkillers, and mostly stuff to treat basic illness like the common cough. For a couple of these medics, it's the first time they have been outside the wire since they have been here.

6 a.m.: Time for orders. We get a road briefing from the convoy commander explaining the details to and from the village. He is in charge of bringing us from point A to point B safely.

In the orders, we are told in detail about every possible "what if" that could happen, and what we are going to do about it. "All right, guys, we leave in 15 minutes," he yells, "let's have a safe one."

We return to our vehicle. The medics cram into the back of the already-packed ambulance, and our signaler crawls out of the air sentry hatch, rifle armed and ready for business. This is his first time out as well. He will be covering our rear and is keen on seeing the countryside.

7 a.m.: Guards at the front gate give us a thumbs up as we leave the comfort of our wire. I give a bastardized salute, signalling them I will be back safe soon. We scream onto the highway, immediately demanding the road from the locals who try to weave in and out of our convoy. As I mentioned in earlier entries, this is our road, and the only way to stay safe from insurgents is to own the road.

Two hours into the trip, signs of Taliban are present. Stones stacked in three are a tell-tale sign that mines litter the sides of the road. There are no signs of people anywhere, just a few camels in the distant sand dunes, and some dead animals, an unfortunate side effect of an anti-tank mine.

Thirty minutes from our destination signs of life appear, little mud castles and small, curious children running to the road to see what these big green beasts rolling into their village are up to. Some children give us the thumbs up, while others give us a different finger and whip a rock in disgust. You can't blame them, their knowledge of

us comes from their parents, and from the influence of the Taliban.

11 a.m.: We roll into a makeshift medical facility built by Canadians. Just as we are ready to set up, a local doctor runs out and tells us not to do so.

He explains that the last time the Canadians set up here the area was bombed by the Taliban the next day. They plea for us not to stay, and we are left alone with a brisk close of the door.

Change of plans. We move to set up at the Afghan National Police headquarters just down the road. As we enter the compound we are welcomed by guards carrying AK-47 rifles.

We unload medical equipment and supplies, as well as a shelter so women can be seen by our female medical staff. In the corner of the compound our civil military co-op team sets up an area with teddy bears, candy and hand-cranked transistor radios.

Our interpreter takes his horn announces to all that can hear that the Canadians are here to see the sick and the wounded. Within minutes the front gate is lined with children, men and women of all ages seeking what little help we can offer.

The compound is quickly filled with women wearing colourful burkas and with robed men. The people have everything ranging from minor cuts and bruises to gaping wounds and diseases that I can't even pronounce. One man is rushed in missing the entire back end of his leg, and is bleeding profusely after being bitten by a dog.

Our doctor keeps a close eye on a local doctor in training as he stitches the two 12-inch wounds. The old man doesn't even wince.

An hour later my doctor wants me to have a look at a girl who was brought in by her brother in a wheel-barrow.

The doctor was reminded of young Neimatuula. My church was able to raise funds for him to cure a disfiguring cancer on his face. He later died, due to complications with chemotherapy. Because of the

outpouring of generosity from my church and from Canadians, we had funds leftover to help other children like him.

I am brought to a burned-out makeshift hospital room where an eight-year-old girl wearing a torn dress sits in the wheel-barrow. The doctor explains to me that the girl was burned in the foot when she was four, and her foot never healed.

When he pulls back her dress a pussy mass of flesh surrounded by flies is revealed. The fleshy disfiguration is as big as her head. The stench is almost unbearable. I can't imagine the pain she is experiencing. For more than four years this beautiful, brave girl has lived with her disfigured foot and the agonizing pain.

The doctor explains that it needs to be amputated if she is to survive. It would cost about \$600 US to have it done, and wanted to know if my church could take an active role in this.

Thinking of my church and the numerous things we have done around the world, including the overwhelming support for Neimatuula, I accept the project on behalf of the congregation.

Her brother tells us where they live, and we promise that an ambulance will pick her up the next day. She now waits in a Kandahar hospital for B positive blood, which, if still needed, I will donate myself when I'm back from my current operation.

3 p.m.: We begin running low on supplies and announce to the locals that we will be closing up. Many children and families have to be turned away, while others already seen by doctors stand by a wall playing with their new-found toys and sharing supplies such as shampoo, blankets and painkillers with other families not so fortunate. It's amazing how this culture works. Everyone takes care of everyone else.

4 p.m.: We begin packing up and loading our vehicles, while donating the remaining supplies and some equipment to the Afghan National Police. It was a feel-good day, but on the other side of the coin a disappointment. So many were not seen.

In a country so desperate for any help, there just simply isn't enough for everyone. The world we live in is so blind to how so many innocent people live. I wish everyone could see, hear and smell the pain that lives here.

Friday, November 16, 2007
Cpl. Brian Sanders
Section: Afghanistan

A Soldier's Diary from Afghanistan : Part 5



July 12, 2006: Up close and personal with the enemy

Well, my search is finally over. I have found nowhere, a place where the population at present is 35. About eight hours north of Kandahar airfield is a little place that is deep in the mountains. It's a place where few Coalition forces have explored. It features rough mountain terrain that is riddled with tunnels and is an excellent hiding place for Taliban and al-Qaeda insurgents.

Through the valleys of the mountains small streams flow, offering life to apple trees and the occasional poppy field — some of Afghanistan's popular resources. This fertile terrain also makes it easy to bury landmines and other improvised explosive devices.

A promise of a five-day operation has now turned into 14 days of harsh living. Burning barrels fill the air with an odd smell — diesel fuel mixed with human waste.

It is a far cry from the porcelain toilets that wait for us back home in Canada. A makeshift shelter offers little privacy from the local Afghans if a person wants to have a lukewarm shower with water scooped up in a can from a nearby stream used for irrigation.

With our natural reaction to remain clean, two small basins and a washboard are propped on the other side of the shower to wash clothes, all in the same water from that stream.

Surrounding our camp are armoured vehicles, providing lethal protection from insurgents. A few kilometres

away, more support stands by, if required, in the shape of artillery, which is available at a moment's notice.

Our days are filled with numerous activities. On a daily basis, sections of infantry explore the vast mountain range, searching for enemy strongholds and storage areas that may contain weapons. Midday patrols in the 50 C heat are challenging for even the toughest soldier, especially when you are carrying protective equipment, weapons and bullets.

But our well-trained soldiers are here to do a job, and no obstacles will stop them from that.

Always something happening

A couple of nights ago, the section returned with news of a compound overlooking our position.

Being an armoured soldier and having experience on the chain gun mounted to the turret of our light armoured vehicles, I was asked if I would like to destroy the target.

I accepted the invitation, and after 30 rounds, and a rush of high-explosive adrenaline, the target was swiftly destroyed.

The next day started early. Again the "frigid" temperatures of 25 C woke me at around 5 a.m. Supplies have been running low here, and resorting to a cold ration pack was the only way to get my breakfast into me.

Later, over the radio, we learned a convoy would be coming in to replace us. A Company was mounted up to provide security for the guys coming in.

The remaining soldiers back at the platoon house started packing their belongings. They were finally going back to Kandahar airfield to relax for a couple of days.

I had only been out here for two weeks, but some of the soldiers here have been around for three months. Morale was at an all-time high, though. Everyone was talking about how they would enjoy their shower upon returning to the airfield, while others just wanted to get online to talk to their loved ones.

All of a sudden there was a

commotion up at the observation post.

"Sarge, contact coming in."

We dropped everything, and could feel the adrenaline rush. Seven of us huddled within earshot of the radio, listening closely.

Our guys have spotted two Taliban fighters with a pickaxe, shovel, and a big silver box. Our guys were in pursuit. The sarge explained in a very calm voice over the radio, "Capture these guys in a very safe manner."

All of us remembered all too well what happened only a week ago. Stacked anti-tank mines attached to an improvised device destroyed one of our LAV-3 vehicles, injuring six of the platoon's closest friends.

After what seemed like hours, a voice came on the airwaves.

"One of them got away, sarge, and the other is trapped somewhere in the valley. We found a cave as well. He might be in there."

More tense moments, and then this: "We got one, and he has admitted to planting mines."

A sigh of relief overwhelmed everybody back at base camp.

"Good job guys, bring him in."

Meanwhile, the rest of the patrol was able to uncover three stacked anti-tank mines attached to a remote device. It was a huge victory for us, and allowed the safe passing of our replacement convoy.

The prisoner was taken in to our compound for questioning. We have been trained in taking prisoners of war and instructed on how to treat them according to the Geneva Convention.

For me, it was an experience I will not soon forget. Blindfolded and cuffed, the prisoner was given a medical once over, fed, and questioned. He was then given a comfortable place to rest for the night.

Unfortunately, it was too late for us to leave that night, so we enjoyed the company of our replacements that evening, sharing stories of what we have been up to, and what we have seen this far during the tour. Canadian-made cigarettes, a hard thing to come by out here, were passed around, and

the night slowly came to a close.

Or so I thought.

About 11 p.m. I awoke to the call of my name.

"Get the ambulance prepped in the back, and bring me a backboard."

Still confused, and groggy, I stumbled to the ambulance and did what I was ordered. When I arrived with the backboard, I found a semi-conscious interpreter on the ground. He had been bitten by what we think was a viper.

A helicopter was ordered and would arrive in about 30 minutes. In heavy darkness, we treated our interpreter in the back of our ambulance and then rushed him to the helicopter pad and waited for the chopper to come.

Within minutes a shadow in the darkness landed in front of us, and our interpreter was flown away.

"All right guys, another good job, let's get some sleep, we have to be up in a few hours to go home."

What a day.

Friday, November 16, 2007
Cpl. Brian Sanders
Section: Afghanistan

A Soldier's Diary from Afghanistan : Part 6



July 25, 2006: Fresh food key to a soldier's happiness

The heat biscuit in the sky raises the mercury to scorching temperatures today. This is my 23rd day out in the mountains. Manoeuvring a vehicle through obstacles unheard of by most stunt men has its tense moments. And one must consider the hidden threats

— landmines — strategically placed to make a soldier's day even worse than it all ready is.

After 20 hours of arm-twisting turns, and backbreaking bumps, we finally park our vehicles in a defensive posture. In the ambulance, I get to relax. For the infantry who bounced around in the back of our vehicles, their day has just begun.

I give credit to our Canadian infantry. I don't mind smashing my vehicle through the mountainous terrain of Afghanistan, but the infantry can get pretty banged up by the unforgiving terrain.

Anyway, lunch time now. Out comes a Coleman stove, pot set, and finally there will be the coin toss that will determine what am I going to get for lunch today.

Close look at IMPs

Let's take a moment to talk about rations.

The individual meal package, or IMP, is a very well-known meal among the Armed Forces. Every soldier, whether you are in the army for two weeks or for 20 years, will endure the flavourless, unappetizing wrath of an IMP.

You can't blame the army or the company that makes them. Come on, how much flavour can you give something that is designed to have a three-year shelf life? You also have to give credit to the makers of IMPs. They try to produce a variety of meals such as beef chop suey, Swiss steak, and cabbage rolls, but no matter how many names the meals have they are still all the same.

Now let's break down an IMP.

First of all every ration is packaged in a bag that can withstand most elements, including nuclear fallout.

Every ration contains a main meal. It varies from beans and wieners for breakfast, to cabbage rolls for supper. You will also find a dessert, usually a fruit cocktail, or something else that can be preserved in heavy syrup. If you get a breakfast ration, you will find a pack of gum, while a lunch ration will net you a chocolate bar, and supper will get you a couple of cookies.

The next item you will find is most disturbing. In a small pouch you will find a piece of bread. Now if you remember what I said earlier, these rations have a shelf life of three years. Who on Earth do you know would enjoy a three-year-old piece of bread? I have never found any mould on my bread, but I think that is thanks to the little desiccant package contained within.

I am very thankful for the next items that are stored inside this bundle of joy. After pushing aside your napkin, spoon, and juice crystals, you will find almost every soldier's prized item. Four little tiny packets lie at the bottom of your bag almost smiling up at you when you grab them. Two of the packets contain have the word "sugar" on them, while the others have "creamer" written on them. Finally, the last item that brings these packets together is "coffee." Whether you're starting your day, or ending it, nothing is better than a fresh cup of coffee.

Some of us looking for a quick perk empty the instant grinds right into our mouths, then down a couple of mouthfuls of water. It sounds gross, but at 3 a.m. when you are waking up for a two-hour sentry watch nothing much else is going to keep you awake.

Now like I said before, the companies that make these meals do try for variety, but when you are on operations for 23 days straight, you're bound to get the same meal at least three or four times. Every soldier tries to put his or her personal touch. Tabasco sauce and seasoning bottles are almost standard for every one of us. Anything that can make a ration not taste like a ration is welcomed.

The fresh food moments

Now that you can appreciate our suffering in the meal department, you will understand the rest of my day more clearly.

Upon arriving at our forward operation base, we are greeted with a convoy that arrived from Kandahar airfield. One vehicle stood out, and a crowd of soldiers quickly surrounded it. Crammed inside were hay boxes. A hay box keeps things hot, and inside was fresh food, a fact all of us knew.

There is nothing, and I mean absolutely nothing, in this world that boosts morale better than a fresh meal. After 10 minutes, tables were set up, and a line formed in anticipation of what was on for dinner. Once at the front of the line, the first thing on my plate was a perfect baked potato.

Next stop, fried mushrooms. Finally, a big piece of juicy steak. At the end of the line we had fresh salads, fruit and fresh bread. Words cannot explain how good that meal tasted.

The night was setting in quick as people finished their meals. Little groups of soldiers, sat, or lay on the ground in circles, allowing their meals to digest. Throughout the camp, an occasional laugh would break the night air. Everything was peaceful.

Well, that was until the silence was broken.

"Seconds."

Friday, November 16, 2007
Cpl. Brian Sanders
Section: Afghanistan

A Soldier's Diary from Afghanistan : Part 7



Aug. 16, 2006: A war like no other

I wonder how soldiers did it back then.

I am no expert in military history, but from what I do know, there is no way soldiers today could have ever fought the way our ancestors did. Being here in Afghanistan has given me a newfound respect for our comrades from decades ago.

For starters, here in Afghanistan where I am on a six-month tour, I have the luxury of knowing when I am returning to Canada. In 54 days, I will be back in Edmonton, enjoying the life that people like my grandfather secured more than six decades ago. Soldiers of the past never knew when they were coming home. One of the things that really underscores the difference between today's soldiers and our heroes of the past is the

technology we all take for granted.

Communications have advanced so much I can call my friends back in Edmonton right from the battlefield. Soldiers fortunate enough to be near any satellite uplink can plug their laptop in and enjoy a video conference with their spouses and children back home.

That same convenience allows us to check our banking, keep up on the local daily news and sports, and place another bid on that set of drums I want on eBay. Of course, the age-old mail system that brings us care packages and letters from home remains the most comforting form of communication.

Video games

Entertainment for the soldiers of the past was, from what I understand, minimal. Now, there is a wide range of things to do to keep the mind entertained. Handheld video games ensure that our military skills are up to date on a virtual battle field, while Tiger Woods keeps us on track for the greens that will be played when we return home.

MP3 players have become almost standard issue for modern soldiers, allowing us to carry thousands of tracks on a device as small as a lighter. During the early wars, soldiers who wanted the comfort of music would have needed a trailer to cart around a wind-up record player and the tonnes of vinyl holding the latest hits of the day.

During the Second World War, the story goes, Canadians and Germans paused on Christmas Day to play soccer together. I don't think we'll ever see those days again, but sports are very common at the airfield or at any forward operating base.

Volleyball and floor hockey are the two most common sports, although there is no shortage in soccer, baseball and even Frisbee games.

Fitness a top priority

Some times, when there are not a lot of operations happening at once, soldiers from different countries will get together and arrange tournaments. Plaques and certificates are struck to recognize the winners (that would be the Canucks), as well as the "furthest

from first place" winners ... ahem, like our brothers-in-arms to the south.

For many soldiers, physical fitness is a top priority, and many make commitments to themselves to improve their endurance and mass while overseas.

At the Kandahar airfield, we are equipped with at least four world-class gyms, all containing state of the art equipment. Trainers work with soldiers to help plan a training cycle to fit any need, while other instructors are available for aerobics and even something called "butts and guts" — something I'm sure our veterans never thought about when storming enemy trenches.

During a three-week leave to Canada in mid May, I had the opportunity to sit with a war veteran at my local legion. I almost made him choke on a pretzel when I informed him of the salsa dancing lessons offered every Tuesday night in Kandahar. That's right, come to Afghanistan, take control away from the Taliban, and then learn how to dance Latin style in the evenings. I wonder how many soldiers actually attend that class?

The last bit of recreation we enjoy is the wonderful world of the service industry.

Nothing says "I miss home" better than the recently opened Tim Hortons coffee shop in Kandahar. I know for a fact that no history book, from any era, talked about franchises operating in a theatre of war.

At Kandahar airfield, we can wander down to "The Boardwalk" and shop for everything from souvenirs to tailored shirts, or dine at Burger King, Subway, Pizza Hut or, as mentioned before, the beloved Tim Hortons.

Months in the field

I don't want anyone reading this to think that we have access to all these amenities on any given day. Lots of us don't see Kandahar airfield for months at a time, and even when we do get there, we are only there long enough to fix our vehicles, restock, and prepare for the next mission. Very few are privileged to work on the camp, and fewer still can get away from mounds of paper work piled on their desk.

Nevertheless, we have access to a lot of different forms of entertainment here on the modern battlefield. As well, we are close as we can be to our friends and family back home thanks to Mr. Alexander Graham Bell and all those who followed in his footsteps.

I have a new found respect for my heroes of long ago, and I am thankful for the new age army that I am a part of.

Now, can I get a large double-double, please?

Friday, November 16, 2007
Cpl. Brian Sanders
Section: Afghanistan

A Soldier's Diary from Afghanistan : Part 8



Sept. 7, 2006: An Afghan odyssey

Part 1: A perfectly designed ambush / July 2006

At home on leave, I had stopped by my local Legion, where an old war veteran asked me about my role in Afghanistan. Then he put his arm around me and told me that now we could share Remembrance Day together, every time the flag is lowered at Parliament.

I remained puzzled by his comments until just a couple weeks ago. Remembrance Day has a new meaning for me now.

Every day in Afghanistan starts the same way, and this day had seemed no different. At 9 a.m. I received a warning order for what my superiors were calling "the Big Op," but to me it seemed just another operation, this one three days in the Panjwahi district.

The armoured ambulance I drive rolls

at the rear, at least a kilometre away from the action, and normally the only time we go forward is after the fight to clean up and transport the wounded.

Packing for three days is easy: six pairs of socks, six pairs of boxers and two sets of combat fatigues, but also included is some mac 'n' cheese sent by a good friend of mine, an MP3 player, a crossword book, and the New Testament, sent by Josiah, the nine-year-old son of a friend.

As with every operation, I need to make sure this 13-tonne ambulance remains in top order. Oil levels are checked, grease nipples lubed, 48 hours of rations packed, and as much water stored as the vehicle can hold. After that, weapons are oiled and loaded. An ambulance is not meant as a fighting vehicle, but under enemy contact, we need to be as deadly as required.

The medic in the back of the ambulance is Cpl. Toezer, an ex-infantryman who re-enrolled as a medic. He has taught me everything from how to insert IVs to dressing an amputation.

After Toezer finished preparing his end of the ambulance, we were greeted by our crew commander Cpl. Creelman. He's another outstanding soldier, a former combat engineer who re-enrolled as a medic five years ago. He commands the vehicle and is responsible for the care of casualties from the time they are injured until they are removed via helicopter. Combined, the three of us with over 30 years of combat trade experience make up the most experienced ambulance crew in Afghanistan.

Secondary orders revealed we would not be leaving until 8 p.m. that night under the cover of darkness, providing time to relax and prepare ourselves. I walked over to the Burger King for my traditional pre-operation dinner, and three Whoppers later enjoyed a short nap. But before long I was standing ready by my ambulance. The compound was filled with three companies of vehicles, about 60 vehicles. After a quick radio check it was time to roll.

The trip to Panjwai took about two hours, one of the quietest drives I've experienced here. The moon was full

and cast an odd silhouette from our vehicles, which were driving in blackout mode without lights. The road changed from paved to gravel and then eventually faded into a wadi, or a dried-up riverbed.

A perfectly designed ambush

A couple of kilometres before our staging area, the radio broke silence. Air reconnaissance reported women and children leaving the area we were to occupy, a clear sign Taliban were in the area and prepared to fight. Even before the warning was completed all hell broke loose.

The light-armoured vehicle just in front of us flashed in silhouette as a rocket-propelled grenade exploded directly ahead. A perfectly designed ambush unfolded, a fury of bullets raining down on our column of vehicles, the sky filled with tracer rounds. A flood of contact reports came over the radio. The enemy, dug in, gave us everything they had.

Our vehicles returned machine-gun fire while soldiers armed with C7 rifles returned shots from the air sentry hatches in the vehicles. The turrets of our light-armoured vehicles, mounted with 25 mm Chain guns, engaged Taliban in bunkers that circled us.

The initial contact lasted about two hours and produced some of the most intense fighting any of us had seen. The sound of bullets whizzing past my head was almost comforting, as I knew they weren't too close. Then the bullets started cracking, a sound that means they're just missing.

No sooner had I lowered my seat to use the periscopes than bullets began striking our vehicle. I reached for my camera and mounted it outside my hatch to videotape the chaos, thinking it would serve later to remind me of how safe we are in Canada.

It's hard to explain the feelings that passed through me at this time. It was unreal, but 12 years of training and field exercises in Canada designed to prepare me for this day were having their proper effect.

Shortly after the enemy fled into the neighbouring village, reports of injured starting coming in, which meant it was our time to get busy. The only injured were the enemy, proving the value of

our armoured vehicles once again. Regardless of which side the injured were fighting on, our job as medics is to sustain life.

In this case the injured enemy was on the other side of a mud wall and could not be easily moved because of seven bullet wounds. Without a second thought, I drove straight through the three-metre wall and came to a rest beside the injured combatant, whose perilous condition suddenly made this fight seem very real.

Toezer jumped out of the back and began to bandage bleeding wounds, but shortly after determined his patient had a collapsed lung. He pulled out a huge needle, fingered down the rib cage and then in a single motion jabbed him with the needle. It was shocking to see, and I asked him what the heck he had just done.

"Ever see the movie Three Kings? Toezer asked, and then I remembered its graphic description of how to treat a collapsed lung. The movies are not always just Hollywood tricks.

A few minutes passed before the injured man was put on a stretcher and moved to the back of the ambulance. A helicopter was ordered and we drove to the landing site.

By this time the first light from a rising sun had begun to show on the horizon, and our battlefield revealed itself. Not even five minutes into the evacuation, the radio was jammed again with contact reports. Above the roar of the vehicle we heard gunshots and explosions. My foot slammed the accelerator to speed delivery of our casualty so we could return to provide assistance.

More casualties: Priority one

Ten minutes passed before we returned to the fight, halting this time near a school destroyed by the Taliban inside the abandoned village. I sat with my head poking out of the driver's hole, listening to the fight 500 metres away, when rounds started coming in at us. More cracking of bullets before I reminded myself to drop my seat and take cover.

Seconds later the radio called for a medical evacuation, which required driving through the firefight to the opposite side of the village to grab our

casualties. This time there were four of them, all coalition forces. Over the intercom Creelman instructed me to follow the armoured vehicle in front of us, which would provide our fire support.

We entered what seemed like a video game come to life — rounds flying everywhere, Apache helicopters firing rockets, and A-10 fighter jets dropping munitions — but this was an experience beyond any simulation. Once through the firefight, and behind the protection of a mud wall, we arrived on the company Sgt. Maj. with the first batch of casualties — some shrapnel wounds, and one Afghan national army soldier (one of the good guys) with a bullet through his neck. How lucky was this guy — the bullet went in and out without hitting anything vital. He was conscious and breathing.

Again the helicopter was ordered and we returned through the firefight to the landing site. By this time the adrenalin was wearing off and fatigue setting in, but I shook it off, just in time to hear we had more casualties — a priority one this time. That's never good, and Toezer prepared for the worst. After driving back through the battle, we arrived at the casualty collection point, but found nobody there yet. Over the radio we were told the casualty was not breathing and had no pulse. They had stopped trying to resuscitate the soldier.

An eerie feeling filled the air as we waited to receive the casualty. Creelman asked if I knew how to get back to the landing site without his guidance. I nodded, and he said he would be in the back with Toezer trying to bring our friend back to life. After what seemed a long wait, our casualty arrived and we were off.

Minutes later we were at the landing site where the helicopter was waiting. I dropped the ramp and jumped out of the ambulance to assist. Creelman and Toezer were working non-stop with CPR and mouth-to-mouth. Within seconds, our fallen comrade was on the bird and whisked away.

Rest in peace my friend, you will be remembered always. I will pay tribute to you every Nov. 11.

Part 2: Here's a straw. Suck it up

Twenty hours had passed since the initial contact, and the sounds of bullets had faded to a familiar background noise. We moved into a staging area 100 metres behind a targeted area, a building where two insurgents refused to give up. We fired artillery, RPGs, 25 mm rounds and even Apache Hellfire rockets into this building, and still they continued to fight. The radio informed us that next they would be dropping something big.

Two more casualties were radioed in, and again we drove to pick up two injured soldiers. "Doc!" one of them screamed, "Are they all right?" Puzzled, we loaded him on a stretcher. "Are they still there?" he yelled again.

"What are you talking about?" Toezer asked, and then the casualty exposed his crotch, where he had a small shrapnel wound, but one that missed his children-maker by millimetres. Toezer ensured him everything was intact.

The laughter from our much-relieved casualty was broken by the deafening crack of a 2,000-pound bomb destroying the enemy bunker. Soldiers cleared the area and found a reinforced tunnel inside the building. We took off to the landing site and transferred our casualties.

The battle finally subsided after 34 hours of fighting. We pulled into a wheat field and set up a small medical station to deal with minor ailments. The companies rolled through our resupply point before they headed off to a staging area to replenish supplies and eat. We saw about 20 patients, most of them just dehydrated or with minor shrapnel wounds requiring a bandage — and a straw. When I asked Creelman what the straw was for, he laughed.

"Suck it up and carry on."

Wake-up call

It was now time for some personal maintenance. Mac 'n' cheese and a good read kept me company until I fell asleep on the ground. A few hours later I was woken to provide sentry duty for an hour. When you train in Canada, the enemy is just our guys playing a part. There's no threat of bullets, just embarrassment if they

sneak by you. But in Afghanistan the fear of being shot keeps your eyes open better than any cup of Tim Hortons coffee.

As the sun peeked over the horizon, our company moved to a staging area north of Panjwail, 48 hours into the operation. The enemy was defeated and the local population had reclaimed their village. Creelman left for orders, Toezer filled out a resupply request and I refuelled the vehicle.

An hour later Creelman returned. "I don't know how to tell you this, guys, but we are not going back. The British to the north have been receiving a lot of contacts, and they don't have the resources to resupply. We are going to be out here for a lot longer than we thought. Relax for the next six hours, and then we are pushing about five hours north."

It was a good thing I'd packed for another couple of days. I reached into the ambulance and grabbed our satellite phone. The best thing about our army is that they supply a phone so you can call home and talk to friends. As you are talking, you can close your eyes and imagine yourself sitting on your couch at home, talking on the phone. For a minute, it takes you away from the arid lands of Afghanistan.

I curled up beside the front tire of my ambulance and looked at the stars. Every minute or two, you could spot a falling star, which to anyone else would be spectacular. Here I flinched, waiting for a big boom. If 10 seconds passed without a boom, I knew it was just a star. Finally I caught a little sleep.

Part 3: Incoming missiles

Cpl. Creelman woke me up: "It's time to go, man." As I tossed my blanket aside and slipped into my boots, a tremendous itch came over my arms. They were covered in sand flea bites, too many to count. Cpl. Toezer laughed at me. "Yeah, we all got 'em. He gave me some calamine lotion - and a straw. I gave him the finger and went to start my vehicle.

The wind was strong today and the dust thick, with visibility only about 100 metres and soon to be worse once we started moving. I stuck my MP3 player

in my ear and we began a long drive north through the hot sands of the desert.

In the sandstorm Camels dotted the horizon, and every once in a while we passed through a small village. There are lots of kids in this country; most of them wave, and some throw rocks, just kids being kids. The girls used to be completely covered from head to toe, but now that the Taliban have lost influence, more faces are visible, revealing huge smiles.

Our journey took 10 hours rather than six, but eventually the British Forward Operating Base Robinson could be seen on top of a hill. It was a nice little base, complete with washrooms, showers and sand. There was no kitchen, but every once in a while, the local Afghan national army soldiers would visit a village and get a sheep for dinner. There was a big-screen television and two computers with internet access. On my first night there I relaxed to British humor on the telly, and it was so refreshing to laugh out loud and forget some recent events.

I should have known better than to let my guard down when I was outside the wire. Shortly after watching television, I was falling asleep under the stars when an earth-shattering boom rocked the base. As I sat up, another explosion, this one closer, made my ears ring. I ran to the back of my vehicle where I found both medics sitting inside and jumped in to join them. In the distance we heard a mortar being fired, a dull thump, then counted to 10 before the explosion of the incoming round, but we could only guess as to where the round would land. Once the barrage was over, it was back to bed, but needless to say it was a light sleep.

Sandstorm The next morning we left to resupply the company of British a little farther north, a routine run that became anything but. An hour outside the base was a relatively prosperous town with a water supply from the north that ran through the centre, providing life to a variety of orchards and fields. Our mission, as the ambulance crew, was to stay south of the village during the resupply. At the same time, Canadian, British and Afghan soldiers would search the village for Taliban and weapons.

The target is us

Sitting on top of a hill, safe from gunfire, I sat on top of my ambulance with Creelman. It was quiet and hot. The radio informed us of weapons caches found and then minutes later destroyed, routine stuff. Until a missile flew about three metres over our heads.

Remember the movie Top Gun, when a jet flies by at low altitude and all you hear is that zzzzzz OOOOOOOO mmmmmm noise? Well that's what it sounded like when a missile buzzed over our heads, followed by a large explosion a few hundred metres behind us. Baffled, I stupidly stood up to see what it was. In the distance I saw another cloud of smoke, followed by another zoom past my head and another explosion.

Buried in the hull of the vehicle, we radioed our boss to inform him the ambulance was being targeted. Apache helicopters soon found the area the rounds were fired from and destroyed the threat. Later we concluded that two Stinger missiles had been fired at us. You might think I'm crazy for saying so, but this was the coolest experience I've ever had.

There, I said it. Don't like it? Here's a straw.

Part 4: "I know you guys wanted to go back but..."

As night began to settle, our bosses decided it would be best for the resupply vehicles to stay in the British compound while we went back to FOB Robinson. From the base I called a good friend in Edmonton, and still vibrating with adrenalin, chatted with him about his kids and life at home. In the middle of our conversation, I heard a familiar distant thump, and before I could hang up there was an explosion, soon followed by others as a barrage of rounds landed around us. A half hour later the all-clear was given, and I called my friend back. I won't repeat his thoughts here, but will be more careful about the timing of my next call to him.

Moving Out The next morning we finally started on our journey back home to Kandahar, and I offered to buy Creelman and Toezer a pizza once we returned. Moving into the

village we passed friendly faces waving at us, more kids throwing rocks, and this time girls completely covered in traditional burka dress. We pulled into the British compound to meet our resupply vehicles and parked by the river.

I had just shut off my vehicle when a building not 200 metres in front of me collapsed. At first it seemed puzzling, because I hadn't heard an explosion, but I soon realized we were under a mortar attack. The British returned fire with artillery at bunkers hidden in the mountains around us. The attack continued for a couple of hours, but at this point we had been fired upon so much that we weren't even taking cover. We had our helmets and flak vests on, but because it was a guessing game as to where rounds would land, nowhere was safe.

As evening set in, everyone realized we would not be returning to Kandahar that night, and then came new orders from our commanding officer. "I know you guys are tired, I know you guys want to go back, but we are needed again." This time our mission would push farther west, about 180 km to a place called Lashkar Gah.

Last one in...

By this time of the evening, with a shower nowhere in sight, the nearby river began to look pretty refreshing. Creelman warned us about bacteria and other nasty stuff the river might contain, as the locals use it for sewage disposal and washing cars, animals and themselves. He also advised us that we had limited supplies for treating illnesses that might arise from bathing in the river.

Five minutes after his lecture, the river was filled with soldiers cooling off and attempting to rinse days of dirt and sweat off their clothes. I turned around to hear some giggling and found Creelman himself floating in the river. All I could do was laugh.

Secondary orders followed that night, revealing we would wait a day before pushing west to assist the British operation. I used the time to do some maintenance on the ambulance. Toezer scrounged together the last of our supplies and cleaned out the back of the ambulance. Creelman,

thoughtful soldier that he is, put on a brew of coffee for us.

The day was pretty relaxing, apart from the few soldiers who came in for treatment of skin rashes.

Desserts and deserts

As we moved west in the morning, we were surprised to find local Afghans constructing a newly paved highway. This was the first time that I had actually seen much in the way of infrastructure. Because of this new highway, it was a relatively quick drive into Lashkar Gah.

Once inside the town, the first thing we noticed were the buildings, which weren't just built from mud. The village was constructed by the Americans years ago, in conjunction with the Afghan locals. Kids smiled and waved, and parents too, something that is rare. Once in the British camp, a wave of Canadians headed first for the showers and toilets, then to the store for cold pop, chips and candy, then off to the kitchen.

Working with the Brits The food was not only tasty, but beautifully displayed on stainless steel trays that looked like silver platters. Dessert was even better, custard and ice cream, definitely one of the most satisfying meals I've ever had. That night, inside the walls of the British camp, we were able to let our guard down just enough to get a good eight hours sleep. No one knew what tomorrow would bring, so we savoured every minute.

The next morning orders were issued again: "All right guys, we have two more days left before we head back to KAF; we need a little more work out of you and then we will push on."

British and Canadian forces were conducting search operations 70 km to the southwest, and our mission was simply to resupply them, which sounded easy enough.

The desert this far west was like a cartoon image, nothing but sand dunes. We arrived at the first resupply point and handed out water, bullets and beans. Our mechanics tended to a couple of vehicles suffering from the wear and tear of the terrain, and we medics tended to minor illnesses, and cuts and bruises.

Just another mortar attack

The resupply took a little longer than expected, and it was under cover of darkness that we moved on to the next company. But waiting for a truck to meet us at the road, flashes lit up the night sky and once again the sound of mortar rounds assaulted our ears. Strangely enough, I didn't flinch. Creelman was the most relaxed he had ever been, he said, and Toezer as well. We don't have post-traumatic stress disorder — we're just carriers now.

The attack only lasted about 20 minutes, and we left shortly after. The moon had yet to rise, and with our lights off it was pitch black, with nothing but a faint silhouette ahead to follow to the next location. A lot of guys use the infrared night vision, but I am more comfortable with my own night sight, and the night vision offered no assistance anyway once the dust kicked up. Eventually we made it to the next resupply point, but this time we faced more work than just scratches and bruises.

A local civilian had been beaten badly by the Afghan national police and suffered severe spinal injuries. We offered to move him to the British camp.

It took about three hours to get him to camp, and my driving skills were tested. By now it was 3 a.m., and besides the darkness and rough terrain, I had to fight fatigue, all the while keeping my ambulance well balanced so as not to aggravate our patient's spine. When we finally arrived at the camp, the British could not help him, and we were turned away. Finally we found a hospital located in Lashkar Gah, built by the Americans for local civilians injured by war. That's what the sign said, and it was in English.

Finally, after four hours on a spine board for this injured 65-year-old man, we put him in the hands of capable doctors. Later we found that the man was an influential leader of the village nearby, and our assistance helped changed the views of some Afghans; an unspoken friendship was made.

We moved back to the British camp, and awaited the rest of the convoy to return, which took until the following

evening because of vehicle problems. The next morning brought the good news that we would finally return to the Kandahar base in the afternoon. Morale was at an all-time high, and the morning was spent enjoying some British coffee and a couple of cigarettes on the makeshift patios. Stories circulated around the table about the recent action in Panjwair, but it seemed like months had passed since that incident. After one soldier told us about the events that led to our friend being shot and killed, everyone became silent and the reminiscing ceased.

The move back passed quickly, everyone had a lead foot as we pushed closer and closer to the base. Night had fallen by the time we reached Kandahar city, and it was nothing like I had remembered it. Shops and restaurants and hotels had opened. Fruits and vegetables were for sale. You would never have guessed that the city had just gone through a war. It was amazing. Because of our presence, people had their lives back.

A lot of people in Canada think that we should not be here in Afghanistan, but those people don't see the remarkable changes happening here. One interpreter told me, "Because Canada is here, our people are happy again."

So to all those Canadians who continue to harp about what they don't know — here's your straw, suck it up.

Friday, November 16, 2007
Cpl. Brian Sanders
Section: Afghanistan

A Soldier's Diary from Afghanistan : Part 9



Sept. 19, 2006: Pin it on my chest

This morning was one of the few days different from the others. Careful,

detailed attention was given to my uniform before it was put on this morning. Threads were burnt off, pants were properly bloused, and boots were properly laced. I shaved extra close, and even got a haircut the day before. Today is a special day, and I wanted to ensure that I looked good.

(DND) Two hours later the sun beat down on me and 45 other soldiers, standing perfectly still at attention. The jagged rocks under my blistered, sweaty feet send a spike of pain up my back, causing the muscles in my legs to cramp. Nothing would feel better than to just sit down, but I remain still.

My chest is pressed out a little farther today. My arms are straight down either side of my body, my hands clenched, thumbs out. Eyes are forward, feet are heeled together.

Neither the blistering heat, nor the trickle of sweat running down my brow can make me move an inch. Days like today are one of the very few times when a soldier can openly show how proud he or she is.

In front of us stands our leader, the colonel of our battle group. He offers praise to each of us standing at attention. He recounts many missions where we have fought, shed tears, and blood. His words of encouragement unearth my personal accounts here in Afghanistan. His praise is echoed through the words of the brigade sergeant major, who calls us to stand at ease. Both of them approach the ranks to see us face to face. Our leader will personally recognize each one of us today.

I snap to attention when the colonel approaches me. He reaches out and shakes my hand.

"Congratulations, you've earned the right to wear this."

He proudly pulled out my medal, and pinned it to my chest. The feeling of having it placed is indescribable. Another handshake, followed by "well done," and our leader moved on to the next soldier. The hardest part is not being able to look down at the medal while standing at ease. Everyone else must receive their medal, and our discipline tells us not to move until the

end of the parade.

Now, while everyone else receives a medal, I must let you know that there is a lot of controversy among the troops about whom should get the same medal we wear. A lot of soldiers don't believe that troops working in an office at the airfield should wear the same medal as another who went head to head in gunfights against the Taliban.

South West Asia Service Medal (SWASM)

The description of the medal is pretty bland. The SWASM is awarded to those employed in direct support of the operations against terrorism in southwest Asia, and a bar is added for those deployed into the theatre of operation. Blah. Blah. Blah.

The actual medal itself, however, looks pretty cool. It's silver, with the Queen on the front and something called a Hydra on the back. The Hydra, a many-headed serpent, represents evil in various forms. A Canadian sword transfixes the Hydra, and over the design is the Latin phrase "ADVERSUS MALUM PUGNAMUS" (We are fighting evil).

Each colour of the ribbon represents something as well. Sand colour on the outside represents the challenges in the theatre of operation, while the red represents the blood spilled on Sept. 11, and the ensuing campaign that followed. Black represents the mourning of victims of the terrorist attack, while the white represents the peace that we are all fighting for over here.

I thought the same way as others about the right to wear the medal — until about two weeks ago. While I was sitting in the smoking area, trying to quit smoking, I lit a cigarette and brought the medal issue up with the sergeant major. He and I were together during the last "big op."

He was able to change my mind with his words that day.

"Every soldier in Afghanistan has helped fight the Taliban in their own certain way. The postal clerk, for instance. It is because of him that you can find out how your loved ones are doing, and about little Johnny and how big he's getting.

"He allows us the opportunity to let our stress levels to come down, and forget about the hell we are dealing with here because we can read a letter from home; therefore, helping us fight the Taliban with renewed strength. Your medal, quite simply, is only as good as the story behind it."

Those words changed the ideas I had held for 12 years about the issuing of medals. I can recall talking to veterans of wars past and them saying: "I got this medal fighting through the trenches in Italy, where I lost several of my friends by a German grenade."

Whenever I talked to a veteran about his medals it was always the story behind them that surfaced, and it wasn't until today that it finally made sense.

It is what makes each individual's medal unique.

The story behind this medal

My medal signifies the 63 casualties that needed my crew's ambulance for life-saving treatment. It recounts the 16 intense firefights my crew suffered through together. It remembers the more than 10,000 miles of arm-busting terrain I drove through.

My medal can also talk about my church, which was able to help a young boy and girl here in Afghanistan receive life-saving emergency medical treatment, in turn changing hearts and minds of thousands of families that live here.

Finally, my medal remembers the 20 soldiers in my seven months here that gave the ultimate sacrifice in the name of freedom for our country. Three of them were brought off the battlefield by my ambulance.

My medal is more than just a fancy coin hanging from a ribbon. It's more than just something that says I have been to Afghanistan. Just like the medals worn by my ancestors, my medal is a memory, it's a feeling, it's a tribute and it's a story. It's not just a thing, it's a living story of why our country is strong and free today.

I will always remember that when I see our veterans on Remembrance Day. I will look at their chest and I will ask, "What's your story?"

The parade draws to a close with final

remarks from our leader.

"Don't forget. The tour is not over yet. It's not over until you are back in Canada, safe at home."

Personally, I hope I don't have to add to the story of my medal. The last chapter of my story will involve repatriation to Canada. I will leave that to my next entry though.

Friday, November 16, 2007
Cpl. Brian Sanders
Section: Afghanistan

Two Canadian soldiers and an Afghan Interpreter killed in Afghanistan



OTTAWA

Two Canadian soldiers, and one Afghan interpreter were killed at approximately 12:00 a.m. Kandahar time on 17 November, 2007 when their Light Armoured Vehicle (LAV III) struck a suspected Improvised Explosive Device approximately 40 km West of Kandahar city in the vicinity of Ma'sum Ghar.

The blast occurred in Zhari district, about 40 kilometres west of Kandahar City, where Afghan soldiers backed by Canadian ground forces and U.S. air strikes reportedly killed as many as 20 insurgents.

Three Canadian soldiers were also injured in the explosion and immediately evacuated from the scene by helicopter to the Multinational Medical Unit at Kandahar Airfield where they are receiving medical care and have informed their families.

The identities of the fallen are as follows:

Corporal Nicolas Raymond Beauchamp, age 28, 5e Ambulance de campagne, based out of Valcartier, Quebec.

Private Michel Jr. Lévesque, age 25, 3e Bataillon, Royal 22e Régiment, based out of Valcartier, Quebec

Ramp ceremony held for fallen Canadian soldiers

Updated Sun. Nov. 18 2007 8:54 AM ET

Hundreds of Canadian, Dutch, British and U.S. soldiers said their goodbyes today during a twilight ramp ceremony for two Canadian soldiers killed by a roadside bomb in Afghanistan this weekend.

The bodies of Cpl. Nicolas Raymond Beauchamp, 28, and Pte. Michel Levesque, 25, will be flown to CFB Trenton in eastern Ontario.

Statement by the Minister of National Defence on the Deaths of two Canadian Soldiers in Afghanistan

NR-07.019 - November 17, 2007

OTTAWA – The Honourable Peter Gordon MacKay, Minister of National Defence and Minister of the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency, issued the following statement today on the deaths of two Canadian soldiers and one Afghan interpreter and the wounding of three soldiers:

"I am deeply saddened by the loss of Corporal Nicolas Raymond Beauchamp and Private Michel Jr. Lévesque, who died yesterday in Afghanistan. I would like to extend my condolences to their families and friends during this very difficult time. I also wish a quick recovery for the other Canadian soldiers injured in this incident.

My sympathies also go out to the family and friends of an Afghan interpreter who lost his life in this incident. This courageous Afghan national gave his life in support of the mission to help Afghanistan achieve peace, stability and the hope for a better future.

These soldiers were participating in a joint operation to further stabilize the Panjwayi district, west of Kandahar City. These soldiers were in Afghanistan to help bring back hope to a population that has seen much hardship and turmoil.

Canada is in Afghanistan at the request of the democratically elected government, and as part of a UN-sanctioned mission to help build a

stable, democratic, and self-sufficient society. Rebuilding schools, hospitals, and roads as well as training Afghan security forces cannot occur in an unstable environment. Our Canadian Forces members are playing a key role in this NATO-led mission, helping improve the security situation in order to create the conditions necessary for Afghans to live normal lives.

We will remain forever grateful for the sacrifice of these brave soldiers, and we are all saddened by the loss of these exceptional Canadians."

Saturday, November 17, 2007
CEFCOM / COMFEC
Section: Afghanistan