

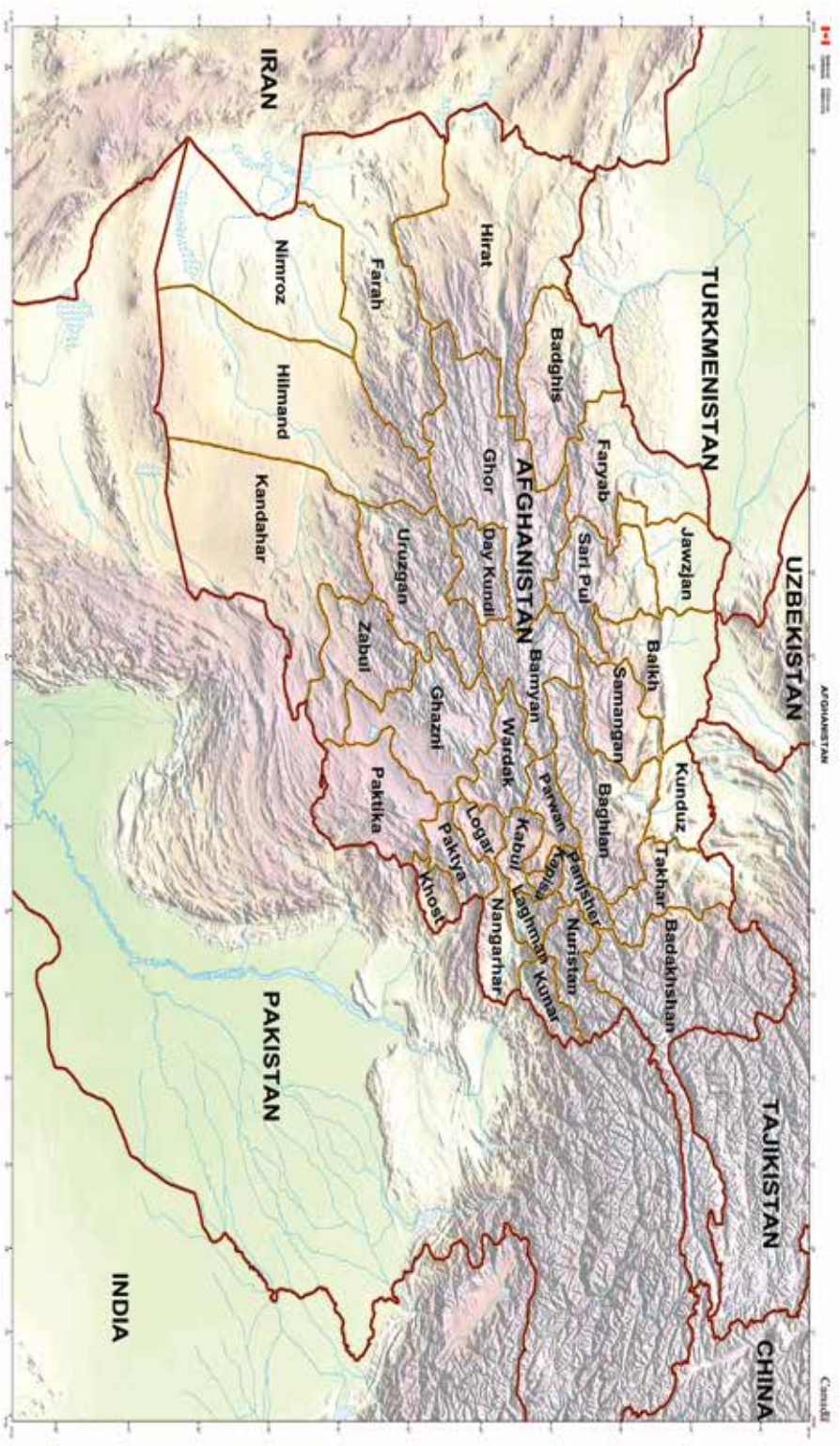
EDITED BY

CRAIG LESLIE MANTLE, CPO2 PAUL PELLERIN (RET'D),  
TOM DOUGLAS, JUSTIN WRIGHT & MÉLANIE DENIS

# IN THEIR OWN WORDS

CANADIAN STORIES  
OF VALOUR AND BRAVERY  
FROM AFGHANISTAN,  
2001-2007





IN THEIR OWN  
**WORDS**



# IN THEIR OWN WORDS:

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CRAIG LESLIE MANTLE,  
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TOM DOUGLAS, JUSTIN WRIGHT  
& MÉLANIE DENIS



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The content of this publication includes personal accounts of actions from soldiers who conducted operations during armed conflict. This publication is presented as a means of describing lessons learned in the context of such operations and is intended for a mature audience. These accounts include discussions of the use of lethal force both by and against members of the Canadian Forces and may be unsettling for some readers. Consequently, this publication should not be read by anyone who might be sensitive to such information or descriptions.

\* \* \*

The views and opinions expressed in this book are those of the interviewees and do not necessarily reflect those of the Governor General and Commander-in-Chief of Canada, Government of Canada, Department of National Defence, Canadian Forces, or their respective employees or members.

\* \* \*

La présente publication contient les récits personnels d'actions qu'ont accomplies des soldats dans le cadre d'opérations pendant des conflits armés. Cette publication vise à décrire les leçons retenues dans le contexte de ces opérations et s'adresse à un public averti. Les récits présentés comprennent des commentaires sur l'emploi de la force létale par et contre les membres des Forces canadiennes et pourraient être troublants pour certains lecteurs. Nous déconseillons par conséquent la lecture de cette publication à toute personne pouvant être sensible à de telles informations ou descriptions.

\* \* \*

Les opinions présentées dans ce livre sont celles des personnes interrogées et ne représentent pas nécessairement celles du gouverneur général et commandant en chef du Canada, du gouvernement du Canada, du ministère de la Défense nationale, des Forces canadiennes, ni de leurs employés ou membres respectifs.

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## *DEDICATION*

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*For every member of the Canadian Forces that set foot in Afghanistan, their families, and all who supported both.*



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# FOREWORD

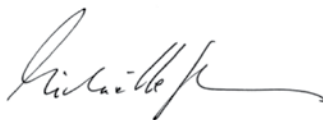
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I am pleased to introduce *In Their Own Words: Canadian Stories of Valour and Bravery from Afghanistan, 2001 – 2007*.

This insightful book offers the highly personal recollections of many of our soldiers who have received official recognition for their heroic conduct in the face of extreme danger overseas.

The powerful stories in these pages stand as models of the professional and courageous conduct expected of the Canadian Forces. Whether rescuing the wounded, fighting against a determined enemy, or striving to limit civilian casualties on an ever-changing battlefield, the actions of these soldiers are inspiring. Their reflections are at times solemn; at others, overwhelming—yet they are always impressive.

I am confident Canadians will find the first-hand accounts of *In Their Own Words* both captivating and humbling. They offer a unique window into military life: the responsibilities, sacrifices and accomplishments, the sorrows and joys. Only by learning of what our soldiers experience can we ever begin to appreciate the true meaning of the words “valour” and “bravery”. Let us therefore recognize again their service to Canada and unselfish dedication to duty.



Michaëlle Jean



The Right Honourable Michaëlle Jean  
*Former Governor General and Commander-in-Chief of Canada*



# PREFACE

---

The four Canadian military values – duty, loyalty, integrity, courage – guide our daily conduct, whether we are serving in garrison, conducting domestic operations or deployed overseas. Taken together, these fundamental principles establish a lofty standard that applies to *all*, from our most senior leaders to our newest military members.

Because of the importance of these values in our everyday lives, I am extremely pleased to introduce *In Their Own Words: Canadian Stories of Valour and Bravery from Afghanistan, 2001-2007*, a significant addition to Canada's collective professional military literature. In the pages that follow, each of these guiding concepts is easily recognizable and exceedingly clear.

Canada's time in Afghanistan has occasionally been marked by tragedy, frustration and disappointment, yet success has always been the watchword of the day. Regardless of the prevailing atmosphere at any given moment however, our military values have always been at the forefront: duty, by serving Canada and acting in accordance with the rule of law; loyalty, by remaining faithful to one's subordinates, peers and superiors; integrity, by acting responsibly and with the highest degree of ethical concern; and courage, of both a moral and physical kind, by demonstrating the resolve never to quit, even when faced with great odds.

The individuals who have been decorated with some of the country's highest honours for their actions in Afghanistan are true exemplars of our military ethos and the example that they have set is indeed one that should be reflected upon with much thought. I trust that all who read *In Their Own Words* will find its pages enlightening, if not inspiring.



A handwritten signature in dark ink, which appears to read "T. Lawson". The signature is stylized and fluid.

General Thomas J. Lawson  
*Chief of the Defence Staff*



# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Like many other books, *In Their Own Words* was nothing less than a team effort. The assistance, encouragement and advice that we received from our colleagues, both near and far, aided immeasurably.

First and foremost, before all others, we must thank the interviewees themselves. Without their enthusiasm for our work and their willingness to recount particularly trying episodes, this book would have been all but impossible. For their participation, we are truly indebted. We can only hope that we have done them and their stories justice.

Sincere appreciation must also be tendered to both The Right Honourable Michaëlle Jean and General Tom Lawson for their willingness to provide the Foreword and Preface, respectively.

Various directors and acting directors of the Canadian Forces Leadership Institute – Colonel Bernd Horn, Commander Robert S. Edwards (since retired), Dr. Bill Bentley, Commander Mike Mooz and especially Lieutenant-Colonel Jeffrey Stouffer – seized upon this undertaking and provided constant and varied support throughout. Despite extremely hectic schedules, they constantly lent their expertise, always ensuring that we had the necessary resources on hand to complete all the “smaller” tasks that went into making *In Their Own Words* a reality.

The staff of CFLI also deserves special mention. Major Brent Beardsley (since retired) helped conduct some of the interviews upon which this book entirely relies. Both Chief Petty Officer 1<sup>st</sup> Class François Bouchard (since retired) and Master Warrant Officer Denis Chercuitte, like Master Warrant Officer Nick Chop (since retired), happily did everything within their power to assist during the project’s latter stages, when much was complete, but when much remained still to be done; their wholehearted support of our efforts was reassuring and motivating. No less important, France Pellicano, Carol Jackson, Frédérique Offredi, Joanne Simms, Patrick Langlais, Jenna Alexander, Greg Moore and Mark Moriarty saw to the administrative details that this project occasioned ... and there were a great many indeed; their dedication, abilities and good humour throughout were of the utmost value. In a similar manner, certain individuals within the

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

larger Canadian Defence Academy Headquarters – Sergeant Keith Baird, Christina Baird, Marg Tebbutt, Holly Picard and Lorrie Therrien – helped us to overcome a host of different challenges as they arose.

We were occasionally compelled to seek advice and assistance from outside circles. To this end, we would be remiss if we did not thank Dr. Christopher McCreery for his outstanding assistance in matters pertaining to the Canadian Honours System. His profound knowledge of this field was of particular value, as was his review of one of the many draft manuscripts. As well, Major Carl Gauthier, Directorate of Honours and Recognition, graciously answered all of our questions and helped move this book from initial idea to finished volume. Both have been friends of this project since its inception.

Recognition must also be given to Lieutenant-Colonel Alexandra Heber, Canadian Forces Health Services, who provided invaluable advice at the outset, all of which later proved extremely useful. Dr. Daniel Lagacé-Roy, Royal Military College of Canada, helped us navigate through two different ethics review processes; in this vein, acknowledgement must also be made of the work performed on our behalf by the members of the Research Ethics Board at the College and the Social Science Research Review Board (Chief of Military Personnel). Dr. Andrew Burtch of the Canadian War Museum provided encouragement and made us more familiar with the complex mission that is Afghanistan. Legal advice was tendered by Majors Eric Weaver and Rory Fowler, Deputy Judge Advocate General Kingston. Warrant Officer Ed Storey and Charmion Chaplin-Thomas, both of Canadian Expeditionary Forces Command, reviewed the entire manuscript for issues of operational security. Louise Côté and Patrick Berrea, also of the Directorate of Honours and Recognition, provided various pieces of required information, quickly and without complaint. Mike Bechthold, Laurier Centre for Military Strategic and Disarmament Studies, took hand-drawn sketches and turned them into excellent maps. Janet Lacroix, Canadian Forces Joint Imagery Centre, helped us secure the images that support the text. Colleen Murphy transcribed the digital recordings made at each of the 23 interviews. The staff of the Base Personnel Selection Offices at Petawawa and in Winnipeg graciously provided space in which to conduct certain interviews. Although now retired, Sandra “Sandy” Holloway, Director Casualty Support Management, assisted with the distribution of information letters on our behalf though

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

the many Integrated Personnel Support Centres located across the country; it is fair to say that without her constant assistance, this book would have stalled and the final stages of its production would have been much harder and frustrating than what they were. The Canadian Defence Academy Press deserves considerable recognition for its willingness to first wait for, and then publish, this book; without its support, it is likely that the following pages would never have seen the light of day. And finally, as always, the staff of 17 Wing Publishing Office turned the rough manuscript into a highly professional and attractive volume.

To all, including those whom we might have inadvertently forgotten to mention, words simply cannot express our gratitude.





# INTRODUCTION

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*Fighting for peace, progress and stability in Afghanistan, our men and women in uniform must constantly demonstrate the highest levels of courage, resourcefulness and personal initiative, as well as a willingness to go above and beyond. Which they do in exemplary fashion.*<sup>1</sup>

~ The Right Honourable Michaëlle Jean,  
Governor General and Commander-in-Chief of Canada,  
2005-2010

Canada's mission in Afghanistan was, and to a certain extent continues to be, both complicated and controversial. Opinion as to participation remains divided: some Canadians still support direct involvement in that troubled region of the world; others, in contrast, believe that the international community has no business being in South-West Asia whatsoever; and many, in good Canadian fashion, support a middle position somewhere in between. Even the nature of the contribution itself is a matter of much conjecture, with varied commentary arguing the relative importance to be attached to diplomacy, security, development and other mechanisms of engagement.<sup>2</sup> Canada's "proper" role in Afghanistan will surely be debated long after complete withdrawal has been realized, after the mission has become historical fact rather than current issue.

Regardless of the "politics" surrounding the nation's role in Afghanistan – whether the mission is right, wrong or otherwise – *In Their Own Words* tells the personal stories of a handful of Canadian soldiers who sacrificed much in pursuit of very specific objectives. Beginning with Canada's first commitment in late 2001 and continuing until the end of the last full rotation in 2007 (until the end of Operation (Op) ATHENA, Rotation (Roto) 3), this book relates the personal experiences and reflections of some of the individuals who were awarded the Star of Military Valour, Star of Courage, Medal of Military Valour or Medal of Bravery for their actions on a particular day or, more rarely, over a prolonged period of time. Whether this small group of soldiers were engaging in high-intensity combat with a cunning and dangerous enemy, seeking to minimize collateral damage on

## INTRODUCTION

a dynamic and frequently undefined battlefield, or putting their own well-being in jeopardy to save the lives of others, the stories that follow are at the same time impressive, instructive and most definitely humbling.

### THE PURPOSE

Above all else, this book's purpose is to provide concrete and indisputable examples of the four military values that inform and guide the profession of arms in Canada. When all is said and done, readers of whatever bent will come away with a more profound understanding of the words "duty," "loyalty," "integrity" and "courage." Courage is surely the easiest value to identify owing to the nature of the acts being described, yet the remaining three are equally present as well: duty in service to Canada and in "displaying dedication, initiative and discipline in the execution of tasks;" loyalty in "personal allegiance to Canada and faithfulness to comrades across the chain of command;" and, integrity in having "unconditional and steadfast commitment" in meeting obligations and acting responsibly both on and off the battlefield.<sup>3</sup> In order to be successful in their various tasks, members of the military must live daily by these ideals, not only at home, but also abroad. Whether he (all were men) recognized it at the time or not, each individual profiled in this book modelled a positive example of leadership for others to emulate by leading from the front, by not asking his subordinates to do something that he himself was not prepared to do, by sharing in all of the hardships of his team and by being physically fit.<sup>4</sup>

But there are other purposes too. A book of this nature has rarely, if ever, been attempted in Canada before.<sup>5</sup> Soldiers are seldom given a forum such as this to tell their own stories, in their own words, without fear of judgement or criticism. By capturing their reflections and commentary, this book will hopefully bring them and their colleagues additional recognition for their service and sacrifice on behalf of all Canadians and a greater degree of understanding from the Canadian public. Despite the message that is sometimes conveyed by certain media outlets, the mission in Afghanistan is so much more than ramp ceremonies in Kandahar and repatriation ceremonies in Trenton, important and essential though these events most certainly are.

To a certain extent, *In Their Own Words* also serves as a very brief primer on morale, cohesion and effective leadership, some of the "intangibles" upon

## INTRODUCTION

which success so often depends. In recalling their experiences, many of the interviewees offer insight into how each of these attributes was first established and then maintained over time, especially in the face of traumatic events, including casualties. Quite by chance, segments of their narratives read like a “how to” manual. Leaders, both military and civilian alike, who wish to understand some of the dynamics of these qualities may find the following stories particularly instructive and helpful.

In addition, by having the soldiers themselves describe the actions for which they were decorated and their thoughts surrounding it all, this book also provides a window, albeit a small and incomplete one, into both their military and personal lives. Military service comes with a heavy price: the time away from family and friends; for some, physical and mental scars; for all, the loss of certain personal freedoms enjoyed by the rest of society. Yet, on the other hand, it also comes with many rewards, rewards that most civilian professions would be hard pressed to match: immensely profound friendships forged through shared, often dangerous, experiences; the opportunity to make a difference on both the national and international stage; a unique and challenging career. The stories of this select group will hopefully go some way towards explaining the “mind of the soldier,” or in other words, why he or she does the things that he or she does, things that might seem illogical or unreasonable at face value, but that are easily understood upon deeper and sympathetic investigation.

And finally, many chapters provide insight into the act of battle itself. It is simply impossible to replicate in words the sheer emotional power of such an event with complete accuracy or totality. What it was like to fight in Afghanistan can only truly be understood by those who actually *fought* in Afghanistan. With that being said, one cannot help but get a *sense* of combat – the chaos, the fatigue, the emotion, the danger – by reading and reflecting on these soldiers’ commentaries.

If this book is about many things, it is **not** about hero-worship. Given the subject matter at hand – publically-recognized acts of extreme courage – some “blowing of the trumpets” may have inadvertently come through, but such was never the explicit intent. In no way are the pages that follow meant to glorify war, its participants, the means by which it is conducted or its human toll. Some of the individuals whose stories appear in this book were

## INTRODUCTION

understandably concerned at the outset that their participation would mark them as “glory seekers” and that their very personal accounts would morph into something that one might expect from a second-rate Hollywood studio interested only in sensationalism and profit. Hopefully the explanation provided by the editors – that their stories had immense instructional value and that the fundamental essence of their experiences would at all times be respected – assuaged their legitimate concerns. The editors approached each individual and asked if we might listen to his story; no one ever approached us and asked if he could tell us his story.

## THE INTERVIEWEES

Only those soldiers who were awarded a decoration for valour or bravery for actions performed in Afghanistan between 2001 and 2007 are included in this book. In the humble opinion of all concerned, this select group best exemplifies the four Canadian military values. In other words, the concepts of duty, loyalty, integrity and courage are extremely easy to identify amongst this subset of soldiers given their actions overseas. Some will disagree with this choice and rationale. Certainly there are many others who were not decorated and yet could still offer powerful and impressive narratives that are equally as enlightening. Their recollections also deserve to be recorded.

The reasons behind the use of such narrow criteria are many. Without doubt, a definite starting and ending point were required. Such an undertaking as this could have theoretically continued until Canada’s mission concludes, until all of the deserving have been recognized, but a decision as to scope simply had to be made in light of very real time and resource constraints. It certainly would have been preferable to gather instructive stories from all who deployed to South-West Asia, military and civilian alike, but such is impossible. As well, while the individual medal recipients have secured a place in the nation’s history by virtue of their actions, their stories, what are in effect stories involving Canada’s newest veterans, deserve to be told in a timely fashion. By extension, it is also hoped that by capturing the first-hand accounts of certain Canadian soldiers, this volume will in some small measure add to the mounting historical record of Canada’s time in Afghanistan.<sup>6</sup> By providing narrowly focused and detailed accounts, this book will surely aid the future historian or social scientist in one way or another.

## INTRODUCTION

Beyond the few soldiers who received either a valour or bravery decoration, many more earned one of the Meritorious Service Decorations (Meritorious Service Cross (M.S.C.) and Meritorious Service Medal (M.S.M.)) or a Mention in Dispatches (MiD) for their commendable actions in this region of the world. In keeping with the proscribed boundaries of the book, they are not the focus. Nevertheless, individuals that have been alluded to in the text by their peers and who have also received one of the above forms of recognition have had their citation included in Appendix Two, arranged alphabetically, in order to facilitate an even greater understanding of Canadian military achievement in Afghanistan. The scope of activity in which Canadian personnel have been involved is truly immense.

Another large group has also been excluded from this publication, but not through any conscious decision or effort: those men and women who acted bravely in a manner deserving of the highest recognition, whether in the face of the enemy or not, but whose act went unseen by those in a position to recommend an award. Since the beginning of warfare itself, such a dilemma has been the proverbial scourge of the brave.<sup>7</sup> It will quickly become apparent that many more decorations could have been awarded if only circumstances had been a little different at the time.

And finally, some members of Canada's Special Operations Forces have also been decorated for their valiant conduct in Afghanistan during this time-frame. For reasons of operational security, however, their recollections are not presented here, nor are any details of their specific acts. The number of personnel actually deserving of a chapter is therefore certainly much higher than what the table of contents would suggest.<sup>8</sup>

Aside from being exemplars of the type of conduct valued by the military, this handful of select individuals also epitomizes much of the national mentality. What shines through in each account is that these soldiers are regular, everyday Canadians who, partly by choice and partly by circumstance, were thrust into a compromising situation that demanded immediate action. Their extreme humility is clearly evident. Humble sentiments that are in no way insincere (and that were certainly not prompted) conclude **each and every** chapter. Such a national characteristic has become the stuff of legend amongst our global neighbours. Canadians tend not as a people to trumpet their own accomplishments, preferring instead to translate individual praise

## INTRODUCTION

into something more diffuse and much less personal. In this, these soldiers are no different, for although they were decorated individually, many believe and constantly assert that their colleagues deserve just as much recognition and that any one of their fellow soldiers would have done the same thing in an identical scenario. Undoubtedly they would have. All profess that their decoration is not so much for what they did individually, but what their fellow soldiers with whom they were serving accomplished as a team. In most instances, they wear their medal not so much for themselves, but on behalf of their peers, as a mark of respect, as a symbol of remembrance, in trust.

If humility is a characteristic Canadian trait, then so too is diversity. Upon closer inspection, the individuals included in this book emerge as a varied collection of soldiers. Some are officers, others are non-commissioned members (NCMs); some have years of military experience, others have much less; most, but not all, were in the infantry; only a handful can claim Anglo-Saxon ancestry; some come from British Columbia, while others hail from Newfoundland and everywhere else in between; all held various levels of responsibility; all have different levels of education, from high school to college to university. What these facts reveal is that anyone, at any time, in any circumstance, can be a leader regardless of rank, age, gender, experience or cultural background.

And finally, given that decorations for valour and bravery have since been awarded for actions outside of the defined timeframe, that is, from mid-2007 onwards, a subsequent volume is certainly required. The content that follows is as complete and accurate as possible as of 29 September 2010. Any errors or omissions that crept into the text, and there are probably a few, were wholly unintended and are completely regretted.

## THE DECORATIONS

As another unintended consequence, this book also provides an opportunity to highlight some of the most prominent features of Canada's young, but comprehensive, system of honours. Over the course of the last 400 years or so, French and then British awards were conferred on the deserving. Whether in the form of a medal suspended by a colourful ribbon, a knighthood and accompanying title, a grant of land, or some other mark of high favour, such distinctions served to recognize those individuals who had made a

## INTRODUCTION

meaningful contribution in fields including, but not confined exclusively to, the military. Yet with Canada's coming of age and growing sense of identity – whether it was born on the muddy slopes of Vimy Ridge in April 1917 as many contend or was simply a natural by-product of the continual maturation process – the nation soon sought to create its own awards in order that its own citizens might be recognized in their own way.<sup>9</sup>

In 1967, the centenary of confederation, the goal of a distinctly Canadian system of honours was at least partially realized with the creation of the Order of Canada.<sup>10</sup> A few years later, in 1972, the number and type of possible awards available to Canadians was expanded with the institution of the three bravery decorations and the Order of Military Merit.<sup>11</sup> The entire system soon began to resemble that which is in use today. Recognizing the need for additional honours, 1993 saw the creation of the three military valour decorations. The system continues to evolve in order to meet changing circumstances.<sup>12</sup> In Canada, the Sovereign is the fount of all honours and the Governor General, the Sovereign's representative and commander-in-chief of Canada, acts on her/his behalf.

The Victoria Cross, the Star of Military Valour and the Medal of Military Valour are intended to recognize extreme acts of bravery, self-sacrifice or devotion to duty in the presence of the enemy. On 19 February 2007 at the Fairmont Château Laurier in Ottawa, the latter two decorations were presented for the very first time – in recognition of deeds performed in Afghanistan, deeds that are described in the pages that follow – thus marking a significant milestone in the history of our nation's honour system. The Canadian version of the elusive and prestigious Victoria Cross has yet to be awarded as of this writing.<sup>13</sup> Collectively, these three decorations are conferred for actions occurring in operations other than war, and of course during wartime itself, so long as Canadian personnel come under fire that is specifically directed towards them by an organized and armed enemy. Such an enemy need only be recognized as a hostile armed force by the Canadian people and can include the armed forces of another nation, armed terrorists, armed mutineers, armed rebels, armed rioters and armed pirates. The word "armed" is obviously key. In addition, the intent of Canadian personnel in responding to such threats must be the destruction of the opposing force as a viable entity. The three military valour decorations are not normally awarded for courageous acts committed during peacekeeping operations

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since factions in a dispute are not considered enemies of Canada and any measures taken by Canadian personnel in response to a threat will generally be made in self-defence.

The Victoria Cross is awarded for the most conspicuous bravery, a daring or pre-eminent act of valour or self-sacrifice, or extreme devotion to duty in the presence of the enemy. The insignia, consisting of a bronze, straight-armed cross pattée with raised edges, depicts a lion guardant standing, with the Royal crown above. A scroll bearing the Latin phrase PRO VALORE (For Valour) appears beneath. The reverse is plain, again with raised edges, and the date of the act itself is engraved in the centre, inside a raised circle. A small bronze link connects the cross to the “V” of the suspension bar; the bar itself is decorated with laurel leaves, while the recipient’s rank, name and unit are engraved on its reverse. A crimson ribbon suspends the entire insignia. Recipients are entitled to use the post-nominal letters V.C. in both English and French.

The Star of Military Valour is awarded for distinguished and valiant service in the presence of the enemy. The insignia consists of a four-pointed gold star with a maple leaf set into each of the four angles formed by the arms. A gold maple leaf, backed by red enamel and surrounded by a gold laurel wreath, is positioned directly in the centre of the obverse. The reverse includes a crown, the royal cypher (presently EIIR for Queen Elizabeth II) and the Latin phrase PRO VALORE, with the recipient’s rank, name and unit being engraved immediately below. The star is suspended by a loop through which the ribbon passes. The ribbon itself is crimson with a white stripe placed a short distance in from each edge. Recipients are entitled to use the post-nominal letters S.M.V. in English or É.V.M. (Étoile de la vaillance militaire) in French.

The Medal of Military Valour is awarded for acts of valour or devotion to duty in the presence of the enemy. The insignia consists of a circular gold medal. A maple leaf surrounded by a laurel wreath adorns the obverse, while the reverse bears the royal cypher surmounted by a crown, with the words PRO VALORE appearing at the bottom. A fleur-de-lys attaches the disc of the medal to a straight suspension bar through which the ribbon passes. The ribbon itself is crimson with three white stripes, one being placed in the middle with the others being set a short distance in from each edge.



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Recipients, whose rank, name and unit are engraved on the rim of the medal, are entitled to use the post-nominal letters M.M.V. in English or M.V.M. (Médaille de la vaillance militaire) in French.

Of a somewhat older vintage, the Cross of Valour, the Star of Courage and the Medal of Bravery are intended to recognize both military personnel *and civilians* who have risked their own lives to save or protect others. While valour decorations are given for actions undertaken in the presence of an armed enemy, bravery decorations are given for actions undertaken *not* in the presence of an armed enemy.

The Cross of Valour has been awarded in the past to individuals who have performed deeds of extreme bravery in the face of great danger, or in other words, for acts of the most conspicuous courage in circumstances of extreme peril. The insignia consists of a gold cross with four equal arms. Translucent red enamel covers a lozenge pattern that has been machined onto the cross underneath, while a gold maple leaf surrounded by a gold laurel wreath appears in the centre. The cross itself is edged in gold. The reverse includes a crown, the royal cypher and the words VALOUR and VAILLANCE, with the recipient's name being engraved beneath. A gold ball and loop attach the cross to a light crimson ribbon, and unlike other bravery decorations, it is worn around the neck by men and suspended from a bow by women. Recipients are entitled to use the post-nominal letters C.V. in both English and French.

The Star of Courage is awarded for acts of conspicuous courage in circumstances of great peril. The insignia consists of a four-pointed silver star with a maple leaf set into each of the four angles formed by the arms. A gold maple leaf, surrounded by a laurel wreath, also in gold, is positioned directly in the centre of the obverse. The reverse includes a crown, the royal cypher and the word COURAGE, with the recipient's name being engraved immediately below. The star is suspended by a loop through which the ribbon passes. The ribbon itself is light crimson with a blue stripe placed a short distance in from each edge. Recipients are entitled to use the post-nominal letters S.C. in English or É.C. (Étoile du courage) in French.

The Medal of Bravery is awarded for acts of bravery in hazardous circumstances. The insignia consists of a circular silver medal. A maple leaf

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surrounded by a laurel wreath adorns the obverse, while the reverse bears the royal cypher surmounted by a crown, the words BRAVERY and BRAVOURE on either side, and a six-leaf laurel flourish at the bottom. A fleur-de-lys attaches the disc of the medal to a straight suspension bar through which the ribbon passes. The ribbon itself is light crimson with three blue stripes, one being placed in the middle with the others being set a short distance in from each edge. Recipients, whose name is engraved on the rim of the medal, are entitled to use the post-nominal letters M.B. in both English and French.<sup>14</sup>

### THE RESEARCH PROCESS AND THE STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK<sup>15</sup>

Largely over the summer of 2008 and into the spring of 2009, members of the Canadian Forces Leadership Institute (CFLI), working in teams of two, one military and one civilian, interviewed each individual who agreed to sit down and tell his story, essentially the circumstances under which he earned his decoration. In order to minimize disruption to their busy schedules – many in fact were preparing to return to Afghanistan for yet another tour! – the interviewers travelled to the interviewees. Visits were therefore paid to Calgary, Alberta, Winnipeg, Manitoba, Toronto, Trenton, Petawawa and Ottawa, Ontario, Fredericton and Sackville, New Brunswick, and St. John's, Newfoundland. The transcripts from these back-and-forth, open-ended, question-and-answer interviews, which typically lasted about one and a half hours, were subsequently edited, condensed and synthesized into the smooth, flowing chapters that follow.

From the beginning, it was very much intended to let the recipients speak for themselves, recounting their actions and emotions, each in their own way. Their spoken words are much more powerful, evocative and meaningful than anything that could ever be written, so pride of place has rightfully been given to them. How could CFLI ever describe combat in the same manner and with the same intensity (and language!) as an infanteer with battle experience? Each chapter witnessed minimal editing while undergoing the transition from choppy interview transcript to polished account, with certain changes being made only in the interest of clarity, flow, security and sympathy. As much as possible, CFLI has attempted to reproduce the interviewees' comments *verbatim*. In some passages, their descriptions are neither grammatically correct nor in strict conformity with the Queen's

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English. Better we thought to leave it as is, with their words conveying a sense of urgency, in some cases even desperation, than to make it “acceptable” in the dry and formal academic sense. For the same reason, the occasional word of profanity remains embedded in the text.

Nearly 70 percent of the recipients whom CFLI approached responded with enthusiasm and agreed to speak about the circumstances under which they earned their decoration. The recipients who could not be interviewed – whether CFLI was unable to contact them or they politely declined our invitation – have had their citation reproduced in Appendix One, arranged chronologically, for the sake of completeness. Even the short, to the point citations are enough to command respect. Some decorations were regrettably announced too late in the editorial process for the respective soldiers to be approached for an interview.<sup>16</sup> With that being said however, CFLI will always be interested in collecting their stories ... or any other instructive story for that matter.

Individual chapters are organized chronologically from 2001 to 2007. The citation for the recipient being discussed, as taken directly from the *Canada Gazette*, without editing, appears at the beginning of each chapter to provide the reader with a general idea as to the circumstances under which the decoration was awarded, with the narrative that follows offering a more comprehensive and detailed account. The chapters pertaining to W.H. Fletcher (Chapter 3) and D.N. Quick (Chapter 12), both of whom received the S.M.V., are somewhat different than the others in content and form. Both officers received their decoration for their exceptional leadership and courage throughout their entire tour as opposed to a single incident. Rather than recount their specific actions on a particular day, their reflections and commentaries are broad in scope, reflective in nature and endeavour to highlight some of their “keys to success.”

The recollections that are presented in the following pages are exactly that, recollections. In some instances, the particular action for which a soldier was decorated occurred half a decade ago. Upon further study and investigation, which is sure to occur, it may be found that the accounts presented herein differ in some respects to accounts found elsewhere (and of course, vice-versa). The personal recollections of the soldiers who were there are presented in the following pages; this is how *they* remember the event as *they* experienced it,

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and as such, no attempt whatsoever was made to find outside corroboration. Such “confirmation” would have been offensive in the extreme.<sup>17</sup> In a few instances, the recollection of an individual participant differs in some minor respects to that of another who was involved in the same incident. Rather than play forensic detective and attempt to reconcile the apparent discrepancies, any conflict between accounts was simply noted (where it was deemed relevant) and the narrative allowed to proceed at pace. That different witnesses remember the same event differently, like a handful of stunned bystanders recalling the same car crash, is only confirmed by this book.

To ensure that each interviewee was completely comfortable with what he had said at the interview and how his comments had been incorporated into the resulting chapter, all participants had multiple opportunities to vet CFLI’s work. Having complete veto too allowed them to add, delete or modify as they saw fit. Chapter drafts were twice returned to each recipient for comment. *Absolutely nothing*, including their biographies, was published without their complete agreement and wholehearted consent. Such a back-and-forth process caused the book to be long in preparation, but given the respectful (and at times delicate) manner in which this subject had to be approached, it was the only way. The individuals included in this book are not only brave, but patient as well.

Many of the medal recipients included in this volume are still serving in the Canadian Forces (CF), with the vast majority having since been promoted and assigned different responsibilities. In order to minimize confusion, and to ensure a degree of timelessness, only the recipient’s rank on the date of the incident for which he was decorated is used throughout. For much the same reason, their biographies that begin every chapter do not include details as to their current employment, for postings happen often and duties change frequently.

In the end, this volume will ultimately serve as a partial record of the Canadian mission in Afghanistan, highlighting as it does the accomplishments of a handful of soldiers who performed their duty in accordance with the highest standards of conduct. Of importance, it records their personal experiences, their impressions and their emotions at a time when they took it upon themselves, whether consciously or not, to set an example for all

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to follow by acting courageously in the face of extreme danger. Readers of whatever background or inclination may be inspired and motivated, but if nothing else, they will most certainly be impressed.

Kingston,  
Autumn 2012.

*... 'tis true that we are in great danger;  
The greater therefore should our courage be.*

~ William Shakespeare  
*Henry V*, Act IV, Scene 1  
circa 1599

## NOTES

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1 Speech of Her Excellency the Right Honourable Michaëlle Jean on the Occasion of the Presentation of Military Valour Decorations and Meritorious Service Decorations, Ottawa, 19 February 2007.

2 The difficulties inherent in a comprehensive approach, where various national “assets” are employed simultaneously to affect a desired result, are briefly discussed in Craig Leslie Mantle, “How do we go about building peace while we’re still at war?” *Canada, Afghanistan and the Whole of Government Concept*, Canadian Forces Leadership Institute Technical Report 2008-02 (November 2008). Available upon request, <cda.cfli-ilfc@forces.gc.ca>.

3 Canada, Department of National Defence [DND], *Duty with Honour: The Profession of Arms in Canada* (2003), 30-31. An updated edition of *Duty with Honour* appeared in 2009, yet the four Canadian military values, given their overarching importance, remain unchanged.

4 Canada, DND, *Leadership in the Canadian Forces: Leading People* (2007), 44-45.

5 For a British example, see Dan Collins, *In Foreign Fields: Heroes of Iraq and Afghanistan in Their Own Words* (Rugby: Monday, 2007). From the American perspective, see Caspar W. Weinberger and Wynton C. Hall, *Home of the Brave: Honoring the Unsung Heroes in the War on Terror* (New York: Tom Doherty Associates, 2006), and, Larry Smith, *Beyond Glory: Medal of Honor Heroes in Their Own Words: Extraordinary Stories of Courage From World War II to Vietnam* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2003). Such are only representative examples of the genre.

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6 See endnote 17.

7 See Hugh A. Halliday, *Valour Reconsidered: Inquiries into the Victoria Cross and Other Awards for Extreme Bravery* (Montreal: Robin Brass Studio, 2006), and, T. Robert Fowler, *Courage Rewarded – The Valour of Canadian Soldiers Under Fire – 1900-2007* (Victoria: Trafford, 2008). See also, Sir Arnold Talbot Wilson and J.H.F. McEwan, *Galantry, Its Public Recognition and Reward in Peace and in War, at Home and Abroad* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1939).

8 Conversation with Colonel, Dr. Bernd Horn, O.M.M., M.S.M., C.D., ex-Deputy Commander Canadian Special Operations Forces Command, 25 June 2012. See also, *Canada Gazette*, Part I, Vol. 141, No. 48 (1 December 2007), 3290, as but one example.

9 The evolution of Canada's honours system dating from the French Regime to the present is succinctly summarized in Christopher McCreery, *The Canadian Honours System* (Toronto: Dundurn, 2005), 13-52. Dr. McCreery has published extensively on the orders, decorations and medals that comprise the Canadian Honours System; readers wishing to acquaint themselves with the relevant particulars would do well to begin with his works.

10 The complete story of the Order of Canada can be found in Christopher McCreery, *The Order of Canada: Its Origins, History, and Development* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2005).

11 The complete story of the Order of Military Merit can be found in Christopher McCreery, *The Order of Military Merit* (Ottawa: DND, 2012).

12 The Sacrifice Medal, for instance, was recently added to the Canadian Honours System and "was created to provide a tangible and lasting form of recognition for the sacrifices made by members of the Canadian Forces and those who work with them who have been wounded or killed under honourable circumstances as a direct result of a hostile action or action intended for a hostile force." Many individuals mentioned in this book have received the Sacrifice Medal. The inaugural presentation of the medal, which was given to 46 recipients or their next of kin, was held on 9 November 2009 at Rideau Hall. See Canada, Governor General [GG], News Release, 4 November 2009, "Sacrifice Medal Inaugural Ceremony." More recently, the Canadian Honours System witnessed the addition of the Operational Service Medal, which is intended "to recognize members of the Canadian Forces, Canadian police officers, members of an allied force, or Canadian civilians working at the request of the Canadian government and under the authority of the Canadian Forces, who served in a theatre of operations, provided direct support on a full-time basis to operations conducted in such a theatre or served under dangerous circumstances outside Canada." See Ibid., News Release, 8 September 2010, "Creation of the Operational Service Medal."

13 Recipients at that particular investiture included Fletcher, Tower, Denine, Fitzgerald, Lamont and Prohar. The history of the Canadian V.C. can be found in Canada, GG / DND, *Pro Valore – Canada's Victoria Cross*, available online in English at

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<[http://www.gg.ca/honours/pdf/Victoria\\_Cross\\_e.pdf](http://www.gg.ca/honours/pdf/Victoria_Cross_e.pdf)> and in French at <[http://www.gg.ca/honours/pdf/Victoria\\_Cross\\_f.pdf](http://www.gg.ca/honours/pdf/Victoria_Cross_f.pdf)>, both last accessed 25 September 2012. Beginning with the Crimean War (1854-1856) and continuing through the Second World War (1939-1945), many Canadians earned the British V.C., at the time the only iteration available. For an overview, see such works as Arthur Bishop, *Our Bravest and Our Best: The Stories of Canada's Victoria Cross Winners* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1995) and Tom Douglas, *Great Canadian War Heroes: Victoria Cross Recipients of World War II* (Toronto: James Lorimer, 2005).

14 According to the GG's website, the number of decorations that have been invested as of September 2012 is as follows: V.C., 0; C.V., 20 (to both military members and civilians); S.M.V., 10; S.C., 429 (to both military members and civilians); M.M.V., 55; and M.B., 2733 (to both military members and civilians).

15 An extremely detailed description of the project's complex methodology can be found in Craig Leslie Mantle, "From Start to Finish: The Research Methodology for *In Their Own Words: Canadian Stories of Valour and Bravery from Afghanistan, 2001-2007*," Canadian Forces Leadership Institute Monograph (forthcoming). A discussion of various ethical concerns that arose during the book's development can be found in Craig Leslie Mantle and Justin C. Wright, "Some Ethical Challenges in Military Personnel Research," in *Military Ethics: International Perspectives*, Lieutenant-Colonel Jeff Stouffer and Dr. Stefan Seiler, eds. (Kingston: CDA Press, 2010), 211-234. Both publications are available upon request, <cda.cfli-ilfc@forces.gc.ca>.

16 Announced in late September 2010, when the manuscript was for all intents and purposes complete, the decorations awarded to Warrant Officer Michael William Jackson (M.M.V.), Master Corporal Paul Alexander Munroe (M.M.V.) and Master Corporal Jeremy Joseph James Leblanc (M.M.V.) fall into this category; their citations nevertheless appear in Appendix One.

17 Other publications in which many of the individuals mentioned in this book sometimes appear include, but are of course not limited to: Lieutenant-Colonel Ian Hope, *Dancing with the Dushman: Command Imperatives for the Counter-Insurgency Fight in Afghanistan* (Kingston: CDA Press, 2008); Lieutenant-Colonel John Conrad, *What the Thunder Said – Reflections of a Canadian Officer in Kandahar* (Kingston and Toronto: CDA Press and Dundurn, 2009); Christie Blatchford, *Fifteen Days: Stories of Bravery, Friendship, Life and Death from Inside the New Canadian Army* (Toronto: Doubleday, 2007); Chris Wattie, *Contact Charlie: The Canadian Army and the Battle that Saved Afghanistan* (Toronto: Key Porter, 2008); Kevin Patterson and Jane Warren, eds., *Outside the Wire: The War in Afghanistan in the Words of Its Participants* (Toronto: Vintage, 2007); Lee Windsor, David Charters and Brent Wilson, *Kandahar Tour: The Turning Point in Canada's Afghan Mission* (Mississauga: Wiley, 2008); Ray Wiss, *FOB DOC – A War Diary – A Doctor on the Front Lines in Afghanistan* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2009); Ibid., *A Line in the Sand: Canadians at War in Kandahar* (Toronto: Douglas & McIntyre, 2010); Colonel Bernd Horn, "The Defence of Strong Point Centre – 14 October 2006," *Canadian Military Journal*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (Spring 2007), 7-18; Ibid., *No Lack*

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*of Courage – Operation Medusa, Afghanistan* (Toronto: Dundurn, 2010); Ibid., *No Ordinary Men: Special Operations Forces in Afghanistan* (Toronto: Dundurn, 2009); Ibid., ed., *Fortune Favours the Brave – Tales of Courage and Tenacity in Canadian Military History* (Toronto: Dundurn, 2009); Ibid., ed., *Show No Fear: Daring Actions in Canadian Military History* (Toronto: Dundurn, 2008); Sean M. Maloney, “Incursion at Howz-e Madad: An Afghanistan Vignette,” *Canadian Military History*, Vol. 17, No.1 (Winter 2008), 63-78; Ibid., *Enduring the Freedom: A Rogue Historian in Afghanistan* (Dulles, Virginia: Potomac, 2005); Ibid., *Confronting the Chaos: A Rogue Military Historian Returns to Afghanistan* (Annapolis, Maryland: U.S. Naval Institute, 2009); Ibid., *Fighting for Afghanistan: A Rogue Historian at War* (Annapolis, Maryland: U.S. Naval Institute, 2011); Ibid., *War in Afghanistan: Eight Battles in the South* (Kingston and Ottawa: CDA Press and Magic Light, 2012); J.L. Granatstein and Norman Hillmer, eds., *Battle Lines: Eyewitness Accounts from Canada’s Military History* (Toronto: Thomas Allen, 2004); Janice Gross Stein and Eugene Lang, *The Unexpected War: Canada in Kandahar* (Toronto: Viking, 2007); Peter Pigott, *Canada in Afghanistan - The War so Far* (Toronto: Dundurn, 2007); Adam Day, *Witness to War: Reporting on Afghanistan, 2004-2009* (Kingston: CDA Press, 2010); Major Mark Gasparotto, ed., *Clearing the Way: Combat Engineers in Kandahar* (Ardith, 2010); David Jay Bercuson, *The Fighting Canadians - Our Regimental History from New France to Afghanistan* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 2008); Melanie Murray, *For Your Tomorrow: The Way of an Unlikely Soldier* (Toronto: Random House, 2011); Valerie Fortney, *Sunray: The Death and Life of Captain Nichola Goddard* (Toronto: Key Porter, 2010); Ryan Flavelle, *The Patrol: Seven Days in the Life of a Canadian Soldier in Afghanistan* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 2011); Murray Brewster, *The Savage War: The Untold Battles of Afghanistan* (Mississauga: Wiley, 2011); Ted Barris, *Breaking the Silence: Untold Veterans’ Stories from the Great War to Afghanistan* (Toronto: Thomas Allen, 2009); Ron Corbett, *First Soldiers Down: Canada’s Friendly Fire Deaths in Afghanistan* (Toronto: Dundurn, 2012); Geoffrey Hayes and Mark Sedra, eds., *Afghanistan: Transition under Threat* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University, 2008); and Canada, DND, *Honours & Recognition for the Men and Women of the Canadian Forces* (various years). Researchers wishing to understand the Canadian mission in Afghanistan, at least from the military perspective, would do well to begin their investigations here. Incidentally, for his service in Afghanistan, Mark Anthony Gasparotto received the M.S.M.; his citation appears in Appendix 2.



THE  

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DECORATIONS

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# THE THREE CANADIAN MILITARY VALOUR DECORATIONS



VICTORIA CROSS



STAR OF  
MILITARY VALOUR



MEDAL OF  
MILITARY VALOUR

# THE THREE CANADIAN BRAVERY DECORATIONS



CROSS OF VALOUR



STAR OF COURAGE



MEDAL OF BRAVERY

## ADDITIONAL FORMS OF RECOGNITION RECEIVED FOR AFGHANISTAN



MERITORIOUS  
SERVICE CROSS



MERITORIOUS  
SERVICE MEDAL



MENTION IN DISPATCHES

# CHAPTER 1

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## *A CLOSE CALL ABOVE THE WHALE'S BACK*

LIEUTENANT KYLE MICHAEL STRONG

MEDAL OF BRAVERY ■ 14 MARCH 2002

*“LEADING SOLDIERS IS EASY WHEN YOU HAVE  
QUALITY PEOPLE UNDER YOU”*

On **MARCH 14, 2002**, while on a mission in Afghanistan, Capt Strong, then Lieutenant, and Mr. Vanthournout, then Warrant Officer, risked their lives to rescue a crew member who was falling out of the open back of a helicopter during takeoff. After landing on uneven ground, the pilot suddenly executed a premature takeoff, causing the victim to slide off the aircraft's lowered ramp. Hanging dangerously off the edge of the ramp, the man managed to grab onto a colleague's leg. Without concern for his own safety, Mr. Vanthournout removed part of his equipment and leaned out to grab the victim by his rucksack. Seeing his colleagues' predicament, Capt Strong also rushed forward and, in spite of the turbulence, assisted in pulling the victim from his precarious position back into the helicopter.<sup>1</sup>

KYLE STRONG WAS BORN AND RAISED IN MANUELS, NEWFOUNDLAND. HE ATTENDED NEWFOUNDLAND'S MEMORIAL UNIVERSITY WHERE HE STUDIED POLITICAL SCIENCE AND HISTORY. HE JOINED THE RESERVES DURING HIS FINAL YEARS OF SCHOOL, SERVING WITH THE 1<sup>ST</sup> BATTALION, ROYAL NEWFOUNDLAND REGIMENT (1 R NFLD R) IN ST. JOHN'S. HE SPENT TWO YEARS AS A PRIVATE AND THEN, FOLLOWING CONVOCAION IN 1998, JOINED THE REGULAR FORCE AS AN OFFICER. HE WAS POSTED TO THE 3<sup>RD</sup> BATTALION, PRINCESS PATRICIA'S CANADIAN LIGHT INFANTRY (3PPCLI) IN EDMONTON IN SEPTEMBER 2001. HE RETURNED TO THE RESERVES IN 2007, AGAIN WITH 1 R NFLD R. STRONG HAS ALSO WORKED WITH THE ROYAL CANADIAN MOUNTED POLICE (RCMP) AS A CIVILIAN MEMBER.

## CHAPTER 1

### WARRANT OFFICER ZACHARY REMI VANTHOURNOUT

MEDAL OF BRAVERY ■ 14 MARCH 2002

*“TO DO WHAT HAPPENED IN THAT HELICOPTER WAS INSTINCTIVE. YOU’RE JUST LOOKING AFTER YOUR BUDDY.”*

On MARCH 14, 2002, while on a mission in Afghanistan, Capt Strong, then Lieutenant, and Mr. Vanthournout, then Warrant Officer, risked their lives to rescue a crew member who was falling out of the open back of a helicopter during takeoff. After landing on uneven ground, the pilot suddenly executed a premature takeoff, causing the victim to slide off the aircraft’s lowered ramp. Hanging dangerously off the edge of the ramp, the man managed to grab onto a colleague’s leg. Without concern for his own safety, Mr. Vanthournout removed part of his equipment and leaned out to grab the victim by his rucksack. Seeing his colleagues’ predicament, Capt Strong also rushed forward and, in spite of the turbulence, assisted in pulling the victim from his precarious position back into the helicopter.<sup>2</sup>

ZACH VANTHOURNOUT IS A FIRST-GENERATION CANADIAN WHOSE FATHER CAME TO CANADA IN 1953 FROM HANDZAME, WEST FLANDERS, BELGIUM AND SETTLED IN CHATHAM, ONTARIO. THE YOUNGEST OF FIVE, VANTHOURNOUT GRADUATED FROM THE URSULINE COLLEGE, “THE PINES” HIGH SCHOOL, IN 1980. WITHIN WEEKS OF GRADUATION, HE JOINED THE ARMY AND EVENTUALLY BECAME A VEHICLE TECHNICIAN. AFTER EIGHT YEARS IN WINNIPEG, MANITOBA, HAVING ATTAINED THE RANK OF CORPORAL, HE RETURNED TO CIVILIAN LIFE, BUT RE-ENLISTED SIX MONTHS LATER. FOLLOWING SEVERAL POSTINGS IN CANADA DURING WHICH TIME HE ROSE THROUGH THE RANKS TO SERGEANT, HE DEPLOYED TO KOSOVO IN 2000 WITH 3 CANADIAN SUPPORT GROUP (OP KINETIC, ROTO 1). UPON HIS RETURN TO CANADA AND SUBSEQUENT PROMOTION TO WARRANT OFFICER, VANTHOURNOUT WAS POSTED IN JULY 2001 TO 3PPCLI IN EDMONTON. RETIRING AGAIN IN AUGUST 2002, HE SUBSEQUENTLY ATTENDED MOUNT ALLISON UNIVERSITY IN SACKVILLE, NEW BRUNSWICK, EARNING A BACHELOR’S OF ARTS DEGREE AND GRADUATING ON THE DEAN’S LIST. FOLLOWING MOUNT ALLISON, HE ATTENDED MEMORIAL UNIVERSITY WHERE HE EARNED HIS BACHELOR’S OF EDUCATION. AT TANTRAMAR REGIONAL HIGH SCHOOL IN SACKVILLE, HE HAS TAUGHT VARIOUS GEOGRAPHY, AUTOMOTIVE ENGINE AND BUSINESS COURSES, ALL THE WHILE COACHING VOLLEYBALL.

## CHAPTER 1

*With 3PPCLI being the designated Immediate Reaction Force (Land)<sup>3</sup> at the time of the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 (9/11), Lieutenant Strong and Warrant Officer Vanthournout deployed to Afghanistan in the first week of February 2002. Strong deployed as the commander of Transport Platoon, being responsible for the coordination and movement of equipment and supplies, while Vanthournout deployed as the production officer (Prod O) for Maintenance Platoon, being responsible for managing the maintenance and repair of all vehicles. Soon after the Canadians were installed at Kandahar Airfield (KAF), a composite platoon, consisting of Strong's transport platoon along with many members of Vanthournout's maintenance cell, was established and designated the Quick Reaction Force (QRF) for KAF, as well as the Reserve Force Platoon during operations "outside the wire." While employed as the latter, their duties consisted of defence and security (D&S) tasks, such as securing landing zones or reinforcing other platoons when they were engaged, if needed. Their tour ended that August.<sup>4</sup>*

*On the morning of 14 March 2002, having been repositioned to Bagrām in Paktia Province in northeastern Afghanistan as the Reserve Force Platoon for Op HARPOON,<sup>5</sup> Strong, Vanthournout and a complement of about 45 soldiers boarded an American Chinook helicopter for a 50-minute flight to a site called the Whale's Back, a particular hill towards the southeast corner of the Shah-i-Kot Valley, near the Takur Ghar Mountains. The platoon had been assigned to undertake D&S tasks and, on this operation, it was their responsibility to secure the main landing zone for follow-up troops who would exploit and continue the advance; they would also be used to reinforce and exploit during any fighting with the enemy that might occur. Strong recalled that the weather on that particular morning was fairly normal, nothing seeming out of the ordinary.*

*It was a typical Afghan day ... blue sky, the sun blazing down. The landing zone in that first operation was at an altitude of approximately 8,500 feet, so there was a pretty good difference in the temperature by day and by night. But at that point it was a very hot day, just like every other day in the mountains. You could look up on the mountains and see patches of snow here and there, but there was no snow on the ground, just a lot of dust flying around. The ground was very hard, very sun-baked, so it almost felt like rock.*

## CHAPTER 1

*Vanthournout remembered certain noises and smells as the helicopter neared the landing zone.*

Diesel fuel and jet fuel and dust. The prop wash. The whining of the gas turbine. It's funny. I can close my eyes and still see the tail rotor of the Chinook spinning. That whir is still there. It's always there.

*Both men vividly remember the conditions inside the Chinook as they approached the valley. Strong recalled just how crowded it was aboard the helicopter because of the large amount of supplies that each man had taken for the five-day operation and the fact that some machinery was needed to move materiel once they were on the ground.*

There were 40 to 50 of us with full kit. We were pretty heavily loaded-down with rucksacks and ammunition. We also had a Gator loaded with us. The Gator is a small four-wheel, all-terrain vehicle; we used it to move around supplies once we were on the mountain. It was located right at the very end of the tailgate, so it had to be unloaded first before everybody else got off. So we were jammed in there pretty tight.

I remember, when we first got on, it was very hot inside. But, as we flew, there was more of a draft since they had left the back ramp door open. The Americans always had a tail gunner on the Chinook and he just sat at the end of the ramp. At about ten minutes from the landing zone, he fired his machine gun. Nobody was expecting it. All of a sudden he started to shoot. I remember looking around the aircraft afterwards and it was very quiet. Nobody was doing any talking. What we found out later was that there was a vehicle actually underneath us and that's what he'd been shooting at.

As you're flying, it's hard to hear. If you were sitting next to someone, you could shout and be heard, but at that point it was very quiet. I think everybody was just kind of going through in their minds what was about to take place and trying to think about what would happen, what might happen, and what to do. It was almost like you could feel the tension, but it wasn't a nervous tension, more like anticipation. Without a doubt, everybody was ready to go; we couldn't have been more ready. You could feel *that* all through the aircraft



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and you could sense *that* amongst the soldiers. I remember just kind of looking around and you felt reassured because you could tell that they knew what they had to do and they were all ready to do it. I guess that was a source of strength that I was able to gain from them.

*Like others, Vanthournout felt the tension rising when the signal was given that the helicopter was only two minutes away from the Whale's Back.*

On the way out, I was sitting by the open rear ramp, watching the countryside whiz by below at 100 knots. I was wondering if we got hit while in transit, how would I survive? How would any of us survive? I vividly remember having the "Bugs Bunny Physics" thought and thinking, "If we get hit, if we don't blow up in mid-air, as the chopper goes down, I'll just bail out of the end here at the last second." Then I pulled my head out of my ass and said to myself, "Jesus, don't be so stupid. If we get hit, we're finished, period."

As you're landing, you're flying between mountain peaks and you can feel the air getting cooler, a little thinner, and you get that two-minute warning from the loadie [loadmaster]. Then the heart starts going and the stuff that's going through your mind is, "What am I going into?" You're on the two-minute warning and you're putting 110 pounds of kit on your back. I mean, literally, I had ten litres of water, three days of rations, a sleeping bag, a change of socks, underwear, and the rest was all fighting stuff ... ammunition and various explosives. One good spark and I'm a grease spot. I was loaded down. It was heavy.

I had a master corporal who was not the biggest and strongest guy. He was kind of a skinny guy, not a lot of meat on him. There was no way he was going to carry 110 pounds on his back ... no way! I ended up taking some of his stuff too. But that's what you do, right? You need the people. You've got to get them out there. You've got to go.

*Strong recalled that he was justifiably preoccupied with the possibility of enemy contact during the flight towards the landing zone.*

As it ended up happening, some of us were towards the tail end, with the Gator pretty much right at the very end of it. We weren't

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sure what type of resistance we were going to meet, so everybody was expecting that it was going to be a “hot” landing zone, with the enemy present. That being said, there were several helicopters on the mission and we had troops that had deployed there just before us, so of course we were listening and hoping to get some info from them to see if they were receiving any fire or not. Basically, as we were flying in, we were told to get ready. I had the headset on and I was listening to the pilots.

*Because of uneven terrain, the Chinook touched down on the Whale’s Back at a precarious angle. When the Gator was off-loaded, the shift in weight caused the helicopter to begin sliding down an incline. Noticing that something was wrong, the American pilot tried to remedy the situation by applying full power to lift the Chinook up into the air where he could stabilize it and then attempt another landing. This quick and unexpected action resulted in the helicopter rocking from side-to-side and back-and-forth, knocking many of the troops off their feet. As Strong remembers, there was a great deal of confusion over what had caused the Chinook to buck violently and bob in the air once the landing zone had been reached.*

The landing zone was very barren; very hard and rocky, with a lot of jagged edges, steep slopes and things like that. The helicopter landed on a bit of a slope or a peak and we immediately began to exit. The Gator went out first. Then the OC [Officer Commanding], Major Shane Schreiber,<sup>6</sup> went out, followed by the sergeant-major, Master Warrant Officer Jim Butters. We were all beginning to go out when there was a sudden shift in the helicopter and I fell backwards and then forward again and ended up on my knees. Of course, nobody knew what was going on. Everything was sort of being tossed about. Everyone just automatically assumed that either we had taken some fire or the helicopter had been hit by some type of rocket or there was a battle going on. And so we ended up back in the air almost right away. The helicopter was rocking back-and-forth.

*Vanthournout compared the turbulence to the rough and tumble play in a hockey game.*

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As soon as we landed, it was like getting checked. I'm not a big hockey player, but that's the only analogy I can give. I got thrown against the bulkhead of the aircraft. It was just like, "Wham!" I got tossed over and landed on my ass. I'm sitting there and I've got 110 pounds on my back and the edge of the ramp is just ahead of me.

*Several men fell to the ground from the airborne helicopter without sustaining any serious injuries while another, Corporal Paul Scott, began slipping off the lowered ramp as the helicopter gradually gained more altitude. Strong watched in horror as Corporal Scott began sliding off the tail end of the aircraft to almost certain injury or death.<sup>7</sup>*

Scott, who was our C6 gunner, got tossed just ahead of me. He was picked up in the air, got completely flipped around, and landed lying face down. That was when he started to slip out. The person next to me, Corporal John Maddison, had fallen but he had fallen backwards and landed pretty much sitting up. Corporal Scott grabbed a part of the ramp with one hand and Corporal Maddison's foot with the other. But, again, Scott was a C6 gunner and he was pretty heavily loaded down.<sup>8</sup> So he began to slide out. I don't know for sure, but at this point I would guess we were probably ten metres in the air. But the pilot, I think, was still trying to gain control of the helicopter because we were still climbing and rocking around.<sup>9</sup>

*Warrant Officer Vanthournout was sure the heavily weighted down Corporal Scott would end up taking Corporal Maddison with him as he fell out of the helicopter.*

Paul Scott's on his way out the door. All I see is him doing "Mr. Fucking Friction," right? He's trying to hold on to anything. He grabbed Maddison's leg, our medic, and Maddison is holding onto the strut of the ramp and Scott's sliding. All I can think of is, "Holy fuck, he's going!" I'm trying to hook him with my foot to try and hold on to him because that's how far I am from the edge of the ramp. I'm trying to get him and I can't.

*Both Strong and Vanthournout would later marvel at how everything seemed to slow down at that point. The whole incident took place in just a couple of*

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*seconds, but it seemed to the two men that time literally stood still. Lieutenant Strong managed to reach Corporal Scott and get hold of him.*

I just crawled out on my knees and grabbed him by his rucksack. He had his arm extended and there was a strap on his rucksack running from under his arm. So I grabbed onto his rucksack and I don't know how long I was holding him. I just don't know. I would guess it wasn't that long, but it felt like a long time. I was trying to shout to the American loadmaster, who was supposed to have been there, but the problem was that he had been tossed out of the helicopter along with a couple of others ... pretty violently actually. I was trying to shout at him to tell the pilot to land because I didn't have the headset on any more. At this point, I was also beginning to slide. I couldn't hold the weight. Then I looked over to my right to shout for someone else to grab onto Corporal Scott and Warrant Officer Vanthournout was already taking off his rucksack. He then moved out on my right and came up and grabbed on as well. It's a good thing that he had taken off his rucksack because I think if he hadn't, the weight alone would have probably shoved us all up and pushed us all out.

*From Warrant Officer Vanthournout's perspective:*

I just bail out of the ruck, lean forward, grab and pull. Then I look beside me and I see Lieutenant Strong pulling too. This is absolutely unreal. All you know is that you've got a guy going over. By this time, Corporal Scott is holding onto Mad Dog [Corporal Maddison], one leg on, and he's hanging. He's going. We're a hundred feet in the air.

*Just when it seemed that all four men – Strong, Vanthournout, Maddison and Scott – would be dragged off the ramp, the soldiers behind them sprang into action. Lieutenant Strong felt muscular hands clamp onto him; he vividly remembers the entire moment, including Corporal Scott's reaction to the very dangerous and precarious circumstance in which all found themselves enmeshed.*

We just kept slipping and then basically what happened was there were individuals behind us who grabbed on to us and held on. We

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formed a big chain inside the helicopter and we managed to hold on to Scott. I don't know how long it all took. I guess a couple of minutes. That's what I would guess, and I would say we were probably about 50 metres above the ground by the time the pilot was able to regain control. Of course, the whole danger at this point in my mind, once I felt that the aircraft was basically stable again, was, "Well, if there's a battle or something going on, they'll start shooting at him," because half of his body was dangling outside the helicopter. We were trying to drag him all the way back in, but we just couldn't because of the weight and the force of gravity, so we just had to hold on.<sup>10</sup>

I remember I was at the edge of the ramp and I could look down at the ground below. I remember some features plainly in my mind. I remember the look on Corporal Scott's face when he looked up as I was pretty much face-to-face with him. I wouldn't say it was fear. It was almost a look of bewilderment. He didn't seem to know what was happening. I saw him when things started to happen and it looked just as if somebody had picked him up, flipped him completely around, and put him down because he ended up being pretty well parallel with the ground. It was very violent. I think when he landed and he began to slip, it just looked as if he was saying, "I don't understand what's going on here. How can this be happening?" Then, after that, there was only one other time where I can remember him looking up ... because I kept shouting to him. After I had moved forward to help – I was probably nearest to him – I kept shouting to him, "Just hang on! Hang on!" He looked up once and he had that kind of look on his face like, "There's no way that I'm going to let go." It was almost like a look of, "Don't let go of ME. Hang on. Hang on." I never really saw what I would call fear on his face. It was more like, "I'm not letting go. Don't YOU let go. We'll land and everything will be fine."

When I could feel that we were going down to land, I was thinking, "If he doesn't get his legs up, the helicopter is going to crush them as it comes down." When we first grabbed him, he was probably about halfway out and slid some more after we had a hold of him ... out to about the full extent of his arms. All you could see of him was

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his arms and head. I think it was the aircraft kind of pitching and moving that allowed us to pull him in a bit. We were able to get him up to about mid-chest. And as we came in to land the second time – you could kind of sense that we were getting close to the ground – I was shouting at him, “Get your legs up! Get your legs up! Get your legs up!” Whether or not Corporal Scott did it himself or whether the pilot or the bucking of the aircraft did it, I don’t know. But when we landed, his legs were up and he got up and he was fine. After we were on the ground, we went over to Corporal Scott and made sure that he had everything he needed because, obviously, we still had to carry on with the mission. To his credit, he got up, grabbed his C6 and said, “Sir, I’m ready to go. Where do you want me?”

*Vanthournout was grateful for the team effort when all seemed lost, and he was particularly impressed by the actions of Lieutenant Strong.*

I’m pulling for all I can and I’m holding but it’s going to go one way or the other. Then Corporal Chris Churchill who was behind me grabs me around the waist and pulls back and it’s just this human chain with everybody pulling. But the thing was that Lieutenant Strong, when Corporal Scott first started to fall, was still a few people back yet. He went by about two or three people to come up and help. So after we get on the ground and we finally bail out of the aircraft and we’re in an all-around defensive position, I said to him, “Sir, that was a pretty conspicuous act you just pulled off.” You recognize that right away. For me, it was just luck. I mean for Scott it was bad luck. For me, it was the right place at the right time. Anybody else in my position would have done the same thing. But, for Lieutenant Strong to come up, grab and pull and choose to put himself in that situation ... that doesn’t happen every day. You know, it was really funny at the end of it. You’re on the ground, the helicopter takes off and leaves you in the middle of no man’s land, and it’s like, “Okay. Good job out there. We made it. We’re all in one piece. Let’s go!”<sup>11</sup>

*One of Strong’s biggest concerns during the incident was that the helicopter was a “sitting duck” for several long minutes and could potentially be brought down by enemy fire.*

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It turned out that there wasn't any fire, which probably saved Corporal Scott and, as well, saved the aircraft. I'm sure the helicopter was probably sitting there a good couple of minutes before the pilot was able to regain control. Without a doubt, if there had been enemy fire we most likely would have been shot down. We had been told to expect it on insertion and so that was why I think it was foremost in everybody's mind. We were all thinking, "Well, if they're going to wait until there are more of us on the ground, they'll probably wait until the helicopters approach before they hit."

*Strong and Vanthournout were extremely impressed with the professionalism of the men who had accompanied them on the mission. Once the helicopter had landed safely, there was still a job to do and, as Lieutenant Strong pointed out, that job got done.*

Once we were on the ground, I think everybody was a little bit on edge. I think we were expecting a lot more, especially after what had just happened on the aircraft. As they flew away, we were expecting something to explode, and I just remember there being a calm, a quiet, and thinking, "This is the calm before the storm." We sat there for a couple of minutes and just waited and, as the Chinook flew away, it was kind of one of those things where the silence was deafening. We just waited a couple of minutes, took a deep breath, and made sure everybody was okay. Then we moved off and did what we had to do.

The one lesson in this case that speaks volumes to me is the professionalism of the Canadian soldier. Every single person that we had out there, as soon as the incident on the helicopter was over, picked up their gear and moved on and that was it. To be honest, there was no more mention of it; there was nothing. Everybody just knew they had a job to do and they did it.

Everybody just seemed to gel as a group even more once we were on the ground. I don't necessarily think it was just because of that incident. It might have been just because of the operation that we were on ... the mission. But I think in terms of the incident itself, going through it maybe reassured everybody a little bit. This was

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one of the first missions that Canada had been on in a long, long time with a known enemy, a defined enemy. We were actually going out to find the enemy and destroy them. I think, after the incident, our feeling was just that little bit of, "Okay, we'll be able to get by. No matter what happens, we'll be able to move on. We'll be able to carry on." When we first left Bagrām, everybody was on edge. There was a lot of nervousness. There was a lot of excitement as well, just not knowing what was going to happen. Once that incident on the helicopter happened, I think it sort of calmed everybody down a little bit and we all just said, "Wow, that was a fairly big thing to have happen and we all got through fine. So bring on whatever's next!"

*Vanthournout similarly recalled that it was all "business" once the helicopter landed and the troops were safely on the ground.*

Nobody really knew what was going on with Scott except for the few guys at the back of the helicopter. But when we got on the ground, control was positive; everybody was mission-oriented. "Go ahead and make this work. We have to take up a position 200 metres up that 45-degree incline. Off you go! Get up there and set up your position." It worked out well; everybody was very, very mission-oriented. I distinctly remember thinking that the hill we had to climb was gonna suck, the air was so thin that you would be out of breath in moments, sucking oxygen through every orifice and pore in your body.

I have to admit though that after a few days of babysitting a landing zone – we were out there five days – people's attitudes started showing a bit, but then it's just a matter of refocusing. That's really what it takes. I think it's important for me as a warrant officer to be doing the same things as my guys. They were probably saying, "If Prod O can pull it off, so can we!" The one thing I tried to sell in this mission was that I'm not just going to ask you to go out and do this stuff. I'm going to go with you in whatever capacity that supports you, even if it means being a rifleman, for which I received some grief from my electrical technical sergeant-major. It's one of those styles of leadership that I decided to adopt.



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*Strong and Vanthournout recalled that their emotions were at a fever pitch throughout the entire operation. Like others, Strong had to deal with a certain amount of fear.*

I was scared to death to be honest. I think everybody was when we boarded the aircraft. Everybody was afraid, but, again, it's just one of those things where you just fall back and say, "You know what? I'm ready for this. I'm trained for this." And we were all ready. When I was holding on to Corporal Scott, I don't think I had a fear of falling. It was one of those things where I remember thinking, "Is this the way it's going to end, before it even starts? Am I going to fall out here, pretty much on day one? Is our D-Day going to end like this?" It was more a fear, not of falling, but that it was going to end for me; that for some reason I wouldn't get back on the ground and I wouldn't be part of the mission. I just kept thinking, "No, this is not the way it's supposed to happen. We're going to land. I'm supposed to land and we're supposed to get off and carry on with the mission." It was a fear that I was going to have to leave or something ... and I didn't want that. I just wanted to get on the ground so we could carry on. It wasn't until later on down the road where you start to think – and even now where I think – "What would have changed? What if we all had fallen? Would we all have died? Would we all have been hurt?"

*Vanthournout suggested that being afraid can be used in a positive way in a dangerous situation.*

I think fear is a good thing to have. It keeps you sharp. It keeps you thinking. The one thing I learned from critical incidents and stress training is that you need to breathe. When we got that two-minute warning, the thought, "When am I going to take the hit?" was going through my mind. I was expecting the hit. I was expecting the bump and it just never came. And you're breathing. I have to admit, I was nervous, but it was a good nervousness, as in focused. The only other way I can explain it, as a long time coach and athlete, is being mentally prepared for a game. This is the show. This is your national tournament that you're at and it's time to go. It's a heightened expectancy and you're really not scared, but you're nervous as hell. I had

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a stronger sense of trust in the guys around me than I think I did in myself. I knew if push came to shove, they'd be there.

*Lieutenant Strong credited the operation's success in great part to the fact that many of the troops had previous experience and considered himself very fortunate to be able to rely on soldiers who had been at risk in the past.*

Most of those guys had been in Bosnia. That was one of the positives that came with the operation. I was lucky to have senior corporals, master corporals, sergeants and warrant officers who had deployed before, some of them several times in Bosnia. So they had experience already. For the rest of us, it was all new being in that type of environment. The mission itself was different but, without a doubt, being able to draw on their experiences helped me as a leader because it was my first mission.

*Lieutenant Strong also had a great deal of respect for Warrant Officer Vanthournout, particularly since he was willing to take on any task, not just the work of overseeing the maintenance and repair of vehicles.*

He was a maintainer – as were several others on the mission – but he was one of those guys who was willing and able to raise a hand to say, “Sure, anything I can do to help.” He was a warrant officer, which is a senior NCO [Non-Commissioned Officer], and he was very senior, very capable; an outstanding individual through and through. When we needed people, he would raise his hand and say, “I’ll go. And you can use me in whatever capacity you feel you need to.” He ended up being a rifleman even though he was a warrant officer. He was completely fine doing that. When we loaded at Bagrām, we wanted to make sure everybody was on board and the warrant and I got on last, just before they loaded the Gator. He went well beyond what he had to do by making sure everybody was on and had what they needed. He just wanted to be one of the first off to help.

*Both Strong and Vanthournout had high praise for one other individual ... Warrant Officer Gilles Payette, Strong's second-in-command (2IC). Lieutenant Strong considered him the most professional NCO he had ever worked with.*

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I relied heavily on Warrant Officer Payette and I could go on at length about him. He was an intimidating soldier ... hardcore, focused, highly motivated, trained, exceptionally fit. He led by example. His support of the chain of command was only equalled by his support for his subordinates. He was the consummate professional and I relied on him throughout our work-up training and deployment. He was the strength. He was the backbone for everybody. He kept everyone focused. He kept everybody under control and you could just sense it about him. I mean, when you think about the typical NCO, that's him. We were lucky enough to share a really close relationship. We just got along very well and, without a doubt, without him there, I think things would have been different. It was the right place at the right time for me. His presence was probably the single most important thing that I had going for me. And I knew that I could count on him and rely on him for everything ... everything. Without question, he made me better as a leader.

*Warrant Officer Vanthournout similarly believed that his colleague, Warrant Officer Payette, was an outstanding soldier, one who added much to the team.*

If you've got to go to war, you want to go to war with a guy named Gilles Payette. He was just absolutely amazing. When it came down to it, I was a very happy guy when Gilles showed up. Very, very happy. Gilles was a no-nonsense guy. When we got our mission orders, we were told that it would be insertion by helicopter. I believe the assumption was a Chinook because of the size of the detachment. I distinctly remember the work-up disembarkation drills that Payette had us do. We didn't have a Chinook to practice with, and I remember him being pissed about that. So we went into a cleared area, he scraped an outline of a Chinook in the dirt, and we practiced our disembarkation drills and getting into an all-around defensive posture. I believe that that was an essential element of our "get to it" attitude on the Whale. We knew exactly what to do and how to do it because an extremely competent and professional senior NCO knew exactly how to prepare men for battle. I know for me it offered a sense of security in that we all knew our jobs. As an aside, before my son went to RMCC [Royal Military College of Canada], we were watching *Truth Duty Valour* on TV.<sup>12</sup> They were showing work-ups

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for Afghanistan and who was the master warrant officer they were talking to in Wainwright, Alberta? Gilles Payette! At that time, I told my son, “Sean, if you have to go to war, that there is the guy you want to go with.”

*Strong and Vanthournout were pleased and proud when they duly learned that they had each been awarded an M.B., although they both were of the same opinion that it was something anyone would have done in their place. Lieutenant Strong considered it a group effort.*

Obviously you're surprised when you receive the news. But even to this day, I don't feel like we did anything that anybody else wouldn't have done. It just happened that we were the next guys in line and the incident happened ahead of us. I had to grab him or else he would have fallen. It wasn't just a situation of the warrant officer and myself going out to grab Corporal Scott. There were guys behind us who grabbed onto us and guys behind them who grabbed onto them. It was just a case of receiving the medal on behalf of everybody on that helicopter more than anything else. It's too bad they couldn't give it to everybody. I certainly didn't expect it and certainly didn't ask for it and didn't think we deserved any special recognition for our action. That's for sure. It was part of our job and it was part of what we were there to do. It's just kind of one of those things that happens during the course of your job and in the course of what you're doing.

I don't think what I did was necessarily a quality of leadership; I think it's a quality of humanity. It's a case of being able to help when you can. The fact that we were able to help a soldier on an operation in Afghanistan just adds that little bit to it. I think fate had something to do with it all because of the team that we had assembled; I don't think we could have handpicked a better group of soldiers. A lot of people have asked me since, “How did you feel going in with a mixed group?” because, as the Reserve Force Platoon, we had infantry and maintainers and, to be honest, that never even crossed my mind. It never even occurred to me because they were such a good bunch of soldiers and so highly trained and so professional in everything they did. Leading soldiers is easy when you have quality people under you.

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It's always, without a doubt, a challenge, but the job is so much easier when you have people you can count on. It's an honour to serve with men and women who are of such quality. That's why we're doing so well in Afghanistan and bringing so much good to the people of Afghanistan. Just give us the opportunity to show the world what we can do.

As for the award, I'm happy to have received it. I don't mind talking about it when people ask, but I don't do it as a habit. It affects others, I think, more so than me. In my mind, it was something that I was doing in the course of my duties. I'm proud, obviously, but I don't think it was anything over and above what anyone else would have done in the same situation. I don't necessarily think that my actions merited special recognition, but if somebody else does, then I'll gladly accept it on behalf of everybody I served with, particularly the guys in call sign "Cowboy." That was our call sign there.

*Likewise, Warrant Officer Vanthournout was surprised to learn of the award. Although he had heard that he was being considered for some kind of recognition, he didn't know it would be as prestigious.*

I knew something was being written up. I didn't know to what level or whether it was going to be a Commander-in-Chief [Vice-Regal] Commendation or a CDS [Chief of the Defence Staff] Commendation or just a slap on the ass and "Off you go, thanks for coming." I was kind of shocked to hear it was an M.B. To do what happened in that helicopter was instinctive. You're just looking after your buddy. Really, that's what it was and, yeah, it was conspicuous to somebody. But in the end – I'm trying not to sound too humble here – I was just doing my job, as I'm sure most of the other award winners are saying.<sup>13</sup> They're just doing their job, right? I remember being much more proud of my accomplishments when we, the Battle Group [BG], were all brought back together in December of 2003 for the awarding of the Commander-in-Chief Unit Commendation.<sup>14</sup> You get close to people. You form a unit. You form a brotherhood. I'm going to look after you. You guys are going to look after me. It wasn't spoken, but it was there.

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CAPTAIN STRONG, WHO HAD SINCE BEEN PROMOTED, AND MR. VANTHOURNOUT, WHO HAD SINCE RETIRED, WERE INVESTED WITH THEIR MEDALS OF BRAVERY BY THE THEN-GOVERNOR GENERAL AND COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF OF CANADA, HER EXCELLENCY THE RIGHT HONOURABLE ADRIENNE CLARKSON, AT RIDEAU HALL ON 25 JUNE 2004 AND 12 SEPTEMBER 2003, RESPECTIVELY.

## NOTES

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1 *Canada Gazette*, Part I, Vol. 137, No. 39 (27 September 2003), 2970.

2 Ibid.

3 The IRF(L) is a standby, light, fully mobile force designed to respond quickly to emerging overseas missions; this task revolves continuously throughout the army.

4 By way of additional background, according to a conversation between K.M. Strong and the editors: As the IRF(L), 3PPCLI deployed as a coalition partner on the American-led Op ENDURING FREEDOM in Afghanistan in response to 9/11. For the CF, the deployment was named Op APOLLO. The Canadians deployed as a sub-unit of the U.S. Army's 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, 3<sup>rd</sup> Brigade Combat Team, 187<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment (The Rakkasans). In theatre, taken together, they formed Task Force RAKKASAN. The first Canadian unit sent to Afghanistan in response to 9/11, 3PPCLI was initially deployed in defensive positions around KAF as it was still being fought for at the time. As it happened, there was only one rotation of land forces for Op APOLLO. Following the end of Strong and Vanthournout's tour, the Canadian land component's mission in Afghanistan was changed and redesignated Op ATHENA, with all operations located in Kabul. Later, the mission would again be changed and redesignated Op ARCHER, located back in Kandahar. Rotation 0 of Op APOLLO deployed on the understanding that the deployment would last at least six months and could even last up to two full years.

5 During March 2002, a small number of soldiers from 3PPCLI were in the mountains of Paktia Province east of Gardez on Op ANACONDA, a U.S.-led coalition effort to search for and destroy al-Qaeda and Taliban fighters. Op HARPOON was the follow-on Canadian operation, a joint Canadian-American assault using land and air forces to eliminate a specific pocket of al-Qaeda and Taliban resistance. Consisting of the majority of 3PPCLI and elements of the U.S. Army from Task Force RAKKASAN under the tactical command of Lieutenant-Colonel Pat Stogran, it was launched in the early hours of 13 March 2002 and was completed less than a week later on 19 March. Conducted in roughly the same region as Op ANACONDA, Op HARPOON was the first Canadian ground offensive / combat operation since the Korean War. For his service in Afghanistan, Patrick Benton Stogran received the M.S.C.; his citation appears in Appendix 2.

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6 For his service during a subsequent deployment to Afghanistan, Shane Bruce Schreiber received the M.S.M.; his citation appears in Appendix 2.

7 At this point, Vanthournout thought Scott “was a dead man.” He also remembers the aircraft being oriented nose up, as all he could see was a lot of ground and very little sky.

8 Strong recalled that Scott, as a C6 gunner, was carrying two additional belts of ammunition for his weapon as well as his regular kit. He estimated that the total weight carried by him added up to about 150 pounds. Vanthournout also remembers carrying a good deal of spare ammunition for the C6, adding to his already heavy load.

9 Gaining altitude would also have helped the pilot reorient himself by clearing the dust cloud kicked up by the rotor wash.

10 Vanthournout remembers thinking, “At this point, I was pretty worried that if we took a hit I would be screwed because all my kit was off.” He would not have been able to do much had the helicopter landed violently and then been immediately attacked.

11 Although Vanthournout remembers Strong coming forward, Strong remembers the situation somewhat differently. Strong distinctly recalls that he was beside, rather than behind, Corporal Scott. Nevertheless, the fact remains, and is completely undisputable, that Lieutenant Strong placed himself in grave danger in order to prevent Scott from falling out of the airborne aircraft. Such is the confusion of the moment.

12 An action-oriented series that profiles a number of diverse occupations within the CF in a variety of contexts ranging from training, to exercises, to operations. The title of this series, incidentally, is also the motto of RMCC.

13 Indeed they are, as readers will quickly realize.

14 From the Governor General’s website: “The Commander-in-Chief Unit Commendation may be awarded to any unit or sub-unit of the Canadian Forces, or to any similar organization of a foreign armed force working with or in conjunction with the Canadian Forces, that has performed an extraordinary deed or activity of a rare high standard in extremely hazardous circumstances. Commander-in-Chief Unit Commendations are restricted to war or war-like conditions in an active theatre of operations.” See Canada, Governor General, “Commander-in-Chief Unit Commendation,” <[http://archive.gg.ca/honours/hon/02/index\\_e.asp](http://archive.gg.ca/honours/hon/02/index_e.asp)> (30 April 2009), last accessed 25 September 2012.





# CHAPTER 2

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## *INTO THE VALLEY OF DEATH*

CORPORAL DANNY JOSEPH MATTHEWS

STAR OF COURAGE ■ 2 OCTOBER 2003

*“BUT IF PEOPLE WANT TO DO SOMETHING FOR ME,  
GIVE ME MY FRIENDS BACK!”*

On OCTOBER 2, 2003, after their convoy's lead vehicle had struck an anti-tank mine, MCpl Jason Hamilton and Cpl Danny Matthews entered an undefined minefield to recover three of their stricken comrades, near Kabul, Afghanistan. Despite the imminent danger of exploding ammunition and grenades complicating an already chaotic scene, MCpl Hamilton courageously led the rescue party, prodding the ground in front of him for more mines. He and Cpl Matthews worked their way onto the dangerous terrain until they reached the first fallen soldier. After escorting the wounded victim back to safety to administer first aid, Cpl Matthews then returned and followed MCpl Hamilton, advancing farther into the minefield only to discover that the mine blast had claimed the lives of the two other soldiers.<sup>1</sup>

DANNY JOSEPH MATTHEWS WAS BORN IN NORTH YORK, ONTARIO. HE ATTENDED KENNEBECASIS VALLEY HIGH SCHOOL, AND LATER, CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY. HE JOINED THE REGULAR FORCE IN MONTRÉAL, QUÉBEC IN 1997, AND ON COMPLETION OF HIS BASIC TRAINING, BEGAN SERVING WITH THE PARACHUTE COMPANY OF THE 3<sup>RD</sup> BATTALION, THE ROYAL CANADIAN REGIMENT (3RCR) IN PETAWAWA, ONTARIO. HE DEPLOYED TWICE TO BOSNIA (OP PALLADIUM, ROTOS 3 AND 8), AND PARTICIPATED IN TWO DOMESTIC DEPLOYMENTS (OP GRIZZLY AND OP ESPLANADE). HE DEPLOYED TO AFGHANISTAN (OP ATHENA, ROTO 0) ON 16 AUGUST 2003 WITH 3RCR AND REDEPLOYED TO CANADA ON 20 NOVEMBER 2003.

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*In support of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), 3RCR, based in Kabul, regularly conducted patrols throughout its area of operations. The work was challenging, yet the battalion was successful in meeting its various responsibilities. For the soldiers within Matthews' company, the experience of serving together in an active theatre of operations had a profound impact on morale. At the beginning of their deployment, as he recalls:*

Morale was soaring; we were all in good moods. We were more or less bonding more than we had back in Wainwright, Alberta where we conducted our pre-deployment training. In Afghanistan, we worked together, but we also hung out and played cards together. The platoon warrant, Rob Cushman, would come and play cards with us. Of all the companies, Para Company was the tightest knit. I mean, all platoons were good to go; you could walk into any tent and it was good to go. There was no question that everyone was ready.

*Morale was equally high when the company was tasked to conduct yet another patrol on 2 October 2003. All was initially going well for Sergeant Robert Short and five men from his section, including Corporal Matthews, but the good fortune was not to last, nor was the high morale. In the early afternoon (at approximately 1330), in the Jowz Valley, the lead Iltis jeep in a two-vehicle patrol struck an explosive device of some nature, killing two of its three occupants – Sergeant Short and Corporal Rob Beerenfenger – and severely injuring the driver, Corporal TJ Stirling. Two of the occupants of the second Iltis, Master Corporal Jay Hamilton and Corporal Cam Laidlaw, received non-life-threatening injuries. Matthews, who in his security role was facing out from the rear of the second vehicle, hit his head when the Iltis was rocked by the blast, but was not physically injured. Fate had had a hand in his being on that particular patrol in the first place and, for that matter, in the section being on that stretch of road at that point in time.*

As a platoon signaller, I had radio duties and gate guard duties that kept me inside the command post for the better part of two weeks. I had earlier done my fair share of patrolling so I had an idea of what was going on outside the wire, but I was doing double radio shifts, covering for people because we had just started HLTA [Home Leave Travel Assistance].<sup>2</sup> Also, people would say to me, "Look, I need to go out on this patrol with my platoon commander, do you mind

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taking my shift?” And I’d tell them that I didn’t mind, but they’d have to cover for me sooner or later so I could get out and do whatever needed to be done.

The day before the incident, my warrant was like, “Look, let’s get you out so you can take a break from just sitting and listening to the radio. You’ve been in the camp for too long. I need to get you out and get you going again. Tomorrow you’re going out with Shorty [Sergeant Short] and Jay.” I was happy because it was with Shorty. Shorty was calm, confident and ensured his troops were prepared before they left camp on tasks. He was approachable with anything that you needed to talk about and helped make you feel that no matter what, what you had done had meant something. I liked working with him. He knew what he was doing. He treated everyone like they were adults and made sure they knew what they were doing.

So by 0530, I was up, getting my gear together, because we had to eat before we got rolling out the gate at 0700. So the six of us went to breakfast together, put all our kit in the Iltises and got set to roll out. I remember it was a blistering, stinking, hot and sunny day. I say stinking and hot because that was always the way it was. When I first got off the plane in Kabul, it was like getting hit in the head with a cinder block. The heat was that bad. And the smell is hard to describe. Forgive my language – there’s no other way I know of to describe it – but the smell of camel shit and diesel fuel being burned at the same time. It made you want to throw up. It was disgusting. It’s all open sewers, and there was a shortage of fuel, so the people burned whatever they could find.

Initially, what we were going to do was a presence patrol. We were going to leave Camp Julien and go down towards the Russian Officers’ Mess, which had been abandoned when the Russians left Afghanistan.<sup>3</sup> There was a burned-out T-72 tank hull near there and the main gun was still operational, so we were going to make sure the engineers didn’t need any help with security and things like that because they were getting ready to blow it up that same day. I remember that when we reached the Mess, we left our vehicles and started walking up towards the tank. Looking down the back side of

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the hill where the tank hull was, there was a bunch of people in blue helmets and blue vests with prodding sticks. I wasn't sure what was going on because it didn't look like the UNMAS [United Nations Mine Action Service] guys doing de-mining. Shorty said they were local nationals that were hired to do the de-mining ... about 30 or 40 people along the side of that hill.

When we reached the tank hull, the engineers had it all wired and packed with C4 explosives, ready to blow by about noon. They said they didn't need any help, so we started walking back towards the Mess to get back into our vehicles. As we were up on the hill, you could see the Jowz Valley, and coming down the road just below where the guys were de-mining were vehicles going up and down a track, staying within two rows of white rocks. If you drove outside the rocks you'd likely get blown up because it could be a minefield. You could tell the vehicles were Canadian because you could see the flags flying off the antennas. There was a LAV [Light Armoured Vehicle], an LS [Light Support Vehicle], an ML [Medium Logistic Vehicle] and an Iltis driving back-and-forth. When we finally got rolling, we were going along another route, different from the one where we had observed the Canadian vehicles, which was pretty much a dirt track as well. We later stopped because Shorty had seen some nomads that he wanted to talk to in case there was anything we could do for them.

*The patrol was not accompanied by an interpreter (colloquially known amongst Canadian soldiers as a "terp"), but Sergeant Short, as Matthews put it, was "hell-bent on talking to the nomads" since part of the Canadian mission was to render assistance wherever possible.*

Shorty pulls out his handy-dandy phrasebook and I don't know how the hell he did it, but he found a few words that he could say, and then went over to talk to them. He found out that they wanted water and needed some tentage. He said "Fine" and we gave them two crates of water and Shorty said he would arrange for some tents back at camp. We headed back to camp at around 1130 or 1200 to arrange for the tents and to have lunch. After we'd had our grub, Shorty went into the Tactical Operations Centre to make sure the route that we were going to take to get back out to the nomads had

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been cleared. When he came back out he said, “Right, guys, change in plans.” The tents were no longer a priority. Our orders were to conduct a presence patrol in the Para AOR [Area of Responsibility]. Shorty also informed us that our route had changed and was now to go through the Jowz Valley.

*Jumping forward somewhat ... as the two Iltises started down the dirt track where they had seen the Canadian vehicles driving back-and-forth that morning, it was slow going, partly because there were a number of children swarming around the jeeps.*

We had all kinds of kids flooding in around us, reaching into the jeep. And the thing with kids is that they don’t know what they’re grabbing. We were loaded for bear. Per jeep, we had M72s, hand grenades, and a lot of ammunition for both the C9 and the GPMG [General Purpose Machine Gun]. The kids were reaching in and even grabbing the linked rounds of the GPMG and I had to smack their hands a few times.

As we came into the Jowz Valley, we were talking into our radios, our inter-section communications system. With that system you have this little headpiece that you wear so that you can talk to people and you don’t have to yell while you’re out and about. If you’re doing operations, you just key it and you can talk real quiet and no one knows you’re there.

At this point, things were a little tense. Not exactly adrenaline high, but we were aware that it was time to get down to business, time to wake up and start paying attention. I felt that sometimes it was easy to get a little complacent. Guys were telling me, “Dan, you got to lighten up when you go out. You got to lighten up a little.” And I’m like, “No, I’m not lightening up and I don’t want to.” When we first got to Afghanistan we were kind of coming out of a Bosnia mindset. We were coming into that kind of mindset where you say to yourself, “Crap, this is not Bosnia where I can walk around without a helmet or a flak jacket.” Here you had your frag vest, flak jacket and when you’re driving you have your helmet on because you didn’t know when you were going to get bumped.

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So we start coming up to Pegasus Three<sup>4</sup> located in the valley, so I know where I am. I'm facing out of the rear of the second jeep and my job is providing rear security. I can see pretty much everything coming out the back. I see the ridge line on the left; I see an open field and a village in the distance on the right; and I can see where we're coming from out of the village which was straight back. So as we pass the first set of white rocks, I'm like, "Okay, Pegasus Three is going to be on my left. Look up! There's Pegasus Three. Right." The thing with Pegasus Three is that it is this huge, honking rock that is big enough to hide people behind. As we start passing Pegasus Three, I can see something move out of the corner of my eye. I call, "Stop! Stop! Stop!" But people are like, "What's going on?" and I say, "Something, somebody is behind the rock up over there. We're being watched."

So we stop, but Shorty, sitting in the first vehicle, is like "We're going to push ahead a little bit and keep going." I should have forced it, I should have said, "No, stop!" but I didn't because I trusted Shorty. So me and Jay are out with our binoculars looking at the rock and he says, "Dan, are you sure?" And I said, "I swear to God there is somebody watching us." But Jay says, "Well, I don't see anybody. Let's catch up." So we start to catch up. We get to maybe ten or fifteen metres behind the lead jeep and the next thing I hear is, "Whomp! Whomp!" and I'm like, "What the hell?" Our jeep slides and stops. My head comes forward and slams off the back of the Iltis, comes back, and slams off the back of the roll bar. Then all of a sudden there are all kinds of dirt and crap coming over the top of my head. All kinds of smoke and flame coming out from nowhere, and I'm like, "What the fuck is going on?"

*The immediate reaction of the three men in the second vehicle was to leap out and take cover at the rear of it.*

I'm up and over the back end of the jeep standing behind it. Cam and Jay are in behind me. Cam is bleeding around his mouth. Jay is stunned and bleeding, and I'm like, "Oh what the hell!" Jay starts telling Cam to call in a mine strike, but I was the signaller for the whole patrol and I already had the headset on. But as I got out of

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the jeep, my drop cord got pulled out of the radio. A drop cord is basically the part that goes into the radio and then the headset plugs into the cord. There's a connector so if you have to get out fast it just disconnects and you don't damage your radio. So I plugged it back in and I start calling in "Mine strike! Mine strike! Mine strike!" As I call everything in, they're telling me, "Calm down! Calm down! Send us your loc stat [location status]." I'm like, "Yes, okay!" so I gave our loc stat plus or minus 600 metres.

*Matthews began giving a detailed report of what had happened, as far as he was able to determine.*

I send our loc stat and then I start sending the rest of the mine strike report as best as I could, and at that time we didn't know Shorty or Robbie were dead. We just thought – well we could see Shorty – so we just thought that he was knocked out. His leg, from his knee down, was busted. It was basically bent up. So we were like, "Okay, okay, he's not going to be walking right ever again." We start calling for him. He wasn't responding, so we thought he couldn't hear us. The lead jeep was still burning like crazy. All the ammunition was cooking off. The grenades cooked off. The M72s cooked off. All the linked rounds. Everything. It all got burned off. There was all kinds of munitions going off everywhere.

People don't believe me when I tell them that Jay and I, when we stood up behind our jeep, saw TJ step up and out of the lead jeep. He stepped up, stepped out, took five steps, fell down and we thought he was just knocked out. Then we hear him start screaming at us to get him out.

*At this point, Matthews, who was the only one without any apparent physical injury, decided to turn the transmitting duties over to Corporal Laidlaw and head out to try to rescue the men from the lead jeep.*

I give my headset to Cam because I was the only one who was not bleeding. I didn't get a scratch on me; not a single mark. I said, "You transmit everything. Don't argue with me." Then I saw Jay starting to make his way out to Shorty and to TJ who were in the middle of

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a possible minefield.<sup>5</sup> He and I just took off our tactical vests and went. The jeep had to be approached with caution because there might have been other mines. We were down on our knees pretty much the whole way, using the proper technique for prodding. We prodded as much as we could all the way down into the wadi. TJ was only about ten metres away from us and it probably only took about five minutes to reach him, but it seemed like an eternity. He was still screaming, "Where are you guys? Get me out of here!" Jay hollered, "Can you prod to us?" He said "Yes." So Jay told him to start prodding. He started coming towards us, and when he got close enough, he just stood up and ran to us. I just reached up and grabbed him and hauled him down. As I pulled him down, a cooked-off mine exploded right in front of us. So we got him in and all of us got back behind our jeep.

*When Matthews and Hamilton got Stirling back to the jeep, Matthews began tending to his wounds.*

So once we got him behind the jeep, I did first aid on him. He had some pretty bad cuts. His hands were in bad shape with first-degree burns. I had to make him move his hands just to see if there was anything broken, and there wasn't, so I kept them the way they were. He had a cut on his right arm, which I didn't think was too bad, so I applied a field bandage to the arm. Once we got TJ bandaged up, he said, "Where are the guys? I'm sorry. It was my fault." I had to tell him to shut up or I would punch his head off because I couldn't listen to that right now, I needed to keep *my* head straight. Once I got him calm enough, Cam started to watch him to make sure he didn't go into shock or anything else and I went back to join Jay, who was already a good halfway to Shorty. So I went back with him to make the path that we were clearing wider so that when the actual QRF and the medical teams came in, they could move freely.

*Matthews estimated that Sergeant Short had been blown about 20 metres away from the lead jeep by the blast, but he had not yet spotted Corporal Beerenfenger.*

So we get maybe halfway up to the lead jeep, to almost where you can sort of make out where the back left corner of the Iltis was, and



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Jay said, “Dan, I see Robbie in low ground, can you see him?” And I’m like, “No, I can’t see him.” And he says, “Well, I can. Just turn to your left and go straight ahead.” I’m like, “Alright.” So I just did as I was told to do. Didn’t question it. No time to question orders; you just do as you’re told. So I start prodding and prodding. I still can’t see him. Cam has his binoculars on and says, “Dan, keep going straight. You’re on the right path. Do you see him?” I keep going, keep going, keep going, and then I finally see his frag vest. I’m like, “Okay, frag vest. Maybe there could be a chance.” So I get going.

Then the first crew showed up and then the Immediate Reaction Team showed up, which was one of our own patrols that was out. They’re pretty much the first responders that show up before the actual QRF shows up. So, Sergeant Teddy Hughson<sup>6</sup> and his crew show up and a buddy of mine that I went through basic training and battle school with, Corporal Brian Duval,<sup>7</sup> comes up behind me on the track I’d cleared and says, “Alright, Dan, let’s get you out of here.” And I said, “Brian, if you’re a friend, you’ll just talk to me so I can keep going. I’m not leaving.”

So I was prodding as best as I could. It seemed it took an hour but people say that it actually only took me about ten or 15 minutes to clear all the way to Robbie. I got to Robbie’s helmet and I go, “This isn’t good.” I pick up his helmet and there’s no chin strap on it. So basically, what happened was the concussion from the land mine blew off his frag vest and blew his helmet completely off his head. So I fell apart, in a sense, and I called out, “Sergeant, Sergeant, I got his helmet and there’s no chin strap.” I was almost on the verge of crying. So he said, “Alright, get yourself together and let’s get you out.” And I’m like, “I’m not leaving anybody behind.” So he says, “Alright, get yourself together and just get going.” So I get going and there’s Robbie. He and I had gotten to be pretty good friends from the time we started training together to the time we deployed. We talked about our families, our kids, played darts. We had been working in our platoon headquarters for sometime and we had some of the same interests and things like that.

He was laying on his back, with his arms out to the sides. His left leg was completely off his body and up around his head. He had blood

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coming out of his ears and his mouth and I was like, “Okay, please God, let there be a chance.” I didn’t care that I was in the middle of a minefield. It didn’t faze me whatsoever. I was more concerned about getting him out. I went over and touched his carotid. There was no pulse. So I figured, “Alright, I’ll try pushing on his chest to get things going.” But as soon as I touched his chest, it was so badly mangled that I knew it was done. There was no chance. There was no point in trying. I just went numb. So Brian pulled me back out, and the others were saying, “We’re going to get you out. Don’t worry. We’re going to get you out.” But one of the things they teach you at Infantry School is that you leave no one behind and I was telling two sergeants and a warrant officer, “The first person who touches me I’m going to take your head off because I’m not leaving anybody behind.”

The platoon commander, Lieutenant Chris Nobrega, basically pulled me out and made me go back to the Bison [an armoured vehicle converted for medical duties] to get checked out. The QRF pretty much pulled Shorty and Robbie out of the minefield. So, all in all, for me, from coming off that hill to getting back to camp took about three hours. It was hard being made to leave your friends and your platoon mates behind. This is the reason why I have such a hard time talking about it because there’s a part of me there that’s always going to be there. I don’t have it here in Canada. A part of me got left there on a dirt track and I won’t have it back. So, I mean, a decoration for bravery is nice, yes. I appreciate people saying I did something great and that I deserve this. But if people want to do something for me, give me my friends back!

*There was an unfortunate mix-up back at camp when Matthews arrived because, it seems odd to say, he hadn’t been killed or injured. In all the turmoil surrounding the event there was some confusion about how many people had actually been on the patrol in the first place. Matthews began to feel extremely frustrated about all of this – the confusion concerning his status – because he had signed out of camp and had indicated that he was going on the patrol, as was the standard procedure.*

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When I got back to camp, I was just a walking zombie. I was thinking about nothing. I just kind of plodded along. It was weird because you could kind of see yourself moving, but you couldn't really say anything. People didn't even know that I was involved whatsoever. The information that got passed around was that there were five people in the patrol instead of six. I believe the reason why they only thought there was five is because I fought to stay behind, at the scene of the incident, to be with our two guys. So when I showed up at the HSS [Health Support Services], which is the hospital service that we had at Camp Julien, they're like, "Well, who are you and what do you want?" And I said, "I'm a member of the patrol that just got hit and I got told I need to come get checked out." So they repeated again, "There were only five people." And I go, "No, there were six and I'm the sixth person. Do you want me to give you a description of the events because if you do I can give it to you!" Just then Jay and Cam came walking by and said, "He was on our patrol and he needs to get checked out."

Later on, talking about TJ, the surgeon asked me, "Who did first aid on him?" and when I said I did, he told me "You saved his life with what you did with the field bandages. The wound was a millimetre away from hitting an artery in his arm and if you hadn't packed it the way you did, he would have been dead."

*Following this major incident, the camp went into "communications lockdown." There was, however, a telephone in the hospital reserved for notifying next of kin and Matthews was able to use it to call his wife back in Canada. She was very upset because she had already learned about the incident from television, despite the lockdown.*

So me, Cam and Jay called home to say we were okay and I got yelled at quite loudly by my wife. I had to tell her two guys got killed but she'd already heard about it on the news. Before the communications lockdown, the media had already sent the information via their computers. They even had the names sent out before the families knew. So it was a bit of a kick in the pants for the families to hear it that way about their loved ones. My wife was yelling, "Why couldn't you get in touch with me before I heard it on the news?"

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How can you be so stupid to get involved in something like that?" I'm like, "I didn't have a choice, but I'm okay." So it was hard telling her I was involved. Very hard.

*After being checked out at the hospital, Matthews started to make his way back to his platoon lines; he felt personally responsible for what had just happened and such thoughts weighed upon him heavily.*

I felt like I had let everybody down. I came out of the hospital and the first person I see is the warrant. And I felt I had to apologize to Rob. I said, "Warrant, I'm sorry. I didn't move fast enough in getting to Robbie, sending the radio message, and getting TJ out." And he's like, "It's not your fault." But I still felt like it was. Still some days I kind of feel that way, but I know it's not right and I know it's not true.

I went in where I was living and the guys gave me space for a little bit. They let me get out of my gear and then they pulled me up to the mess for an Irish wake. I walked in and there were all the guys from the platoon. They came all around me, pulled me over, sat me down and the mess president came over and put three flats of beer in front of us and said, "This is from General Leslie."<sup>8</sup>

So it was a long night. At some point the news came on, and when I heard them say something about Afghanistan, I started walking up towards the TV. The guys were saying, "No, Dan, come on back and sit down." I'm like, "No, I got to see this." There were people all around in front of the set and I'm saying, "Excuse me. Excuse me." But they weren't moving. So I said, "Would you get the fuck out of the way? That was my patrol. I want to see what the hell these people are talking about." And it was just like a huge parting of the seas. I couldn't believe the names had already been released that fast. It just sent me over the edge, hearing that.

*Matthews couldn't help feeling angry that the families back home had learned about the incident through the news media, but what made it worse was that because of the confusion about whether he had been involved, his wife kept getting conflicting stories. Matthews couldn't sleep as a result of the stress that had been building.*

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For a couple of days after everything happened, I hadn't been sleeping at all. They had to tranquilize me to sleep; they had me on sleeping pills. They told me not to show up for work. But they didn't admit me into the hospital. They figured it would be better if I was back with the guys in the company lines. I kind of wish that they had put me in a hospital bed because I felt like I was being forgotten; I was as involved as anyone.

I was having a hard time trying to understand how I walked away from the blast without a cut, a bruise or anything; some thought that I had never even been there. My wife was going ballistic because even the rear party was saying, "No, your husband was not involved. He wasn't on the patrol." It took my wife three days with a padre and a mental health nurse to convince the rear party to call overseas to talk to somebody to make sure I was involved. There was a real disconnect. They were only naming the ones who were hurt. I guess mental injuries weren't considered operational injuries then.

Just to give an idea of how badly things got screwed up ... TJ was supposed to go to Ramstein in Germany to get taken care of and there was no escort or aide designated for him and his wife back home. Those people are supposed to go along with a wounded warrior like that. He was getting put on a plane and there was no one back home either to help his wife. So Colonel Devlin<sup>9</sup> gave TJ his aide and then General Leslie heard about this and he made sure his aide was on a plane to go get TJ's wife and get her overseas.

*A little while later, the three members of the patrol who had been in the rear jeep at the time of the incident took part in a service for their fallen comrades at the camp; after that, they also went home to Canada for their funerals.*

In Camp Julien, we had everybody come out for a memorial and then just the platoon went to Kabul International Airport for the ramp ceremony to send the guys home. There were also Americans, Dutch, French Foreign Legion, Aussies and Brits all lined up for the ramp ceremony in Kabul. After the ramp ceremony, we went back to our camp and Warrant Officer Cushman came down and said, "Do you guys want to go home for the funerals?" And we said, "Does a bear shit in the woods? Yes we want to go." He said, "Alright, let's go

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make something happen.” They had Shorty’s funeral on 7 October 2003 and Jay, Cam and I were back in Canada for it.

We were allowed to stay in Canada for two weeks on compassionate leave and they told us we needed to make a decision if we were going to go back to Kabul or not. My wife was ready to hang me when I said I was going back. She went freakin’ nuts. She was begging me to stay home. Begging me. She said, “Look, you almost got killed. You have a two-year-old son here who is going to be completely upset if you leave again. Stay home.” And I said, “If you love me, you’ll let me go back.”

I remember when I first got to the battalion, after I’d finished my basic training, Shorty was a master corporal then and he said to me, “Look, if you do anything here and you want to do it right, finish what you start. It doesn’t matter what it is, finish what you start.” So I wanted to finish what I’d started. I wanted to finish my tour. I couldn’t see myself only doing half of it and deciding, “Okay, I can’t handle this. I need to stay home.” Going back was the right thing to do.

*It was one thing to make that decision, but quite another to carry it through to the end.*

It was hard on our return to Afghanistan. Cam and I walked off the Herc [Hercules] at Kabul International and it was just like walking back into everything all over again. I knew I was at the airport, but I could smell and feel everything from the incident. When I felt the heat, it was like feeling the heat from the jeep. I fell apart, and people who saw me were looking at me like, “What the hell is his problem?” And then someone saw my nametag and said, “Alright, give him some space.”

We got back to camp and the company sergeant-major, Master Warrant Officer Wayne Bartlett,<sup>10</sup> was happy to see us. I went down below into our company lines, with my bag and everything else, and the guys were totally floored that I had come back. They thought of all the people not to come back, I was going to be that person.

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Somebody said, “We figured you wouldn’t want to come back.” And I said, “You’re right. I don’t want to be here, but I need to finish what I started because if I’m going to move on, I need to face it head on.”

I was back two or three days in theatre – we’d returned around the 18<sup>th</sup> of October, just before my son’s birthday – and for some reason I lost vision in the centre of my right eye and it lasted about a month. I guess the stress and everything just overloaded my right eye. They kept me in the camp for the whole month; they didn’t want me driving if I couldn’t see right. And I didn’t feel comfortable going outside the wire if I couldn’t shoot straight. So they had me working the radios and I didn’t mind that. I still did my share of signaller duties and things like that.

*Finally, as his mid-November birthday neared, Matthews decided that things were not working out and it was time to make the hard decision.*

About two or three days before my birthday, I decided I needed to go home because it started to hurt to read and things were just getting all wound up. I was hypersensitive. People would say something the wrong way and I’d pretty much fly off the handle. I’d go at them. So I finally said, “I need to go home. I can’t do this. I don’t want to wreck things here.” It was hard to admit that I needed to go home, but I had to. So with the help of the docs, who said I needed to get home if I wanted to get better, I was repatriated. On my return, I was out on leave for a while in Canada. I hadn’t had my HLTA yet and so they tied my HLTA in with my disembarkation leave. I got to spend about a month and a half at home.

*Not surprisingly, Matthews found himself reliving the mine strike incident over and over again in his mind. His thoughts about what had happened that day centred on the dark figure he was certain he saw hiding behind the huge rock on the hill.*

The Board of Inquiry held to investigate the mine strike determined it was one of two things: it was either an old TM-57 anti-tank mine from earlier days or it was deliberately set. My opinion is that it was deliberately set because there’s no way in hell a Bison, a LAV, a

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LS, an ML and an Iltis can drive, earlier that day, through the same area on other duties and miss that damn thing. Looking back on it, I'm sure that, when we were coming down, I saw somebody. I knew something was going on. We were being watched. They were timing us to see when the next patrol would be coming through. The figure I saw behind the rock ... I think he was the guy who had planted the device.

*Matthews' thoughts also kept returning to the three men in the lead jeep on that day.*

The only way, I think, TJ survived was that when the explosion happened, the blast blankets we had in the Iltis enveloped him. As the driver, he had one over his seat. His hands got the worst of it. The Iltis was the largest piece of crap for these patrols. It wasn't armoured and we had to rely on the blast blankets. It was the right type of vehicle to have when we were in an urban environment, but the RG-31 is now the one to use because of the IED [Improvised Explosive Device] threat. They're armoured. You could never armour an Iltis. The only protection we had were those blast blankets.

The morale in the company pretty much plummeted for a few days following Shorty's death. Everyone was in mourning because we lost one of the best sergeants in the battalion. Shorty was the person everyone wanted to work for. Losing him was like losing a parent figure. Shorty's leadership was exceptional; he could take a section of new people and within a week could have them working at levels higher than what was expected. He treated the troops like people, like humans and as equals, and brought something to the table that the others did not.

It was also really hard losing Robbie because he had been working hard to join Para Company. The day before we went out, we had gone on a run and he was ecstatic. I was like, "What the hell are you jumping up and down for?" He said, "I'm finally able to keep up with you bastards." Before then he was always saying, "You para guys are crazy with how fast you can run." So he was finally able to keep up with us and he was happy. He got recommended to go on



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the jump courses as soon as he got back to Canada so he could come over to 3RCR from 1RCR.

Paratroopers are different in the sense where you could take a section of us and drop us in the middle of nowhere and we'll bash on. We'll find ways to get stuff done. A regular infantry section, they're too dependent on stuff, like, when is the next water point, when is this, where is that? With Para Company, you're dropped into the middle of nowhere and you're told, "Look, your next reply point is going to be in four days. You need to get there. Go!" And off the plane you go. So it was hard to have a guy who had been busting his ass – knew what he was doing – and lose him.

*After Christmas, Matthews reported back to the battalion in Petawawa. A few days later, he was informed that his request to transfer to the Intelligence Branch had been approved and that he would be going to Kingston, Ontario to start his training. Over the next few months, he would get two pieces of news that had a profound effect on him.*

The battalion eventually came back to Canada about mid-February or the beginning of March, but on 27 January 2004, I heard that Para Company got hit again – with a suicide bomber on one of the jeeps – and we lost Corporal Jamie Murphy.<sup>11</sup> And three other guys got hurt.

Months later, in October 2004, I got this big envelope and it had DND on it and I'm like, "Oh crap, here comes the court-martial for something I said." The regimental sergeant-major [RSM], Chief Warrant Officer Wayne Ford,<sup>12</sup> knew I had a rather big mouth. So I open it up and I'm like, "Rideau Hall? What the hell?" Then I start reading the letter and I completely fell apart because I never knew I'd even been nominated. I guess Para Company Headquarters had put together a synopsis of everything that had happened and decided that, seeing that Jay and I waded into two minefields in total disregard for ourselves to get everybody out, they wanted to do something about it.

I never did think what I was doing was a brave act. I just thought I was doing my job. To give a guy a medal for doing his job, it's kind

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of hard to swallow, especially when you lose friends. I felt crappy. I know I'm supposed to feel honoured and I know I'm supposed to feel good, but I felt like I was getting awarded for getting my ass home.

*Even though he felt that he didn't deserve it, Matthews decided to wear the medal in honour of Sergeant Short and Corporal Beerenfenger.*

I wear it for the memory of a couple of friends, and that's the only reason why I wear it. I could do without it. I don't need recognition like that for doing my job. I mean, you can ask any soldier, if anything like that happens to them, and they'll tell you they don't need a medal for putting their lives at risk.<sup>13</sup> The guys in theatre right now are putting their lives at risk and there is only a select few that are getting medals. I mean those medals might be rightly earned, but there are still guys out there who are doing the same job. The only difference is that somebody gets recognized by somebody and the other person keeps on bashing on all the same.

When I did my first parade at NDHQ [National Defence Headquarters] and came walking down the hallway with my medals on, people would stop and look and say, "You didn't get that as an Intelligence Operator. How did you get that?" And I was like, "If you really want to know, I'll tell you. But if you don't really want to know, just let it be." I even had three majors asking me, or sort of coming up, shaking my hand and saying "Well done" and things like that. I don't need to be told "Well done." It's the last thing I need. I mean, I still have an infantry mentality; you're a soldier first and your trade second. But I still believe you need to be a professional in everything you do.

*Matthews' wife had mixed emotions about the award ... pleased that the actions he and Master Corporal Hamilton had taken were being honoured, but concerned about her husband's feelings.*

She was trying her best to keep me standing and not crying because I had lost two best friends. She told me, "You're being recognized for something and it kind of shows that people actually understand

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what you did.” She was happy for that, but she understood how much it was hurting me to get it. It was weird.

My son likes showing me off to his friends, especially when I’m all dressed up. One time I went and talked to his Grade One class for Remembrance Day and one of his classmates told him, “Jacob, your dad looks really cool.” Since 2005, I have been part of *The Memory Project*<sup>14</sup> and have talked to schools from elementary to high school. I have also done a number of TV interviews.<sup>15</sup>

CORPORAL DANNY JOSEPH MATTHEWS WAS INVESTED WITH HIS STAR OF COURAGE BY THE THEN-GOVERNOR GENERAL AND COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF OF CANADA, HER EXCELLENCY THE RIGHT HONOURABLE ADRIENNE CLARKSON, AT RIDEAU HALL ON 4 FEBRUARY 2005.

## NOTES

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- 1 *Canada Gazette*, Part I, Vol. 139, No. 4 (22 January 2005), 188.
- 2 That is, leave outside of the theatre of operations, usually in Canada, but not necessarily.
- 3 Soviet forces occupied Afghanistan for a decade, from late 1979 until the late 1980s.
- 4 An Observation Post (OP).
- 5 Like Matthews, Master Corporal Jason Cory Hamilton received the S.C. for his actions on 2 October 2003; his citation appears in Appendix 1.
- 6 For his actions on 2 October 2003, Sergeant Teddy Raymond Hughson was Mentioned in Dispatches; his citation appears in Appendix 2.
- 7 For his actions on 2 October 2003, Brian Michael Raymond Duval was Mentioned in Dispatches; his citation appears in Appendix 2.
- 8 Andrew Brooke Leslie, later Lieutenant-General and Chief of the Land Staff. For his service in Afghanistan, he received the M.S.C.; his citation appears in Appendix 2.

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9 Peter John Devlin, later Major-General and Deputy Commander Canadian Expeditionary Forces Command (CEFCOM), and later still, Lieutenant-General and Chief of the Land Staff. For his service in Afghanistan, he received the M.S.C.; his citation appears in Appendix 2.

10 For his service during a subsequent deployment to Afghanistan, Wayne Alan Bartlett received the M.S.C.; his citation appears in Appendix 2.

11 Corporal Jamie Brendan Murphy, killed while on patrol near Camp Julien, 27 January 2004.

12 For his service in Afghanistan, Wayne Arnold Ford received the M.S.C.; his citation appears in Appendix 2.

13 As they are, as readers will quickly realize.

14 “The Memory Project is one of The Historica-Dominion Institute’s most successful educational programs. Founded in 2001, The Memory Project connects veterans and Canadian Forces personnel with students online and in classrooms across the country. The veterans in The Memory Project represent a wide range of conflicts, including the First World War, Second World War, Korean War, Peacekeeping Operations and modern conflicts. Our volunteer speakers share stories of their service experience and help today’s young people understand the selfless sacrifices Canada’s men and women made and continue to make in war and peacetime.” As taken from an earlier version of The Memory Project’s website.

15 Additional information concerning Matthews’ service in Afghanistan, especially the incident for which he was decorated, can be found in Master Corporal Dan Matthews, “That Day in Kabul,” *Harrowsmith’s Truly Canadian Almanac* (2008), 176-183. For treatments of some of the issues raised in this chapter, see Major K.A. Cameron, “‘Mine Strike-Mine Strike-Mine Strike,’ Countermining Operations in the Jowz Valley, Afghanistan,” *Canadian Army Journal*, Vol. 7, No. 3-4 (Fall-Winter 2004), 52-66, and, Major J. Janzen, “Op Athena Roto 0 – Embedded Media,” *Canadian Army Journal*, Vol. 7, No. 3-4 (Fall-Winter 2004), 43-51.

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## CHALLENGES

MAJOR WILLIAM HILTON FLETCHER

STAR OF MILITARY VALOUR ■ JANUARY TO AUGUST 2006

*“LEADING BY EXAMPLE WAS MY HIGHEST PRIORITY.”*

As Officer Commanding C Company, Task Force Afghanistan, from **JANUARY to AUGUST 2006**, Major Fletcher repeatedly demonstrated extraordinary bravery by exposing himself to intense fire while leading his forces, on foot, to assault heavily defended enemy positions. On two occasions, the soldiers at his side were struck by enemy fire. He immediately rendered first aid and then continued to head the subsequent assaults. On these occasions and in ensuing combat actions, his selfless courage, tactical acumen and effective command were pivotal to the success of his company in defeating a determined opponent.<sup>1</sup>

WILLIAM HILTON FLETCHER WAS BORN INTO A MILITARY FAMILY IN ST. ALBERT, ALBERTA AND GREW UP IN A NUMBER OF CANADIAN COMMUNITIES, AS WELL AS IN EUROPE. AFTER JOINING THE RESERVES IN KINGSTON, ONTARIO IN 1988 (762 RESERVE ELECTRONIC WARFARE SQUADRON), HE ENROLLED TWO YEARS LATER AT LE COLLÈGE MILITAIRE ROYAL DE ST-JEAN, QUÉBEC. AFTER THREE YEARS OF STUDY, HE TRANSFERRED TO RMCC IN KINGSTON, GRADUATING WITH A BACHELOR'S DEGREE IN CIVIL ENGINEERING. IN 1995, HE WAS POSTED TO 2PPCLI IN WINNIPEG, MANITOBA AND, AFTER TWO YEARS, DEPLOYED TO BOSNIA AS A CIVIL AFFAIRS LIAISON OFFICER (OP PALLADIUM, ROTO 1). FOLLOWING THAT TOUR, HE ATTENDED THE INFANTRY SCHOOL IN GAGETOWN, NEW BRUNSWICK. IN 2004, HE WAS POSTED TO 1PPCLI IN EDMONTON, ALBERTA. HE DEPLOYED TO KANDAHAR, AFGHANISTAN ON 25 JANUARY 2006 (OP ARCHER, ROTO 1) SERVING THERE AS OC, C COMPANY UNTIL 27 AUGUST 2006.

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*Major Fletcher began his pre-deployment exercises in 2005 and, in retrospect, found the training rather rudimentary compared to later initiatives, due largely to the fact that the Canadian experience in Kandahar had been fairly limited at that point.*

Roto One was the first battle group into Kandahar since the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion PPCLI had been there in 2002. The pre-deployment training went alright. It was not as slick as it is nowadays. I don't think we really had a very good idea of what we were getting into. There was some experience from Kandahar, but that was experience gained under the 3PPCLI Battle Group during Op APOLLO in the early days of post-9/11. After that, most of our experience in Afghanistan had been in the Kabul area which is very different than Kandahar, the Taliban's stronghold.<sup>2</sup> We knew that there was a chance that we would meet some enemy, but most of us were thinking along the lines of our Bosnia experience, with contact being fleeting and maybe sporadic at best. Most of us probably wanted to get into the fight to be perfectly honest. So the training was a bit of a hybrid – a lot of live fire, a lot of unit cohesion-building<sup>3</sup> – but any sort of attempt to tailor the training to a specific situation that we would face was marginal at best because we didn't know what we were going to face.

When we finished our final training exercise in Wainwright, Alberta,<sup>4</sup> we hadn't done a lot of the stuff that I'd hoped we would do. For instance, we didn't do enough work with night vision goggles [NVG] because only one of the three companies in the battalion had sets. We'd end up trading off kit to try to get a night in where guys could walk around with the goggles. We weren't as comfortable as I think we should have been on a lot of things ... through nobody's particular fault necessarily.

The other thing happening concurrently was the training of the brigade headquarters, since Brigadier-General David Fraser<sup>5</sup> was going in to take over command of RC [Regional Command] South from the Americans.<sup>6</sup> So there was a significant focus towards the end of the pre-deployment phase on the brigade, which kind of left us feeling a bit like training aids as opposed to, maybe, a training

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audience. The brigade headquarters understandably needed to be trained and evaluated. Unfortunately, that meant the focus was off us and on them. Since the battle group was subordinate to the brigade headquarters, we became elements supporting the training of the latter. There was really no way around this dynamic at the time, but the battle group did not get a great deal of benefit from this latter portion. Of course, you could argue that the benefit was realized upon deployment overseas where the brigade staff was able to draw upon their training and lessons learned. I still believe the training could have been structured to provide more benefit for both the battle group and brigade headquarters though. By the end of field training in Edmonton and Wainwright, we'd seen each other at our best and at our worst.

*Fletcher was pleased at the camaraderie that existed within the company, both because of the fact that he had worked with some of the senior team before and that many of his troops were already highly experienced.*

We were a mechanized rifle company, with three platoons ... 7, 8 and 9 Platoons. In addition, the company had a headquarters element and a support element. And then, because we were a combat team, we had attachments of medics, military police, surveillance assets, artillery forward observation officers [FOOs] and then actual artillery pieces, plus this huge chain of support elements in terms of fuel, ammunition, food and water.

The command team consisted of myself and the company sergeant-major, Master Warrant Officer Shawn Stevens.<sup>7</sup> That was the face of the company at the highest echelon. And thank God he was there. Stevens had served with C Company for some time and had intimate knowledge of the personnel. He was a no-nonsense leader who always put the needs of the company first. Not only could I rely on him to advise me on the personalities and readiness level of the company, but with decades of experience, his knowledge of administration and tactics was second to none. Add to that his remarkable intelligence and ability to remain calm in even the direst of situations and it is easy to see why I valued his advice and support so highly. I had a second-in-command who was actually a friend of mine from our

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service in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, Captain Ryan Jurkowski.<sup>8</sup> He was a senior captain and his experience level greatly benefited the company. He proved instrumental in preparing the platoon commanders in all aspects of company administration and handled the tactical integration of all the various enablers – artillery, logistics, military police, *et cetera* – into the company. He also commanded the company for three weeks while I was on my mid-tour leave, and was more than prepared to command it should I become incapacitated for whatever reason. I had worked with the LAV captain,<sup>9</sup> Captain Marty Dupuis, before. I knew him very well. He was an excellent young officer with outstanding potential. I did not know the three platoon commanders very well at all when I first slid into the company: Captain Hugh Atwell,<sup>10</sup> 7 Platoon; Lieutenant Jon Snyder,<sup>11</sup> 8 Platoon, who was decorated and also died on a subsequent tour; and Lieutenant Craig Alcock, 9 Platoon. They had all served with the company for a while and were comfortable with their troops.

Getting to know them all proved not to be very difficult, nor was it with the platoon 2ICs. My first order of business was a one-on-one interview with the key leadership of the company. After that, it was really just a feeling-out process over the course of our training. There were a few social functions as well that helped. Social interaction is something that is underestimated. This does not mean getting sauced in the mess, but more so a chance to speak in a more informal setting and to include families.

I was very confident that we would be successful. The platoon commanders were not inexperienced by any stretch of the imagination. They knew their platoons. They had lived together under the previous company commander for at least a year if not a little longer, and in some cases prior to that. So they had a very well-gelled team. In terms of me and the sergeant-major, I didn't know him at all, but I think the RSM<sup>12</sup> and the CO [Commanding Officer]<sup>13</sup> put us together for a reason. We balanced each other out. It ended up being a very good mesh, in my opinion. He might tell you something different! I'm a guy who will run into something headfirst, whereas he is the type of guy who is incredibly smart and very methodical.



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So between the two of us, we ended up balancing each other very well in our approach.

*Fletcher believed that the relationship between the company commander and the sergeant-major was vital to mission success.*

If that relationship is not working, you keep wondering if the troops are going to know and if they would suffer if they did. Honestly, they are going to suffer regardless in such a situation. I've seen it in the past where the two did not get along and that bad relationship – as much as you may want to try and hide it – will translate itself down the chain. It is a poison that can debilitate a unit. If you're going to ask guys to go into a situation where they can get grievously injured or killed, they need to trust that you're thinking about the right things. A bad relationship in the command team can really have a significant and negative impact. Therefore, I was very fortunate to have the team I was working with. The sergeant-major and I always spoke with one voice. That was very critical. If we were talking at different ends of the subject then that disconnect would be readily apparent and the guys would start saying, "Well, if there's no command team up front, we'll take care of ourselves. We're not going to worry about what the major and the sergeant-major think."

*Despite some initial concerns, Fletcher was pleased with the training provided once the troops were on the ground in Kandahar.*

Because I deployed right into the field when I took over the company, it was "sink or swim," which was a blessing in disguise. Lieutenant-Colonel Ian Hope was our CO. He took a page out of our regimental history. There was a guy with our 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion – "Big Jim" Stone – who was the CO in Korea.<sup>14</sup> Stone refused to be pushed into the front lines until he could make sure his guys were ready. So Lieutenant-Colonel Hope said essentially the same thing and resisted some significant pressure from the American brigade commander at the time. He said, "We need a certain amount of training that the guys have missed." Some of that was night fighting. Some of it was just driving. Our drivers had never driven with the full armour package on the LAVs, for example. Another area was first

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aid ... using the new tourniquets, the quick clot, the Israeli combat bandages. We'd never seen the bandages before, so we had to drill guys in how to use it. I think that the phrase the colonel used was, "Close your eyes and do it with one arm, because you might not have another arm or any eyes to do it with when the time comes." So it was a case of doing it over and over again. Part of it was just sort of letting the guys adapt to the heat, in addition to squaring them away mentally for what could be a very tough slug out.

The environment was a big challenge. We got there in January, towards the end of winter. It was dusty and sort of miserable, but it wasn't as brutally hot as it gets there over the summer. We spent our first days in theatre trying to acclimatize. We worked on a set routine of reveille and PT [Physical Training] in the morning, and enforced a "lights out" policy at night. This helped initially, but there was no preparing for the searing heat the summer would bring. There were times when the temperature reached 50 degrees Celsius. In combat, there was no physical way to consume enough water to counteract the effects of the heat. Water made up a significant amount of the weight we carried when dismounted. The temperature drop at night was significant enough that at times we actually had to use sleeping bags, even though it was still in the mid-20s. Throughout the tour, we suffered more casualties due to heat exhaustion than we ever did to the enemy.

*Although they had an excellent team in place, a change in circumstances early in the tour had a bad effect on morale for a while.*

When we first got there, it was frustrating because we had a plan. Each of the three companies was to have a piece of Kandahar Province. You would own that piece. I would be the little local warlord or mayor ... whatever you want to call it. The platoon commanders would do their business. When we got there, we – my company – were supposed to take over from a French Special Forces [SF] element along the Pakistan border. But they didn't give it up. So we ended up sitting in KAF and watched the other two companies deploy into their areas of operation. So it was a lot of, "Geez, Sir, where are we going to go? We have to do something!" Kandahar Airfield

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is a very sobering place. To be honest, you can't spend more than a little bit of time there without going nuts. So the guys were very antsy. They wanted to get out. Most of them wanted to meet the bad guys – to find the Taliban and get into it – because I would bet that almost none of them had ever fired a shot in anger. It was very frustrating for the first few weeks. Then we started doing some small platoon-level operations in and around Kandahar. You don't really gain real confidence until you go outside the wire for the first time. That's kind of a big mental step to take. Once you've done that and settle in a bit, then you go on to the next piece.

At this time, I hadn't given much thought to the strategic issues of the Taliban leadership. I was more worried about the situation on the ground. But the two are quite clearly linked. The effect on the ground can have impacts higher up and vice-versa. I never once thought that they were stupid. It's easy to form that perception, that it's a backwater, dirt-poor nation and that they're uneducated. That is a big mistake. They're a smart, cunning, intelligent enemy capable of adapting sometimes faster than we were and they were in their own backyard. Never once did I think we underestimated them from that perspective.

All in all, the colonel's plan, from what I understand, was to get out of our space and, as much as we might or might not find the enemy, introduce ourselves to the locals and let them know that there was a new kid in town and that we were different than those before us.<sup>15</sup> Lieutenant-Colonel Hope really fired the message down. I think everyone understood that the security piece – and this sounds like a broken record because you see it in the papers every day – was really only a small means to an end. The end was to facilitate reconstruction that would allow the Afghans to stand on their own. He made sure that everyone was very aware of our little piece. The first month after we deployed was spent so that every village we hit, we'd stop, get out, and talk to people. It was also our first introduction to the Afghan National Police [ANP] and the Afghan National Army [ANA], of which the Army was brilliant and the Police were at the time a liability.

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*C Company found it difficult to make contact with the local populace because the troops were perceived as something other than what they really were.*

Our first week there, as we tried to meet with the villagers, was hard. In Kandahar proper, most people had already had some contact with U.S. troops. During our push into Helmand in April, however, the locals ran at the sight of us because they thought that we were Soviets.<sup>16</sup> They had no idea things had changed, so it took them a week to figure out that we were not Soviets and that, in fact, they had left and we had come. But wherever we went, no matter where we operated, we looked like complete and utter aliens at the best of times. Throw on body armour and drive up in a vehicle from *Starship Troopers*, and boom, you're scaring the crap out of people, even people who have been used to conflict and war for the last 30 years. The initial reaction from people who did not know who we were was, "Lock the doors and hide!" Every once in a while there would be a brave man who would come out, but we would never see the women. It took a sort of continued presence in those cases – over the course of a week or two weeks of driving, waving and trying to speak to people – before an elder would eventually come and sit down with us and find out who we were and what we wanted. Once they found that out, people were more than happy to speak to us about their concerns. One of these was that it's the poppy breadbasket along the Helmand River and they thought we were there to raze their crops. The Soviets had destroyed their only means of support. Once we let them know that that's not why we were there, they were quite happy to come out and chat with us. Our conversations always focused on agriculture or basic needs. So we established that rapport, saying, "Look, we're here to help. We're Canadians. We're not Soviets. What do you need?" It was a real challenge. That we actually managed to connect with so many ordinary Afghans was a testament to the soldiers' perseverance and their ability in spite of being dressed to look like hard chargers.

Everyone at times used non-verbal cues or changed their demeanour to make themselves look less threatening. A soldier completely geared-up for combat, with weapon at the ready and ballistic goggles on, is a pretty intimidating sight. Simply by lowering your weapon

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while still being ready to act – the term I used was “like a coiled spring” – made you more approachable. Throw on a smile and wave, and suddenly you become friendly, all the while vigilant and ready to react to an enemy attack. In the cases where things happened more immediately, it was always because the kids were overcome by curiosity. When people saw our soldiers or the Afghan soldiers interacting with the children in a friendly way ... that was the ice-breaker. It was a really neat experience. I don’t know the first thing about Afghan non-verbal cues and cultural issues. Other Canadians can read me to a degree and I can read them because we’ve all grown up in the same place and have sort of shared backgrounds. You can’t do that necessarily for another culture. So the Afghan interpreters and army guys became absolutely critical to help us understand and be able to read people. We’d go into an area and, to become less threatening when talking to people, I would always take off my tactical vest and my helmet and lay my weapon down. I always had a guy standing behind me with a rifle, looking the other way, so I was safe.

As people got more comfortable, you’d see little things. You would start seeing women showing up or the odd woman would actually be let out of her home in your presence, covered of course. Often-times we were waved down by somebody who wanted to sit down and talk to us about an issue they’re hoping to bring to the government. And then, ultimately, it was the provision of intelligence, “Hear me out. There are actually bad guys that were here last night.” It was that type of thing. Those were the tell-tale indicators.

*Because they were unable to stake out their own specific area like A and B Company had done, C Company, as Fletcher put it, became the “firefighting” element ... and soon suffered the consequences.*

B Company had their element, which was Kandahar City and its environs, places like Zharey and Panjwai, with the PRT [Provincial Reconstruction Team]. A Company was up north. So we became the guys who would surge to wherever the CO wanted to achieve more of an effect. In the early days, that was up in A Company’s area.

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On the 29<sup>th</sup> of March, we lost Private Robert Costall. Seven Platoon was tasked as the divisional reserve. They took a chopper to Helmand Province – to a small Special Forces base – and Costall was killed in a firefight that night. It turned out that it was friendly fire from the Americans. So that was a pretty significant blow because the rest of us were at Kandahar Airfield at the time. I listened to it all on the radio. It was very hard to take. Talk about feeling impotent!

When I broke the news, it would have been kinder for me to kick the guys right in the guts than tell them they just lost a buddy. Immediately following that the guys wanted to get in the LAVs and drive 250 kilometres to Helmand to find the guys who had done it. By that I mean the Taliban, not the Americans! And, in fact, we got our wish. After a very short rest and refit period in KAF, 7 Platoon redeployed to Helmand where it was to link up with the rest of the company. To join them, 8 and 9 Platoons, with the support elements,<sup>17</sup> began “The Road Move from Hell.” It was supposed to be a three-hour drive, but it took us 18 or 19 hours to get to Helmand and reinforce FOB [Forward Operating Base] Robinson near Sangin. The orders we got initially were to go to Helmand for about a week, just to stabilize the situation. Thirty-one days later [!] we came back after covering the width and breadth of the province. We got into one fairly significant firefight and brought coalition forces to places that, at that point in time, they had feared to venture. The LAV was able to fight in those areas. So when all was said and done, it was a pretty impressive feat. Resupplying the company via a line of communication that stretched over 250 kilometres was an amazing feat in itself.<sup>18</sup> Our National Support Element [NSE] was brilliant.

The reason it took us almost 20 hours to get to the original area was that the Afghan terrain got together with Murphy’s Law and just bit us in the ass. From breakdowns to sandstorms ... you name it. It was just atrocious. At one point, we had a truck wander off. It was the first time those guys in one of our logistics attachments had ever driven with night vision goggles and there we were in operations. I don’t blame the driver by any stretch. It’s just a testament to the fact that during our training, we didn’t have the resources that we would

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have liked. With their truck, they went about two kilometres off the route and fell into a seven-metre wide by one-to-two-metre deep wadi. We ended up having to call an Apache in to find them. All the while, tracer fire was arcing through the night sky as Taliban elements attacked local police stations. That's a snapshot of the nightmare that it was. The good news is that we got where we needed to go and no one was hurt. The entire company group made me proud. Of particular note, Captain Nichola Goddard,<sup>19</sup> my forward observation officer, was a rock on the radio and aided the move by finding routes, occupying key pieces of terrain, and controlling the airborne assets assigned to assist us. She did all this at night, over unfamiliar and hostile terrain that was, in effect, bandit country.

*More than three months into the tour, several operations took place that played a significant part in Fletcher being awarded the Star of Military Valour for his actions over this six-month period.*

It started towards the end of May. That's when there were serious indications that the Taliban was massing in the Panjwai region, likely for a significant push to take over the Governor's Palace in Kandahar on Afghan Independence Day.<sup>20</sup> This was basically to demonstrate from an information operations/influence perspective that they were there to take us. They weren't going to hold anything. They had no illusions that they were going to take over Kandahar City. To take over something significant in the face of a sizeable coalition presence would have been a pretty big coup. So they were massing. We ended up moving in to support B Company, which was working primarily in that area. That was the start of fighting, which went on fairly consistently through to the end of the tour at the end of August.

*Major Fletcher actually wasn't in the thick of things when the fierce fighting started at the end of May, which left him feeling a bit awkward when he returned. All that would soon change however.*

It was at the end of May that Captain Goddard was killed on patrol. I heard the news about Nic while on leave. She was a forward observation officer and was killed when an RPG [Rocket-

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Propelled Grenade] round hit her LAV. There is no doubt that nothing would have occurred differently ... even if I would have been there. But not being there gives one a complete and utter feeling of impotence. When your guys are fighting and you can't be there to back them up, it's the worst feeling. I'd rather be there any day being shot at than sitting and listening to the radio when you know your guys are being shot at. The nature of battle is – and it always has been – that platoons will go off on their own and do their things away from “The Boss” or whatever you want to call it ... but it's hard.

I had been putting off taking my leave until the time we were supposed to be down off operations. We were supposed to be down for a couple of weeks, and for the most part we were, but there ended up being a last-minute push while I was away. That was rough. My HLTA was at the end of May and I got back very early in June, the 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup>. During that timeframe, my company had pretty much been working flat out in the Panjwai region. It had been involved in a couple of ambushes, returned fire, and had done some significant patrolling under the company's 2IC. He did a really good job by all accounts. So when I came back, I was the guy who hadn't been shot at yet. Not to say I was eager to get shot at necessarily, but the company had been bloodied and I hadn't been part of it. Then the company redeployed out again. We got involved in a pretty big fight in a little place called Seyyeddan, just over the Arghandab River.

Just as we moved in, we managed to surprise the bad guys that were still in place. At that point in time, they weren't all that keen on taking us on. It was an ambush ... hit and run. We saw the mass exodus of women and children, which is the surest indicator that the enemy was there and the civilians wanted to get out of the way. We patrolled through. One of our platoons – 7 Platoon – made initial contact with some bad guys. At that point, the Afghan Police were with us. They screamed forward, fired off all their rounds, said “Alright, we're done for the day,” and took off. Seven Platoon had pushed up and secured a key road through the area. The rest of the company – 8 and 9 Platoons – advanced and then ended up bumping into the enemy and pinned them down in a small grape-drying hut. As we manoeuvred, there was a small area where we came into



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view through a break in the wall. The guy in front of me and the guy behind me were both shot by the Taliban ... straight through the wall. Needless to say, that stopped our advance. Myself and the section commander who was leading the front with me, Sergeant Chris Mavin, managed to do some first aid until the medic got up to us. We managed to coordinate their evacuation and called in a bomb. The estimate is that we killed eight to ten and maybe four or five got away. So that was our first big piece, actually fighting a battle as an entire company, and two fairly serious injuries resulted. One took a shot to the shoulder and actually walked off the battlefield. He's a really tough soldier. The other had been shot through both legs. He almost lost them because there had been about five minutes of bleeding out before first aid was administered.

That incident was a good thing for me in that I reacted under fire and then the company gelled ... it did what it was supposed to do. But it was also rough for me because that was really the first time that one of my immediate decisions had resulted in casualties on our side. So there was a lot of soul searching after the fact. My after-thoughts were, "Could I have done anything different? Did I mess up? Did I do anything wrong as it related to the guys?" I think that's probably normal. Anybody who's involved in that kind of situation is going to wonder what they could have done better. Not to say that we can never do things better, but I would not have changed my decisions had I known then what I know now. And, ultimately, we accomplished the mission we set out to accomplish. The soldier who was shot through both legs was told he'd never walk again. They were going to cut off his legs in Germany, but he ended up walking with the use of a cane to our Christmas party later on that year. Pretty tough. So that was one big instance and I think that was probably the first major stand-up, face-to-face firefight in the battle group.

*That engagement was the first of a number of operations that turned relatively untried troops into battle-hardened veterans.*

I think it was around the 8<sup>th</sup> or 9<sup>th</sup> of July that we did a major operation and we actually had just secured our objective, spent the night, and were clearing through a series of fields with grape-drying huts.

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The plan was that 8 Platoon would move on to secure the next site as we searched the previous one. We just sort of leap-frogged, one over the other. As we were searching the site, we heard some shots fired and the platoon commander yelled, "Contact! Wait out!" on the radio. Then we heard, "Casualty!" What had happened is a bad guy came around the corner wearing a complete chest rig with AK-47 ammunition, but no weapon. He looked up, saw a bunch of Canadians, and it probably scared the hell out of him and back he went. Our guys surged forward. He ducked into the door of a compound. So they stopped, set up, and began doing a methodical clearance assault of the compound. By that time, the guy went on to the roof and had a couple of buddies with him. They sprayed and it killed Corporal Anthony Boneca with either a ricochet or a lucky shot. So when I got up to the front, I immediately hustled forward and they were pulling him out and we pushed back into the compound to try and surround it. One of the most amazing things was to watch the guys doing first aid on somebody who's dead, but doing it nonetheless because they had to try everything to save a buddy.

Things were getting a bit chaotic. I managed to get the situation calmed down and then I decided we were going to assault the compound. The first assault I did was with some ANA that we had, as well as two Americans. We pushed in a door. I don't think the guys expected the company commander to come with them because the first comment when one of the Americans turned around was, "Sir, what the fuck are you doing here?" Anyway, we got in. They tried to push up the stairs to go on the roof and just couldn't ... there was too much fire. At that point, we were under a small overhang made of dried grass. They started firing down through the roof at us.

*What happened next was what Fletcher has since termed his "most uncool moment in combat."*

I had launched myself towards the door because rounds were ping-ing all around me ... but the door was locked. So I hit it and stumbled backwards and here I thought I was going to die like an idiot. Fortunately, the Americans had suppressed them so it wasn't an issue. However, we didn't get in. At that point in time, we threw

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some grenades to precede our entry, but our grenades didn't work. We'd throw two or three grenades and hear only one "Boom!" That's a disconcerting feeling ... pushing into a compound when you've got two potentially live grenades that are sitting there ticking. That became a common problem. So we reorganized and assaulted again. This time it was Canadians. It was the same issue. We had a sergeant wounded. Again, I pushed in with the lead section and my thinking was that assaulting a compound in an urban setting is a pretty damned dangerous thing to do; the chances are that the guy asking them to do it should probably be there. I went in on both assaults and both didn't work.

Throwing bodies into the problem probably would have accomplished the end state but the face of warfare has changed. It's funny having conversations with World War Two or Korea vets who say, "You know, if someone is dead or injured, we complete the assault and then we go back and get them." That's doctrinally how we trained, but that's not how we did it in the field. The guys need to know they'll be taken care of in order to put themselves in difficult situations. We would always take care of the casualties as a priority and then worry about killing or capturing the bad guys.

Ultimately, we called in a bunch of ordnance. We were sitting there when an Apache came in and hit the ammo cache inside the compound. It was the biggest explosion I've ever felt. My signaller was chatting with one of the Americans and they both got nailed with shrapnel as the explosion went flying off. The former had his thigh fairly torn up and he asked me to check to make sure "everything" was all right. He was quite happy once that was confirmed. The latter had been hit in the leg as well. We managed to get the first aid done on both of them. Finally, we secured the site on the third assault into the compound. Two of the bad guys had been killed and we managed to capture a third.

There were a number of other minor fights as we pushed out along the Pakistan border. The last big incident was on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of August. [*Discussed at length in Chapter Six – Eds.*] I, along with one of my platoons, was holding Spin Boldak, a small forward operating

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base on the Afghan-Pakistan border. We had named the FOB “Costall.”<sup>21</sup> One of my other platoons, 9 Platoon, had been called away to support a company move into Panjwai again. That was the assault on the White School, where we ended up losing four guys. Nine Platoon, along with Recce [Reconnaissance] Platoon, formed the southern thrust into Panjwai as part of a battle group operation. B Company was the main effort advancing from the north. Right away, 9 Platoon hit an IED that killed Corporal Chris Reid.<sup>22</sup> The engineers hit another IED as they advanced in to clear the area. The platoon commander was knocked unconscious and evacuated. Throughout this the troops were also under small arms fire from what proved to be a major enemy defensive position. They had fortified the area and were determined to stand and fight. The troops, despite numerous heat casualties, succeeded in advancing to the White School, but were then pinned down by murderous enemy fire. An RPG round killed another three soldiers ... Sergeant Vaughn Ingram,<sup>23</sup> Corporal Bryce Keller<sup>24</sup> and Private Kevin Dallaire.<sup>25</sup> Ingram had taken over as the platoon commander earlier. Sergeant Pat Tower and Sergeant Willy MacDonald, along with some other troops, ended up making a mad dash over 200 metres of exposed ground to reach the casualties. LAVs braved the IED threat to move forward and evacuate everyone. Ultimately, both Tower and MacDonald received the Star of Military Valour for the action.

I spent that day listening to the radio, hearing my guys dying, and that was arguably my worst day. The second-worst was shortly after that event when a medic who had worked with us off and on throughout the tour, Corporal Andrew Eykelenboom, was killed by a suicide bomber just after they resupplied FOB Costall. We were the first guys to respond. We couldn't get him out of the vehicle. There was nothing that we could do. That was a pretty rough day as well.

*Having had their initiation, and having seen some of their fellow soldiers either wounded or killed, many of the young troops who had been anxious to get into the fray when they first arrived in Afghanistan soon changed their minds. The excellent leadership demonstrated by those in command however kept the company moving forward.*

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In the beginning, it was, “Let me at them! Let’s go! When are we going?” It changed to, “Do we have to go again?” It’s a real testament to the backbone of the Infantry Corps, with its senior NCOs and platoon commanders, that they kept the guys motivated and pushing forward. I think there are a number of reasons for that. One is that they had a very clear definition of what the mission was. They knew exactly why we were there and what we had to do. Especially after losing soldiers, there was not going to be any compromise on the accomplishment of the mission during the time we were in theatre. I think it would have been seen as letting them down if we had hunkered back and stopped doing what we needed to do. That was an element. There was a debt of honour to be paid to those who had fallen and those who were injured.

Also, before we deployed, a guy named Lieutenant-Colonel Dave Grossman – he’s an American author who wrote a book called *On Combat*<sup>26</sup> – had come to speak to us. He’s a very motivational, sort of a “rah-rah” kind of guy. His talk about the psychology and physiology of traumatic events, specifically of killing, actually ended up being very cathartic for us. We instituted the After Action Review [AAR]. Guys would sit down when they got a moment and reconstruct the events and talk through things. You only see things from your perspective and your little corner of what you went through. You don’t know what happened in the big picture and what other people were thinking. You may think you screwed up, you may think someone else screwed up, or who knows? The AAR allowed us to reconstruct those events at group-level and let guys know exactly what happened. As one of my corporals said, “They’re shooting real bullets. They shoot enough of them and eventually they’re going to hit someone.” So that proved very valuable to allow the guys to reconcile events.<sup>27</sup>

The other issue was that every chance we got guys would attend the ramp ceremonies to be able to say farewell to their friends on their journey home. There really was an element of closure in theatre that allowed guys to refocus before going into the next piece. I never had any significant issues getting guys motivated to go out and do what they did. If you’ve got a mission that you buy into and

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you understand, then you can motivate guys to go do what they need to do. It's up to the sergeants at the section-level. Those are the guys who really push them forward. I believe – and I know that Lieutenant-Colonel Hope has said the same thing – that there are very few true warriors and by that I mean the guys who, regardless of any situation, will always charge towards the sound of the guns and manage to subdue their fear. Most of the other guys will follow those true warriors because they're not going to let their buddies down. You need to figure out who they are and rely on those guys. I don't know if it's just that they're wired differently or what it is. Maybe it's a combination of some of their experiences. But for every 10 to 20 guys, there's one guy – he may not be the leader in terms of the actual appointment – but he's always ready to lead others towards the sound of the guns when the time comes.

*Major Fletcher took a reasoned approach to leadership to motivate his troops to get the job done.*

I knew very clearly from the start that I was the alpha male. When I said something, it had to be done. Having said that, I felt that I was open to suggestion before that decision was made, because nobody has a monopoly on good ideas. It's important that guys not only *feel* they have been heard, but that they actually *have* been heard because they have good ideas. Sometimes there's no time for that; you just have to get on with it. But that was my approach. I didn't always do it as well as I ought to have, but I hope for the most part guys figured they'd get an honest listening from me.

The other issue is one of shared risk. There's a balance here, between being able to exercise command and control, because sometimes the best place to do that is sitting in your vehicle with the suite of radios, coordinating things. I was very fortunate that my 2IC was quite capable of doing that, which allowed me to be up front. Maybe you're not controlling the battle as much necessarily, but you are leading and influencing the guys who are actually out front facing the rounds. To be honest, the team of me and the second-in-command proved invaluable as well because he was senior enough and squared away enough that he could coordinate a lot of things

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that may have been the purview of the company commander. That allowed me to push forward to try to influence the actual battle itself.

Being forward was just my way of doing things. I couldn't think of an incident to put my finger on and say that it taught me that that's what I had to do. If anything, it's probably the sum of my experiences from the time I joined the army ... going through early training and so on. The infantry has senior NCOs teaching junior officers so I think, looking back on it now, that's an excellent way to introduce the infantry to guys who are going to become leaders. Officers start as followers, and the guys actually teaching the officers are the guys that they are ultimately going to command. Those instructors are able to put a spin on it and say, "Look, Sir," and you've never met a guy who could use "Sir" in a derogatory tone until you've met a sergeant training a young officer! They can really put that imprint on it.

Leading by example was my highest priority. I'm just wired that way because a lot of times I found – especially in the first couple of incidents where it was very close and personal – that you just reverted back to your training. Your initial reaction is what you've been drilled to do. You also need to be where you can make the proper decisions and that might be a little bit towards the rear; it might be a little bit up front. I realize there is an annoyance in having an officer there all the time. I'm sure that was the case some of the time with me. I'd like to think that my being there and sharing the risk engendered an element of trust. It's "Mission. Troops. Self." I firmly believe in that. I hope that I was able to follow that mantra. I'd try to inspire guys, "Yeah, I know we're going into a dangerous spot but I'm going too. I've thought this through. I'm not throwing your lives away."

This philosophy was the backbone of the company. The section commanders and the 2ICs were the ones who kept the guys in the section motivated, squared away, properly trained, and who did most of the AAR pieces to reconstruct events. They were thinking about the guys' mental health as much as their physical health. They were the ones who would be able to call up and say, "Sir, we need to take a break." They'd be completely honest and forthright. And

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it was the 3ICs [Thirds-in-Command] and the 4ICs [Fourth-in-Command] – the corporals and the odd private – who would step into the breach when the time came or who were always the dependable guys. It was some of those true warriors and some of those guys with, at the time, untapped leadership potential, who were really able to step up. We saw that.

The 3<sup>rd</sup> of August is a good example. The platoon commander was knocked unconscious, the acting platoon commander was killed, and so Sergeant Pat Tower took over. Everybody just shifted to the right. There's a private commanding a section. That fact is a testament to the ability of those guys as individuals, but it's also a tribute to our training system in selecting and recruiting the right people so that we can do these types of things.

We're good. Canada has a brilliant military and I don't mean just the infantry or just the army at large. Our troops are smart, intelligent and incredibly motivated. They are doing amazing things every day that we don't hear about ... and it's the nature of what we do. But the little bit of flag-waving that we do see – things like the Highway of Heroes<sup>28</sup> – to me means the world. Canadians are supporting our guys doing brilliant, brilliant work. For the new soldiers coming in, it's a pretty amazing time. You're going to get the benefit of some pretty amazing experience and you're going into a very professional organization. I love it. The day it stops being fun and rewarding is the day I will get out of the military. As tragic as our losses can be, our guys are doing brilliant things.

*Like others who have been decorated for their actions, Major Fletcher doesn't feel that he had been particularly "valorous" in doing what he considered was his job.*

To me, valour is the image I get when I think of the guys storming the beaches at Normandy or fighting in the mountains of Italy during the Second World War. And now, I have images of guys doing amazing things in Afghanistan. Valour to me was always going above and beyond in the face of the enemy in combat. To me, what differentiates bravery from valour is doing amazing things, but



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not necessarily with somebody shooting at you and trying to kill you. You can call it bravery, or valour, or whatever you want. I don't know if that jives with the reality of it, but that's how I differentiate the two. I don't believe I displayed any particular moments of valour that no one else did. I was never alone charging stark raving mad at the enemy or anything. I didn't jump on a grenade. I didn't do those things. My award – as much of an honour as it was – was a testament to all the soldiers that I had the pleasure of serving with over the course of seven months. The company managed to accomplish all these various things under all circumstances and I happened to be the guy at the top of the organization chart.

MAJOR FLETCHER WAS INVESTED WITH HIS STAR OF MILITARY VALOUR BY THE THEN-GOVERNOR GENERAL AND COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF OF CANADA, HER EXCELLENCY THE RIGHT HONOURABLE MICHAËLLE JEAN, AT THE FAIRMONT CHÂTEAU LAURIER ON 19 FEBRUARY 2007.

## NOTES

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1 *Canada Gazette*, Part I, Vol. 141, No. 8 (24 February 2007), 324. See also, "Valour," *Canadian Military Journal*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (Spring 2007), 4-5.

2 Fletcher remarked on this point specifically, "To a degree, there is a difference in terrain and climate, with Kandahar being further south. The real differences, however, are manifold: rural versus urban, the proximity to Pakistan, and the tribal dynamics in particular, just to name a few."

3 "In truth," Fletcher commented, "the best building block is shared adversity. This shows who will be there to back you up when the going gets rough and that engenders trust. At this time, however, we held a couple of social events called 'smokers' that allowed everyone to interact in a more personal fashion."

4 At this time, the Canadian Manoeuvre Training Centre (CMTCC) had not yet been officially stood-up. The chain of command (of 1PPCLI), Land Forces Western Area and the Land Forces Doctrine and Training System therefore conducted the pre-deployment training.

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5 For his service in Afghanistan, David Allison Fraser received the M.S.C.; his citation appears in Appendix 2.

6 For the better part of 2006, Fraser, through his multi-national brigade headquarters, was responsible for all Canadian *and* coalition operations in southern Afghanistan.

7 For his service on this particular tour, Shawn Douglas Stevens received the M.S.M. For his service on a subsequent tour, he received the M.S.C. Both of his citations appear in Appendix 2.

8 For his service in Afghanistan, Ryan Jurkowski was Mentioned in Dispatches; his citation appears in Appendix 2.

9 The LAV captain is the 3IC of a company, commanding the vehicles once the soldiers dismount. He controls the LAVs as an integral sub-component, allowing the company commander to employ them in support of the overall plan.

10 For his leadership during two separate incidents, Hugh Llewellyn Atwell was Mentioned in Dispatches; his citation appears in Appendix 2.

11 Later promoted, Captain Jonathan Sutherland Snyder earned the S.M.V. for his actions on 4 June 2008; his citation appears in Appendix 2. He unfortunately died soon thereafter, on the night of 7/8 June, after falling into a well while on patrol.

12 Chief Warrant Officer Randy Allan Northrup. For his service in Afghanistan, he received the M.S.C.; his citation appears in Appendix 2.

13 Lieutenant-Colonel Ian Hope. For his service in Afghanistan, he received the M.S.C.; his citation appears in Appendix 2. Lieutenant-Colonel Hope's experiences in Afghanistan have been published in Ian Hope, *Dancing with the Dushman: Command Imperatives for the Counter-Insurgency Fight in Afghanistan* (Kingston: CDA Press, 2008).

14 Colonel James Riley Stone, C.M., D.S.O., M.C., C.D., 2 August 1908-24 November 2005.

15 Meaning that the Canadians under ISAF, not the Americans that had been there before under Op ENDURING FREEDOM, would from now on bear significant responsibility for security in southern Afghanistan.

16 Soviet forces occupied Afghanistan for a decade, from late 1979 until the late 1980s.

17 Essentially including the normal attachments from the BG and NSE, namely artillery pieces, transport, maintenance, military police, medical personnel and the like.

18 The impressions of a Canadian logistics officer serving in Afghanistan at this time have been published in Lieutenant-Colonel John Conrad, *What the Thunder Said – Reflections of a Canadian Officer in Kandahar* (Kingston and Toronto: CDA Press

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and Dundurn, 2009). For his service in Afghanistan, John David Conrad received the M.S.M.; his citation appears in Appendix 2.

19 Captain Nichola Kathleen Sarah Goddard, the first Canadian female combat soldier killed in action, 17 May 2006. For her dedication and exemplary service in Afghanistan, she was posthumously awarded the M.S.M.; her citation appears in Appendix 2.

20 Celebrated on 19 August to commemorate the 1919 Treaty of Rawalpindi through which Afghanistan gained its independence from Great Britain.

21 Out of respect for Private Robert Costall, who had earlier been killed.

22 For actions performed earlier in his tour, Christopher Jonathan Reid was Mentioned in Dispatches; his citation appears in Appendix 2.

23 For his actions on 3 August 2006, Vaughan Ingram was posthumously Mentioned in Dispatches; his citation appears in Appendix 2.

24 For his actions on 3 August 2006, Bryce Jeffrey Keller was posthumously awarded the M.M.V.; his citation appears in Appendix 1.

25 For his actions on 3 August 2006, Kevin Yves Royal Dallaire was posthumously Mentioned in Dispatches; his citation appears in Appendix 2.

26 Lieutenant-Colonel Dave Grossman with Loren Christensen, *On Combat: The Psychology and Physiology of Deadly Combat in War and in Peace* (PPCT Research Publications, 2004).

27 As Fletcher recalls, "Grossman recommends the AAR as a process to reconstruct events. This is not only useful for individuals, but also allows us to identify lessons, positive or negative, that can be applied in the future."

28 A section of Highway 401 in southern Ontario, stretching between Trenton and Toronto. Crowds consisting of private citizens, members of the various emergency services, and of course veterans, habitually gather on top of the many overpasses to pay their respects as the procession carrying the remains of a repatriated soldier passes.



# CHAPTER 4

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## *DWINDLING OPTIONS*

SERGEANT MICHAEL THOMAS VICTOR DENINE

MEDAL OF MILITARY VALOUR ■ 17 MAY 2006

*“I DID WHAT I HAD TO DO TO KEEP MY GUYS ALIVE AND KEEP MYSELF ALIVE.”*

Sergeant Denine deployed with 8 Platoon, C Company, 1 PPCLI during Operation ARCHER in Afghanistan. On **MAY 17, 2006**, while sustaining concentrated rocket-propelled grenade, machine gun and small arms fire, the main cannon and the machine gun on his light armoured vehicle malfunctioned. Under intense enemy fire, he recognized the immediate need to suppress the enemy fire and exited the air sentry hatch to man the pintle-mounted machine gun. Completely exposed to enemy fire, he laid down a high volume of suppressive fire, forcing the enemy to withdraw. Sergeant Denine’s valiant action ensured mission success and likely saved the lives of his crew.<sup>1</sup>

MICHAEL DENINE WAS BORN AND RAISED IN ST. JOHN’S, NEWFOUNDLAND AND JOINED THE RESERVES (36 SERVICE BATTALION) UPON GRADUATION FROM GRADE 12. HE LATER WORKED FOR SEVERAL YEARS IN BASE MAINTENANCE AT CANADIAN FORCES BASE (CFB) GAGETOWN IN NEW BRUNSWICK AND EVENTUALLY JOINED THE REGULAR FORCE IN NOVEMBER 1993, BEING POSTED TO 1PPCLI IN EDMONTON, ALBERTA. AFTER TOURS IN KOSOVO (KFOR, 1999, ROTO 0) AND BOSNIA (IFOR, 2000, ROTO 11), DENINE DEPLOYED TO AFGHANISTAN IN JANUARY 2006 FOR OP ARCHER ON TASK FORCE 1-06.

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*In mid-May 2006, as an infantry section commander, Sergeant Mike Denine received orders for his small group of soldiers to take the lead in a search for Taliban fighters in and around the village of Bayanzi near the dried-up Arghandab River in Afghanistan's Panjwai District.*

The way it worked out was that our battalion was the spearhead for an American division since we had all the armoured vehicles and had better protection, mobility and firepower than the Hum-Vees did. The 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion was the spear and Charlie Company was the forward edge of it, because we were always “outside the wire” and had lots of experience. Bravo Company was running the PRT. And Alpha Company was out in the FOBs in the mountains. So our platoon was the spear tip and my section was the lead for 8 Platoon. We were out to neutralize insurgents and provide a safe and secure environment for the local population.

It was about two weeks after we had had soft contact with the enemy in the same area. A “soft contact” is an enemy shooting at you but you can't see where they're shooting from and there is no effect from their fire, and therefore there's no sense firing into a building or a populated area where you can't see where your fires are impacting. About the soft contact in early May ... the ANA or the ANP were there in a gunfight with the Taliban. As for my platoon, we were up forward and were the closest to the battle. I called up Corporal Rory Ozerkevich – “Oz” – on the net and I said to him, “Oz, we're going to dismount and start moving in. See if you can get eyes on.” So I got my guys all out and I put them in an arrowhead formation and we got up there and scattered a little closer to the objective. Rounds would go by and you'd just smile and be like, “Come on!” And then we got called back because they, our HQ [Headquarters], didn't want us to get involved. They wanted the ANP to actually do their job. They called us to go up there because of our LAV. We could have laid waste to the building and chopped it right in half, but, for whatever reason, we got called back. I was kind of pissed off about it – don't get me wrong, I despise having to hurt anyone – but I was like, “Well, fuck man. What am I doing here then?” I don't thrive on that stuff, but it's like training all your life to be a hockey player and you're always on the bench.

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So we got back to the cars<sup>2</sup> and I called Lieutenant Jonny Snyder<sup>3</sup> back and said, “We got wounded here, man.” Some of the ANA buddies got shot up. One guy got shot in the throat and he was flopping around in the back of the truck. Another guy got hit in the arm or the wrist. He was moaning about his hand or something. I was like, “Yeah, okay man. Put a bandage on it. Let’s go!” And then another guy got shot in the side. But they all lived. They rifled them back to the camp hospital at KAF. They had wicked good doctors at the hospital and they were from everywhere. You wouldn’t believe the amount of medical support we had over there. It was just amazing to see. They had actual operating rooms and everything.

After the wounded got evacuated, we stayed at that location all night. We secured the south end over where the contact was coming from and that was just to cut off any squirts<sup>4</sup> getting out. It was a sleepless night. The next morning we swept through the village area, and then we regrouped and went back to camp. For a place that’s all desert, there were some places there that were just beautiful, beautiful trees, a park-like setting, and I guess that’s what it was at one time. So we regrouped and we cut back to our base to refit, rearm and all that stuff. Well, it wasn’t really a case of rearming. It was getting more water. That was the biggest thing – water – because it was about 30 or 40 degrees at that time. And you’ve got about 50 or 60 pounds of kit on and you sweat quite a bit. So it’s always a concern for you.

With my guys, I let them have their little moment because even though it had been a soft contact, you want to tell them they did a good job. Everybody was quite happy with themselves. But then I said, “Okay, now pull your head out of your ass. You’re still on sentry duty. Keep watching.” Jonny Snyder had a near miss. He was up in the turret of the LAV. As he went down near the water where we had it stacked, a case of it got zapped. But we did our job. We did what we had to do. We swept the area the next day and then went back in to get more water. You don’t really eat much over there. It’s too hot. You’ll get a meal a day into you, but water ... you drink tons of water.

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So with that soft contact behind us, we got orders the night of 16 May down in the PRT camp that we were going to go on the north side of the Arghandab to act as a cut-off for squirts coming down to the south, escaping out of the known suspect villages. The whole idea was that the ANP and the ANA were supposed to go in, corner the enemy off and kill or capture them. We were just basically in our corner and if we had enemy come down to us, then we would either engage or try to detain. I don't want to give the impression that it was always "kill" because it wasn't. If we could detain someone, then by all means we would. We'd make every effort to get them to surrender, but sometimes people are stubborn and they don't want to do that.

So we got our orders at about 2030 or 2100 that night and I went back to brief my guys. I had to give them the boot, kicked them awake, because I had put them to ground earlier. I gave them what was going on, and at around 2230 or 2300, we left the front gate. We got about five minutes down the road and we got "lased" by something or someone, which was the big thing over there. I guess kids or whatever get those little handheld lasers and find it fun to put little red dots on us. Not too cool though, especially when things are starting to heat up. We already had one incident where someone got killed, perhaps it was Costall,<sup>5</sup> so there was no messing around now. Everybody had to take their job quite seriously. So here we are on the road, at night time, and someone's tracking people with a laser. I was up in the back of the vehicle and Corporal Calvin Bérubé – nice guy, he would give you the shirt off his back – says, "Sarge, we're being lased! We're being lased!" And I'm like, "What? What are you talking about?" Then you see this little red dot hitting the back of the car and it's like, "Oh man. Just keep track of it. If you see a flash, we'll turn the car around and take them out!"

But nothing happened, so we continued up to the police station, just prior to going into the White School area. We stayed there for an hour covering off the town and then we pulled out and ended up almost back to the spot where we'd had our first soft contact two weeks earlier. We stayed there until, Jesus, it must have been about 1400 or 1500 in the afternoon the next day, just staying there as



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security. And man was it hot. It was a nice clear day but it must have been 45 or 50 degrees. We'd stop cars or people coming by, check them, and then let them go on their way. It was all just routine stuff. It was no different than a regular checkpoint that you'd run. Then we got orders to move up to just shy of the area where we had come under soft contact. They wanted us to push in at the south end of the village.

*As the LAV entered the village, it had to squeeze between the buildings that formed the edges of two separate and distinct compounds. Sergeant Denine felt incredibly uneasy about the whole situation because the road was so narrow at that point that the vehicle had no room to manoeuvre and the troops wouldn't be able to dismount if required.*

We got about not even 20 metres away from the main entrance between these two compounds ... the road just squirted between them. We saw people walking out of the village but we didn't clue into anything at the time. I remember Oz saying "Look at all the people." And I'm like, "Yeah, just keep an eye on them." And then all of a sudden, she just opened up. I'm hearing this popping sound and I'm looking around. You'd figure after 16 years in the infantry that you would be able to clue in as to what your own weapon sounds like! And I'm looking around and I see Oz. I'm like, "Oz, what are you doing?" And he looks at me and he goes, "I just shot two people, man. I just got two of them." I said, "What? What are you shooting at?" because I couldn't see anything. Then I said, "Well, if they're coming out, keep shooting. Don't let me stop you!" And then all of a sudden the car went to open up and I think she might have got one round off – from the main chain gun – and she went into catastrophic failure. The link belt jammed inside. The turret crew called out, "Misfire!" So then it's like, "Okay, you're going to switch to the co-ax<sup>6</sup> now!" Then they yelled, "Stoppage! The co-ax has jammed up!"

*With both guns broken down and the troops inside the LAV unable to dismount, only Sergeant Denine and Corporal Ozerkevich were able to shoot back at the enemy through the air sentry hatches.*

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So I went, "Here we go!" I started seeing guys coming out off the left side next to the building. Oz caught two guys and I caught one, and then we were taking fire from all over the place. So now we're in a firefight. We're not just taking it from the front, we're taking it from the sides too. From where we were, all of the other cars – all of our platoon LAVs – couldn't move up to support us because there was nowhere to support from. So they were pretty much stuck there. I shot a guy coming off the corner. I put two rounds square into him. You could see the puff coming out of the back of him. So he dropped. I remember when I shot buddy there coming off the left-hand side ... he fired and the ration box strapped on the car ... you could see the cardboard flipping as the bullets were going through it.

And then I looked over and there are all these ANA cars about 50 feet away from us and they're all in the ditch looking at us and waving. It was getting dicey because we were getting RPG rounds left, right and centre. I had one go right down the side of the car. She went right through the dragon's teeth<sup>7</sup> on the side of her. Right through the actual teeth. The round stalled out. The motor on it burnt out and she just dead-headed on the ground behind the car. I saw a lot of them that hit our vehicle but didn't detonate. I think a lot of it had to do with the range. They'd hit and they'd make an awful smack when they did, but nothing, no effect.

So Oz is firing. I'm firing. The other troops are in the back of the car. Me and Oz are starting to get low on ammo because you get that – what do they call it? – "buck fever" I guess. The first firefight. So we're starting to run a little low on ammo. But the guys were sitting on each side of the air sentry hatch and as you finished your mag and dropped it, there would be another mag coming up. That's what the boys down there were doing. What little ammo we had, and we had very little 5.56 over there for the first couple of months, the boys were passing up to us and you could hear them. They were all chuckling and cheering and stuff, saying "Yeah! Right on!" So she started picking up something good.

So I said to Oz, "Keep firing!" And I'm losing my mind right now on the gunner and the crew commander. I'm like, "Get that fucking

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turret going right now!” because of the amount of fire that was coming in. It wasn’t two or three guys out there with AKs. We were getting sustained PKM<sup>8</sup> fire. We were getting sustained AK fire, sustained RPG fire. So it was a fair-sized element on the ground. They were just hammering into us. And at that point, the battalion still had not lost a LAV. A LAV hadn’t been destroyed up until then and I wasn’t in the mood to have mine be the first one. So I told Oz, “I’m going to hop up on the pintle-mount.”<sup>9</sup> It was just one of those things. It was going from bad to worse.

*The pintle-mounted machine gun was smaller and less effective than the LAV’s other two main weapons, but with those both out of commission, Denine knew that it would be a much better way of laying down suppressing fire than what he and Ozerkevich had been using so far, their rifles. Up until that point, Denine had been somewhat protected within the air hatch; now he was totally exposed to the enemy.*

Two rifles weren’t winning the firefight. Oz had dumped seven mags. I dropped seven or eight. He dumped 18 grenades, so we weren’t up against just a couple of guys. It was a lot of bad people there. Oz is looking at me and he says, “What? You’re hopping up?” I was like, “Yeah, yeah. We gotta get more fire going, man!” I went up there and I looked at the LAV sergeant, Gerry Moores, and I told him, “You get that fucking gun going right now.” He was staring at me and, politically correct or not, I said, “Don’t you be fucking staring at me!” It was funny. I said, “This fucking C9 better be working or you’re getting it.” I rack back the action. I’m getting peppered all over the turret. I’m not getting hit, but it was just by luck. Bang! Bang! Stop. I was thinking, “Okay, here we go. I’m fucking dead!” Then I yelled out at Oz, “Get me some oil.” The gun was dry. So he handed me up a bottle of oil. I ripped open the feed tray cover and just greased her up ... gave her one good squeeze right over the guts of her, closed the feed tray cover and that was it. She’s just going. I said, “Keep the ammo coming Oz!”

So I laid down enough fire and then took an RPG round. It skipped off on the side of the turret. There was a guy behind a low wall lobbing RPGs at us. Bastard. So I got him the next time he popped up.

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I put about a half a box of ammo in him and then there were guys moving across in front or from the sides. I just laid into them with the machine gun and I guess they got tired of getting shot, so they withdrew. But they withdrew into Alpha Company which was located with some engineers nearby. So that was good. By that time, Gerry said he had the gun going. The whole thing took about a half an hour or 45 minutes. It may sound quick, but it wasn't. Anyhow, that was that. She died down then.

It came over the radio to pull back because we were going to put in artillery on the village. So Gerry's like, "Get off the top of the turret." Meanwhile, I've already gone through almost three boxes ... 200 rounds a box. So I was choked at the whole situation. I said, "Alright, I'm hopping down." And there's Oz – I'll never forget the look on his face – a big smile, just killing himself laughing at me. So I got down and they pulled us back. My driver was Corporal Brian Bell, who's only a young fellow, he might have been 19 or 20, nicest guy in the world and as sharp as they come. He'd do whatever he was told and he'd always try to do the best job that he could. So here he was driving backwards and Gerry's going, "Left. Left. Right. Right." So we're doing this the whole way back. This was ridiculous because there was nothing at all back there. Just an open desert. Once you're out of the kill zone you could go 100 miles an hour backwards and not have to worry about hitting anything. So I come over the ICS [Integrated Communications System] and say, "Bell, straighten out and just drive straight back. You're fine." As soon as he heard me, he straightened right out and drove backwards.

*At this point, an order was given to shell the village with artillery, but the first round caused another problem.*

As soon as we stopped, they called in 155mm artillery rounds. The shell landed about 75 metres from the front of my car. I see that thing impact and splash. It blacked out all of our optics on the car. Bastards. I said something like, "Ho! That's good." The car has so much firepower it can make or break you in a firefight, quite literally. Not only that, the enemy is petrified of that vehicle. It's no good if it doesn't have the shock value of even having the gun going. So,

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anyhow, they blacked out our optics and I was just livid. Gerry came over the net and he says, "It was a drop short." And I said, "Well, no fucking shit!" What happened was the GPS [Global Positioning System] belonging to either Bravo Company's 2IC or the OC was off when he called in the grid reference. Obviously it wasn't accurate. So they ix-nayed the artillery barrage and opted for us to go back in and sweep it on foot. I didn't mind, but I had no ammo. So I ran over to the remainder of Bravo Company since their LAVs were just showing up now and I asked the guys, "Has anybody got any spare 5.56? We're low." But everybody was in the same boat. They were all, "No, no, I've only got this much or that much."

So I saw the platoon warrant, Warrant Officer Ronnie Gallant, in his G-Wagon. I told my troops, "Boys, stay here. I just have to run and see the warrant." The first thing Bérubé says to me is, "Well, no. I'm going with you because you always told us that if you go by yourself, there's a better chance of getting killed." That's the type of guys I had. Outstanding. So we went over to Warrant Officer Gallant and I said, "Ron, I need ammo." He says, "I'll help you out." And he pulled out a big be-Jesus size backpack full of 5.56. So I grabbed it. He says, "How'd you do?" I said, "Oh, I got two."

Then I went behind the car and I threw my guts up. I think it was because of the fact that I had killed two people outright in the first two minutes of it. But I quickly got over that. It's one of those things. When the whole thing was going on, my biggest concern was if we don't get enough fire down right now, we're going to get cooked. And I didn't want my guys to die that way. I didn't want my vehicle to get destroyed. So that's why I jumped up. I wasn't thinking about getting a medal for it. It's the furthest thing from your mind. Your task at hand is to suppress the enemy. Kill as many as you can or drive them off and make them think twice about going after you. You have got to make yourself an unattractive target to the enemy, which we did. And when it got sorted out enough that we could get out of there, we did. There were no ifs, ands or buts. It wasn't a case of, "Yeah, we stayed there just because we wanted to get right into her." Everything is metered with a lot of common sense. I was more concerned that if we don't get the fire going, we're done. Let's get her

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moving. Let's do it. Let's get it done and move onto the next thing. I did what I had to do to keep my guys alive and keep myself alive.

So after Ronnie gave me the ammo, I said, "I got to get going." As I ran back, I yelled to him, "I love you like a brother." And he yelled, "Me too, man. I'll see you on the other side." So I ran back, threw the ammo in the car, and told the boys to start bombing-up<sup>10</sup> everything. Bérubé was still following me at that time. We were still taking fire. There was one of these grape-drying hut towers nearby and we were taking fire from that. So I ran over to Jonny Snyder's car and said, "Jonny, put a dozen rounds in that pricking thing." And he did and then the fire bleached off from there and we started getting squirters coming out alongside the grape field, along the edge of the town. So we went in and swept both sides. Boy was she hot. It felt like it was about 60 degrees out there.

At some point we all ran out of water. You can't carry cases of water with you when you're trying to clear out a town or village. Finally, the water arrived and we continued to sweep the town. We pulled off on the northwest side of the town and waited as cut-offs because we were looking for a tunnel. Apparently the Taliban were all scooting into tunnels. They were good at it. They knew the terrain. It was their backyard. We looked and we searched all over the place. It starts to get dark there about 1700 or 1730, so it was just at the end of the strong daylight. I said to Jonny Snyder, "Listen, there's nothing here, mate." We had swept through, I'd say, 10 or 15 compounds and found nothing. Just a lot of signs of people being in their farms. Bits of blood here and there, or something like that, so you knew you got them. But nothing else. So at around 1730 or 1800, Jonny Snyder said, "Yeah, okay, we're going to head her back in."

When we were coming back in, we came across a compound that was all full of people ... a lot of fighting-age males but no weapons. I told my guys, "You won't shoot. We're not playing that game." So at about 1830 or 1900, it's now getting dark, we got back to the mouth of the town where we had first come under contact. I got out of the car and was I ever dehydrated. Everybody was. I saw the medic and I said, "Look, I'm puking now. I need something in me." So he gave

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me two packs of electrolytes, the powder. So that was one of the big lessons we learned. Always carry those in your car over there. They taste horrible. So you down the powder and then you drink a bottle of water and your guts will settle and you'll be good as new. We got back to the car and the boys were cooking rations and then all of a sudden she started up again. It's always that way. You get your one meal of the day and as soon as you're about to put the spoon to your mouth, a gun starts going off, and it's like, "Aw, crap!"

*Denine's section went back into action and drove about 15 or 20 of the enemy back into a building where they refused to surrender.*

So we're looking at each other and it's like, "Okay, who's going to draw the short straw on this one to breach the building?" Then I look up and there's four Apaches coming over the horizon. So I said, "Call them in!" So they cleared the area for us.

Around this time we got a call over the net that I will never forget. Master Bombardier Jeff Fehr,<sup>11</sup> who was Nichola Goddard's<sup>12</sup> driver, said she got killed. And then you just hear the net light up. I was like, "Get the fuck out of there." Her car got hit maybe four or five times on the one side. It was a mess trying to get them out of there, but they got them out. We ended up calling in a B-1 bomber to effect it. There was a lot of enemy out there. We see the B-1 come in. Well, you couldn't actually see it because it was dark now. All you could see was the exhaust on it. And as quick as you heard it, it was gone the other way. And then it came back around the mountain. That was it. Its bombs just lit the tree line right up. But there was still some sporadic fire coming out of that tree line, believe it or not. By now, we had probably dumped, I don't know, I'd say about 20 or 30 155[mm] rounds on that location just to neutralize it. From where we were out on the highway, you could see the Afghan cars lined up, tearing away. What they were doing was hauling wounded out. They said we killed 50, captured 40 or 45, and wounded another 50 or 60. It wasn't like the movies.

*Having heard that Captain Goddard had been killed, a lot of the Canadian troops were tempted to open fire on the fleeing enemy.*

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We were pretty livid at that point. I knew Nic. She was always saying “Hi” to me and smiling. She was a really nice person. Very smart too. At that point, you get kind of mad and we were all like, “Let’s call in fire on those fucking trucks.” But cooler heads prevailed. I said “No.” We knew those vehicles were hauling away wounded and heaven help us if we ever did do that. That’s something that you’d have to live with. So I’m glad that we didn’t.

With my car shot up, we pulled into a perimeter around the White School. The ANA were there so we handed them our prisoners. That was the doctrine at the time. One of the prisoners was on a cell phone talking to his buddies. They got the cell phone off him, and the terp that we had with us said, “This is what they’re talking about. They’re all going to come in here tonight.” So we stayed up. We had us another sleepless night but she was dead quiet after that.

*As things were relatively quiet now, Sergeant Denine took the time to chat with his LAV sergeant and gunner about the vehicle’s guns not working in the midst of battle, when they were needed the most.*

The guys weren’t incompetent or anything like that because it’s just one of those things that happened with the guns jamming up. They were both pretty upset about it. So we had a little chat and it never happened again and everybody was happy.

*Once that issue had been resolved, he focused his attention back on his exhausted soldiers. For him, as a section commander, there was always something to do, someone to look out for.*

So at this time, I sent all my guys to ground for as long as I could get them down, maybe an hour, while I stayed up. It’s a funny thing. You don’t get much sleep in the field, but what sleep you do get is far better than what you get at home. I guess you could say that your time on active duty is the best game you’ll ever play in your life. You’re on top of your game, and rightly so because it’s your life at stake. The air smells sweeter. The water tastes sweeter. The food tastes better. The cigarettes are better. I slept like a baby over there when we were out. You only get an hour a night or whatever, but it was the best hour of sleep I ever got.



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*Ironically, after repeatedly exposing himself to enemy fire and coming away without a scratch, Denine received a debilitating injury the next day that he could just as easily have sustained in a sandlot baseball game.*

The next day we did a BDA [Battle Damage Assessment] and stayed at the White School until 2300 or 2400. We could see the areas where the artillery had impacted and the damage that was done. There were a lot of blind corners, so you fully got the picture of where Nic and Jeff and the Taliban were when Nic got killed. Unluckily, they were in a tight area with very little room to manoeuvre. It was good that they were able to get out of there with only one fatality. We cleared through, swept the whole area.

Earlier that morning though, at about 0600, my car was leading this time for the section and a civilian car came around a blind corner. The driver was a guy whose house we'd bombed. So I got him out of the car, and then he took off on me, but I got him back. However, I busted up my ankle. Rolled on it. When it was all said and done, I came crawling out from the side of the road. Oz and Private David Dehaney – Dehaney was my fireteam partner and since he was the newest guy we kept him with the most experienced one – saw me. Oz jumped on me. He says, "Were you hit?" I was in a lot of pain and I said, "I'm not hit. Get off of me. You're on my ankle." I was punching at him because he was ripping all the stuff off of me. Idiot. And then Dehaney pipes up and says, "Holy crap, man. You were going at a pretty good clip there, you know?" I said, "Right. Get me back to the car, now!" I wouldn't take any medication. All the section came up to me and I said to the boys, "Listen, I can't walk. My leg's done. So if it's all the same to you, I'll stay up here and do sentry. I'll be here but I just won't be with you." They were like, "Okay. Yeah. No problem." And they went and carried on like they're supposed to do. So I was very proud of that. No pain medication and I was hurting bad. But that's the way she goes. We got back to camp at about midnight that night.

It was funny because the medics and those who were there were like, "Yeah, you're going home." I'm like, "No, I'm not." So I saw a doctor. He gave me some pain medication and the guys brought

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me back down and put me to bed because I was just zoned. They apparently have some strong pills over there! I went to bed and first thing in the morning I got up and went to see the doctor. He said, "You shouldn't stand on it." So I got off the table, walked ten feet, turned around and walked back another ten. My ankle was broken. So I just kept my mouth shut about it, bandaged it up, and talked to my company commander about it. I told him, "Listen, if I have got to get down on the ground and run, I'm dead. There's no ifs, ands or buts. But you can still use me in the turret to navigate and stuff like that." He was like, "Yeah, if you want to stay, you can stay." So I did.

At the time when it happened, I knew things were picking up. Everybody did because the first month or so that we were there, there was nothing. The worst thing that had happened was a couple of vehicle accidents and rollovers and stuff. And then, all of a sudden, every second day you're in it. She's picking up hard now. So I didn't want to go back to Canada for the simple fact that I didn't want to leave my guys there and not only that, but who was going to lead them? Some fucking schmuck from the CC [Command Centre]? I don't think so. Not to say that the guys in the CC were schmucks, but it's just saying that you didn't know who you were getting. It's like that old saying, "Better the devil they know than the one they don't." So basically they gave me seven days bed rest, for what good that did, and I went back to it. But I was lucky because that week I didn't miss anything. I know it sounds stupid – like you're missing something – but it's true. I hated the fact that I was laid up. The guys would come out because they know I'm laid up and I can't move quick or anything like that. They'd come over and give me a poke or whatever and say, "Hi, Sarge." And I'm like, "Get the hell out of here!"

*The obvious camaraderie enjoyed between Denine and the men in his section had been built-up over a long period of time. He prided himself on being a tough but fair disciplinarian.*

A lot of my guys were brand new. It was like herding cats at first. They were all over the place. They were full of wonder and curiosity. But they were good kids. I was really, really fortunate for having the

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guys that I had. They'd listen and that's half the battle right there. I'm actually quite proud of my boys. And when we were deployed, there wasn't too much switch-around of guys because we did all our training together and it wouldn't have made sense to break up platoons because now you've got a whole other bag of worms to deal with. We kept the same guys for the most part out there. I had one guy shot over there, so we got a replacement and he worked out fine. He was a really good kid. Very smart.

It really helps to serve with the same guys in theatre. It's one of those things where if you have a group of guys and the same section commander, the same leadership throughout, you've established a trust amongst one another. You've got cohesion and your guys know it. So this is where it falls to the senior NCO. It falls on me to do my job and make sure I'm doing it right. I never babied my guys, but my guys knew that if we had to go clear a building, I'd be number one in the stack<sup>13</sup> and everybody would take a turn up front. So that shows them that you're accepting as much danger as they are. I never asked my guys to do something I wouldn't have done and they knew it. I treated them like men. When they screwed up, they got it. When they did good, they got a pat on the head, off you go, and that was it. I could count on my guys, quite literally at any time, to do their job and do it well.

We went out one night and recovered a car, from 9 Platoon, that had broken down. Christ, by this time I don't know how many contacts we had had, but it was commonplace that I'd be up on deck,<sup>14</sup> or Oz, and we'd all take turns going through it. We get out there and pick up 9 Platoon's car and get them all squared away. One of their section commanders hops in the car and says, "What are you doing, Mike?" I said, "I'm getting up." All my guys are looking at him like, "What do you mean, what's he doing? He's taking his fucking turn." And it was like, "Well, we don't do that." And I said, "Why not?" He said, "Well, what happens if you get killed?" And I said, "That's why I've got a 2IC, mate. That's why I trust him to do his job. If he gets killed, then it's the 3IC and so on and so forth." That's why you have got to be always training these guys.

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Yeah, I was hard on them, just because sweat in training saves blood in battle. We were always training. Every time we'd come in from an operation, other NCOs would say to their guys, "Okay, we're going to Burger King." They had that on the camp. Now I love Burger King as much as the next guy, but my guys all knew the drill. As soon as we got in, it was: weapons, water, ammunition, personal kit, and then rest. Then they could go have their Burger King or whatever it is they wanted to do.

The next day, if we had some down time, I'd have them out doing patrolling drills. I'd have them out sparring, doing that armed combat stuff. I'd have them out doing break contact drills. I'd grab a weapon and show them how to rip the guts out of it and put it back together again. Always, always ... train, train, train. Because when we got out there and stuff started going south – and it did a lot of times and in a hurry – the guys knew how to fire an AK. The guys knew how to pick up a PKM and load it and fire it. Guys knew what the blast radius of an RPG round was. They knew what a grenade could do and what it couldn't do. They knew what a claymore mine was. They knew how to set it up. They knew how to fire an M72. They knew all the platoon's weapons. They knew how to pick up a shotgun, load it and fire it, and be deadly with it. All of my guys knew how to use the radios ... I call them the Harris Hawk radios, the 117s. Anything and everything that I was ever taught that I figured could help, I showed them. How to find water in the desert. How to conceal yourself. Which is your best route back home. And so on.

That's what you do. That's why you train all the time. Because when it comes down to it and it's going south, you haven't got time to pick up the rifle and say, "Right! Take mag A and insert it into slot B." You don't. You've got other things on your mind ... like the guy trying to kill you! I said to my guys when we first got there, "Look on your left and then on your right. That's all you've got. You guys want to dog fuck, it's not you that's going to get killed, it's the guy next to you. So do the job the best that you can the first time out."

Not just the sergeant or the master corporal needs to know how to use a map and compass ... it's everybody because we've had it where

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the sergeants or the master corporals got lit up and died and it's the private or the corporal taking the section and saying "Hey guys, we have to get out of here and get to this place. Follow me." Gone are the days where it's a privilege of rank to use a piece of kit.

And wherever we were, we did PT. On the hottest days, we were out giving her. I'm as slow as the day is long, but it's like I always told my guys ... never quit. You've got to have the attitude in your head that you can do it no matter how hard it seems. You've got to be able to do it because your guys are depending on each other. Look out for the morale and welfare of your men and they'll do it for you and in spades.

But I was always fair with them. They knew they could talk to me and if they had questions, I'd answer them and I'd do whatever I could for them. I firmly believe that if you put your soldiers before yourself as a senior NCO, they'll pay you back. Don't lie to them. Always be honest and they'll do the same for you. We were close because of the year of training spent together, but you get a lot closer when you're in combat together. I don't know if you're a little softer on your guys – a little more forgiving – after you've been under fire together. When we were training, if guys showed up a little late, I'd be the devil with that. I'd be all over them for it. But when we got back from the war, if the guys want to go and take off a bit, I'm like, "Yeah, go on." Because you knew he was a solid guy. When the chips were down, he'd be there. I saw that more than once.

And everybody was there to do their job. I don't know what anybody else thinks about it, but I'm a big proponent of not letting them get overzealous about it all.<sup>15</sup> If my guys were like, "Yeah, man, I can't wait to get out there and whack some of those guys," I was like, as soon as I heard that, "Shut your mouth. For one, when it happens you're not going to like it, and two, you're not going to be quick enough to react to it. You'll be lucky to get out of it alive. So don't be going around shooting your face off, like the other idiots who do that." For me anyhow, I only had to say it once and that was it, and the boys knew I was pissed off about it, because as cool as it

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all looks in the movies, she ain't fucking cool when you're doing it. When you've got to pick up your buddy or something like that and drag him out, she ain't fucking cool then. When she happens, she happens fast.

*Not only did Denine feel that strong leadership skills were vital in preparing his men for the dangers of combat, he looked for similar traits in his superiors.*

They were fair. They knew what they were talking about. It was never a case of, "I don't know." If they didn't know, they'd tell you, "I don't know, but I'll get you an answer." And they would. They didn't always want to have their fingers in the pie either. They didn't need to micromanage. They had faith in the senior NCOs and it went back to them. If we were in combat, my OC was always up there with us. It wasn't a case of, "Yeah, I'll lead from the rear." No, he led from the front. And if they screwed up, they'd tell you. It wasn't a case of, "I'm trying to hide it so I'll look good all the time." No, everybody makes mistakes and they would be the first to come up and say, "Boys, I screwed up. Sorry. It won't happen again. I learned from it." Like Major Bill Fletcher.<sup>16</sup> He won the Star of Military Valour. I have a lot of time for him. He's a really good man and a really good officer. Smart. Knows what he's doing. Wasn't arrogant. I haven't met an officer yet that isn't smart. But some of them, I don't know ... they get this almost elitist type attitude and they've got to get away from that. And I blame us, the senior NCOs, because we're the ones training them half the time.

When we were overseas, I could talk to anybody. It didn't matter if it was the company commander or all the way down the line. Of course, you respect their rank and you respect the man. And you get it back. So I guess what I look for in leadership is honesty, integrity, the ability to have trust, knowledge, because knowledge is power, and confidence in your job. You treat men like men. And it's the ability to be able to say, "No, we can't," or, "It cannot be achieved to this level." Because you'll find – or I found anyhow – that a lot of people have a hard time going to their boss and saying, "Man, I can't do this. I don't have the resources. I don't have the manpower. Can you help me or can we work on something else?" Some people

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won't do it. They'll just go, "Okay, Sir. We'll do it." And they're out the door. And that's the wrong way to look at it because there were times overseas when we were fighting and most of us just got out of there by the skin of our teeth and it was just luck ... that's all it was. If you don't know it, say so. That's what you've got to be able to do as a leader. If the equipment's not working, say it, because it will save lives in the long run and that's what it's all about.

*Denine was happy to share his leadership skills and combat experience with others when his tour was finished.*

After we got back, in Canada, people kind of looked at us as an extended encyclopaedia with knowledge and experience to help train the guys that much better. If I tell the guys, "Hey, don't put your mag up on the top of your rifle butt where your cocking handle is," there's a good reason for that, because when you cock your rifle, it's going to be hitting that mag and you won't be able to cock it. Hence, you won't be able to fire. Don't group up. Everybody knows it and yet you'll always see some guys doing it because they want to get close to their buddy and shoot the breeze. No! It only takes one RPG round that's got a kill radius of about 17 metres. If it hits the ground, it'll pepper you all. Sometimes I'd be like, "Don't do it that way because it's dangerous." And guys would be looking at you and saying, "Well, what's the big deal? We're in Canada. We're not at war." I'd say, "No, you're right. But what happens when it's your turn to go and you do something like that? Knowing what to do will keep you alive, man."

*Denine found it hard to comprehend all the fuss that was made about the incident when he and his section finally got back to camp. Medals were the furthest thing from his mind then.*

When we got back in, I had to get the LAV looked at to get the gun fixed. I had to replace the plates of armour on the side of her and everything else. The regular stuff. We got back in and the next day we went over and got the car all squared away. I remember walking in and 9 Platoon's commander came right up to me and said, "You got some fucking balls on you." I'm like, "What are you talking

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about?” And then 7 Platoon’s commander came up and wanted to shake my hand. I’m looking at these guys like, “What is wrong with all you people?” I didn’t and I still don’t look at it as a big deal. To be quite honest, anybody that was in that car would have done the same thing. I had an old sergeant-major come up to me as I was going to the mess hall to get something to eat and he started shaking my hand and saying, “You know, it’s good to see what you did and you’re a good guy.” So I’m like, “Yeah, thanks Sir. I guess I just did what I had to do to get on with her.”

*If others thought Denine deserved credit, he, in turn, thought his soldiers deserved just as much; he was very proud of the way that they had handled themselves in the midst of a significant contact with the enemy.*

There was a lot of fire. As soon as I jumped up on top of the car, I know one of the other kids jumped up on the back as well, and that’s a given. I mean, as I left the air sentry hatch, another one of my guys took my place. So it’s not like when they say I won the medal. No. I was just picked to take it. All my guys won that medal. It’s for them, not just for me. It’s for everybody there.

*The announcement that Sergeant Denine would be decorated for his actions came after his return to Canada.*

We were all with the CO, Lieutenant-Colonel Ian Hope,<sup>17</sup> and we’re doing the training calendar together. I’m sitting next to Warrant Officer Tim Turner, our CQ [Company Quartermaster], and we were just sitting back relaxing, and someone came up and knocked on the door, calling the CO out. He was gone for about five or ten minutes and when he came back, he says, “I’m pleased to announce that the first-ever two recipients of military valour decorations have been named.” I’m sitting there thinking, “Hey, cool. Who are they?” And he said, “Sergeant Pat Tower<sup>18</sup> and Sergeant Michael Denine.” When he said that, I didn’t know what to make of it. There were guys there that I looked up to and they were standing up clapping, coming over, hugging me, patting me on the back. They were saying they were proud of me and stuff like that. To me, that was more than enough. Better than any award they could give you.



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SERGEANT DENINE WAS INVESTED WITH HIS MEDAL OF MILITARY VALOUR BY THE THEN-GOVERNOR GENERAL AND COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF OF CANADA, HER EXCELLENCY THE RIGHT HONOURABLE MICHAËLLE JEAN, AT THE FAIRMONT CHÂTEAU LAURIER ON 19 FEBRUARY 2007.

## NOTES

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- 1 *Canada Gazette*, Part I, Vol. 141, No. 8 (24 February 2007), 324. See also, “Valour,” *Canadian Military Journal*, Vol. 7, No.4 (Winter 2006-2007), 4-5.
- 2 In this context, “cars” is slang for Canadian LAVs or Afghan military/police vehicles.
- 3 The platoon commander, Lieutenant Jonathan Sutherland Snyder. Later promoted, Captain Snyder earned the S.M.V. for his actions on 4 June 2008; his citation appears in Appendix 2. He unfortunately died soon thereafter, on the night of 7/8 June, after falling into a well while on patrol.
- 4 In this context, “squirters” is slang for individual Taliban fighters who were trying to remove themselves from the immediate area while not being detected in the process.
- 5 Private Robert Costall, who died on 29 March 2006.
- 6 A machine gun mounted in parallel with the main chain gun.
- 7 A metal bar with triangular metal pieces that are used to shred tires at vehicle checkpoints and road blocks.
- 8 A GPMG used by Soviet forces.
- 9 A light machine gun mounted on a post on the highest point of the turret.
- 10 That is to say, reloading.
- 11 For his actions on 17 May 2006, Jeffrey Allan Fehr was Mentioned in Dispatches; his citation appears in Appendix 2.
- 12 Captain Nichola Kathleen Sarah Goddard, the first Canadian female combat soldier killed in action, 17 May 2006. For her dedication and exemplary service in Afghanistan, she was posthumously awarded the M.S.M.; her citation appears in Appendix 2.
- 13 That is to say, in line.
- 14 Exposed, outside of the protective confines of the LAV’s hull.

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- 15 The calming of overzealous young soldiers by their seasoned superiors appears throughout this book.
- 16 See Chapter 3.
- 17 For his service in Afghanistan, Ian Hope received the M.S.C.; his citation appears in Appendix 2.
- 18 See Chapter 6.

# CHAPTER 5

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## *HELPING A BUDDY ... UNDER FIRE*

MASTER CORPORAL CHRISTOPHER LORNE HARDING

MEDAL OF MILITARY VALOUR ■ 8 JULY 2006

*“THERE WAS NO WAY I WAS LEAVING HIM BEHIND...”*

Master Corporal Harding was deployed with 6 Platoon, B Company, 2nd Battalion, Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry, in Afghanistan. When his section was attacked on **JULY 8, 2006**, he selflessly advanced across open terrain and commanded the battle, while providing first aid to a critically wounded soldier. His courageous actions under intense fire enabled his section to hold its position and to save the life of a comrade.<sup>1</sup>

CHRIS HARDING WAS BORN IN LAHR, GERMANY WHERE HIS FATHER WAS SERVING WITH THE CANADIAN ARMY. AFTER THE FAMILY'S RETURN FROM EUROPE, HE LIVED IN VARIOUS COMMUNITIES ACROSS CANADA, ESSENTIALLY WHEREVER HIS FATHER WAS POSTED. HE JOINED AIR CADETS AT AGE 12. HE THEN JOINED THE RESERVES, THE QUEEN'S OWN CAMERON HIGHLANDERS OF CANADA, AND STAYED WITH THE REGIMENT UNTIL HIS HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION FROM PIERRE RADISSON COLLEGIATE IN WINNIPEG, MANITOBA IN JUNE 1996. HE SUBSEQUENTLY JOINED THE REGULAR FORCE AS AN INFANTRYMAN WITH THE PARACHUTE COMPANY OF THE PPCLI IN EDMONTON, ALBERTA. HE COMPLETED HIS FIRST TOUR, IN BOSNIA, IN 1997 (OP PALLADIUM, ROTO 0) AND, UPON HIS RETURN, WAS POSTED TO WINNIPEG WITH 2PPCLI. AFTER TWO MORE TOURS IN BOSNIA (OP PALLADIUM, ROTOS 7 AND 12), HE DEPLOYED TO AFGHANISTAN FROM JANUARY TO AUGUST 2006 WITH 2PPCLI (OP ARCHER, ROTO 1). HIS SECOND DEPLOYMENT TO AFGHANISTAN (OP ATHENA, ROTO 5) STRETCHED FROM JUNE TO OCTOBER 2008. ALTHOUGH SPENDING MUCH TIME OUTSIDE OF CANADA, HARDING ALSO DEPLOYED DOMESTICALLY, FIRST TO THE ICE STORM IN 1998 (OP RECUPERATION) AND THEN TO THE KANANASKIS G8 SUMMIT IN 2002 (OP GRIZZLY). HE IS MARRIED WITH CHILDREN.

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*Master Corporal Harding first learned in the late fall of 2005 that B Company, 2PPCLI would deploy to Afghanistan in just a few months time.*

It was rather short notice. We were on an exercise in Shilo, Manitoba when we got word that our company was going to be sent over to the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, PPCLI, deploying in January 2006. We had about four months to do all the work-up training and to get ready for our deployment overseas. However, that was sufficient time because we were already a fully trained company. We were cut loose to the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion in late November.

*The move to 1PPCLI went fairly smoothly, although there were a few rough spots along the way.*

Whenever a company gets cut loose from its parent unit to another unit, there's always a bit of a transition because you're kind of treated as the "red-headed stepchild." It feels that way and it takes a little bit of getting used to. Certainly, we had difficulties even overseas. Just getting our fair share of supplies and stuff was a fight sometimes. But we had a great company commander that had a head on his shoulders. Major Nick Grimshaw<sup>2</sup> was probably the reason why Bravo Company took so few casualties despite seeing more than our fair share of the action throughout the tour. He was a good buffer between us and the rest of the battalion. So it worked out for us. We were 1PPCLI's third company. They had an Alpha Company and a Charlie Company, but no Bravo Company, so we fit right into the Bravo Company slot. It is common for army units to be tossed around like that, especially more so now, what with Afghanistan going on and all.

With us being in Shilo and them, the rest of the battalion, being in Edmonton, the pre-deployment administration before the tour was certainly difficult. There were a lot of phone calls back-and-forth. We maintained communications with the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion and tried to stay in the know. I know there were definitely lapses of communication. Don't get me wrong, 1PPCLI is a great unit with a lot of great soldiers, and the problems we were having is a common theme anywhere in the army. If we were working for any other unit,

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these problems would have been amplified ten-fold. We were the first company to deploy out of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion and, when we got into Kandahar, they weren't even expecting us there. There were no quarters. There was none of "anything" for us. We ended up setting up tents on a gravel pit.

*Despite these initial glitches, Harding found that the morale and cohesion within the company was first-rate and very strong.*

I've never seen anything like it in my entire military career. If there was ever a unit I could go back to, it would be "B Company 2006." It was a company that just clicked all around. Everybody seemed to mesh. Morale was high and that led to our success. We actually started clicking in the pre-deployment phase. Most junior ranks were all brand new privates and all brand new, newly-promoted master corporals. So we had that kind of "new generation" mentality going on.

The senior NCOs were very skilled and experienced, but were young enough to mesh well with their young company. The "old military" was kind of gone and you had the "new military" that saw eye-to-eye on issues. We all just kind of had the same mindset. It was the same with the upper leadership. Most of the officers – some of them brand new – were outstanding and dynamic. They knew how to deal with soldiers and be personable and were "soldiers' soldiers" themselves. It just kind of flowed and made the company click. Everybody had the same goal in mind ... and that was to fight the Taliban.

There is a definite difference between the "old military" and the "new military." There is the "old military" way of thinking ... "What I say goes!" or "If you don't do what I say, I'll charge you!" or "I'll do what I want because I'm an officer or because I'm a senior NCO!" In the "new military," basically everybody is on the same line, education-wise. Some might have university, but everyone has graduated high school. Everyone has done some sort of course or something. So they are all educated in a sense and everyone has that sociable mindset. Everyone treats everyone else with respect. Just because they have rank doesn't mean they get to treat someone like shit.

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You're a leader, but your responsibility towards your men is to treat them with respect and make sure they're taken care of. That is the new army mentality.

In my experience, guys can be friends with their subordinates but, when it comes time to work, it's time to work, and they both know it. It's just something that's almost ingrained in training ... not officially, of course. It's just the way. There is an understanding between leaders and followers when it comes time to work or be friends. The section commanders or the leaders will take their guys to the side and be friendly with them and explain things one-on-one to them. When it's time to work – to do section or platoon attacks – then the hammer comes down! After that, he takes the guy aside and it's all calm again and he tells him what he did wrong and what he did well. Soldiers are smarter today. I'm not saying that the old soldiers are dumb – not at all – it's just that you can still be sociable and be a soldier. You don't have to make someone's life hell just because you have rank on your shoulders.

Today's soldier also realizes the importance of leadership by example. If your soldiers are working, then you are working. If your soldiers are in danger, then you share that danger with them. When it is time to make decisions and lead, there is no time for incompetence. Soldiers need to see action out of their leaders so they can do their job and know that their leader is with them 100 percent.

*Harding found that during the pre-deployment phase some of the challenges were mechanical, while others, emotional.*

At the time we were still getting integrated with the LAV. That presented some challenges. We had a lot of newer equipment ... the LAV, the TCCCS [Tactical Command and Control Communication System] and all that kind of stuff. Even though we had already used the LAV in Bosnia, it was still kind of coming into play, especially with a lot of new soldiers just getting qualified on the vehicle. Another challenge was having young soldiers. We had a lot of discipline problems despite our level of unit cohesion. We had to get rid of some soldiers before the tour. They'd come in and they're so

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young. Some of these guys are straight from mom and they're just kind of newly let loose to be on their own. Even in the field, they're expected to meet their timings and perform on their own volition. Some of them found it hard. So, one of the leadership challenges was keeping some of the young guys in check, especially at such a stressful time, right before deploying. Definitely, some of these privates were feeling the stress and not really sure what to expect. Everything was happening so fast. Some took it in stride and some had problems that the leadership had to deal with. There were even some leaders we had to get rid of – master corporals – as well. They just weren't deployable material at the time. It was a challenge to replace them too. From my point of view, those were sometimes greater challenges than the training itself. Personnel management definitely requires experience, especially at those crucial times when you're getting ready to deploy

My platoon, 6 Platoon, was led by Captain Dave Ferris, who was an amazing platoon commander. He was a little older than most new officers and had a lot of life experience under his belt ... and being a "soldier's soldier" made him great to work for. Keeping the new privates in check was largely Warrant Officer Darren Hessel's thing. The section commanders kind of liked to pass it off to the warrant a lot of times because he is a big, scary man, but also because he had a lot of experience in dealing with young guys and knew how to keep them in check. Darren also received a Mentioned in Dispatches from our deployment for being a very skilled leader and soldier throughout some very intense combat operations.<sup>3</sup>

As a master corporal, if my guys screwed up or showed up late or something like that, I liked to bury it, hide it, or find an excuse why he was late. I am kind of understanding that way. Life is life. There are a million reasons why someone might be late. You can't be on time every morning. With things of that nature, I tend to give guys a couple of chances before I get onto them. Some leaders like to get on them right away. I think that helped from my point of view. You give the guys a couple of chances, and if he or she is professional enough, they usually sort themselves out before it becomes a problem. I didn't have the same issues as some other sections did in

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terms of discipline. My guys were pretty awesome. The most I ever dealt with was them being late or small issues like that. Other guys had to deal with their guys showing up drunk or not showing up at all. Or sometimes worse. For me, it wasn't too bad. I was lucky.

*When B Company arrived in Afghanistan in January 2006, they hit the ground running.*

Initially our role was to be the PRT's force protection element. Our job was supposed to be inside Kandahar City, but it ended up being basically the frontline fighting unit for the battalion in Panjwai. We started our PRT task right in January. We did the handover with the previous company from 3PPCLI, which was there before us. At the time, the PRT was the place to be. That's where the action was ... Kandahar City. There was nothing going on in Panjwai or so we thought. We didn't know that it was even on the radar. Kandahar was the big city and that's where everything was happening. We certainly ran into problems like suicide bombers and such. We had the odd small ambush in Kandahar City itself. It was non-stop patrolling there. The PRT was only one aspect. We would take the actual PRT people themselves out to do their PRT thing, liaising with these different organizations. But most of the time we spent night patrolling in Kandahar City and basically trying to gather intelligence on the bad guys. I remember being quite sick of patrolling by March. I still know Kandahar City inside-out.

While we were part of the PRT, there was the usual task of camp security and what we called "Red Star" package-type deals where we had somebody important that we had to transport to the Governor's Palace in Kandahar City and we had to provide security for big functions like that. There were a lot of convoys. Sometimes I was in charge of convoys to take them to Kandahar City or take them wherever they needed to go.

Finally, boredom started to set in. The guys wanted to get their "war story." They were tired of doing "Mickey Mouse" patrols. Even though it was still very dangerous, it became routine. We actually got very good at doing our jobs. We had no real casualties while



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we were in Kandahar. Well, we had two deaths related to a vehicle accident, and one of our master corporals sucked up a little shrapnel from an RPG round that hit his vehicle, but the suicide bombers couldn't get us because of the way we did our job.<sup>4</sup> It was too tough for them to hit us. But guys were hearing the war stories from the rest of the battalion and that kind of made them want to move on. They changed their minds later of course.

To counter this boredom, the leadership moved sections around a lot from one task to another, like to QRF, to gate security, to patrolling, and that helped out a lot. Also, during periods of relative ease, we would squeeze in some training, anything from weapons handling drills to calling in indirect fire. However, the best medicine for boredom is giving guys down time ... they will generally keep themselves constructively busy.

It was actually in March when our mission started to change. Things were starting to happen outside of the city. We were getting called outside on QRF responses for assistance, for extra back-up and stuff like that. I think it was actually the Easter long weekend that was the big transition. There was quite a substantial battle that went on between the Taliban and ANP forces. One of our platoons was with them at the time doing some outside-the-city patrolling and they called for the rest of the company to come out as back-up and we participated in that battle. We quickly found out that that area, which was the Panjwai/Zharey District, was swarming with Taliban. Soon after that, we were still kind of stationed out of Camp Nathan Smith in Kandahar City, but we were continually going out to Panjwai. I remember the PRT was quite frustrated with us because they thought their job was more important. Eventually what happened was that Bravo Company, with 5 and 6 Platoon and the complete Company Headquarters, moved out as a company and we left 4 Platoon behind at the PRT. But eventually, they came back to us as well.

When things started to change, morale increased at the beginning, partly because we could still come back to Camp Nathan Smith once in a while where we could get some good food, sleep and take a hot shower. But also, we were going out and finding the bad guys

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and taking it to them. We hadn't sustained any significant casualties. And then things started to heat up and the stress was put on and casualties started piling up. Morale decreased but the cohesion was still fine.

*The patrols usually tended to last two or three days, but eventually Harding and his unit moved out of Camp Nathan Smith altogether and stayed in the field.*

I remember in May we were in and out of the camp and we had one significant battle where Captain Nichola Goddard was killed.<sup>5</sup> After that battle, the top brass sat down and said, "Okay, we have to do something about this." So we moved out to the Panjwai District Centre [PDC]. The town was called Bazar-e panjwa'i. It was kind of the capital of the region you could say. We took over the police station and made it into a little FOB and staged out of there. So B Company was turned into a combat team, which consisted of a lot of our guys, and then we had some attachments with us such as combat engineers, FOOs and mechanics. We were basically right across the river from the White School. We could see it. There's a mountain out there that the Taliban like to hide in which was turned into a FOB called Ma'sum Ghar. We often went across the river and did our thing, and sometimes we would get right into Panjwai and not see a thing. Other times, they knew we were coming.

*There were a number of aggressive operations that took place from March onward. By the time the incident occurred for which Harding received the M.M.V., he, like much of the rest of his company, had seen a lot of action.*

We were definitely kinetic and doing actual World War Two-style advances through Panjwai ... trying to stir the bad guys up and get them out in the open so we could take them down. One specific action I remember quite well was at a place called Mushan. We were actually going to conduct a VMO [Village Medical Outreach] the next day, where we cordon off a village and set up a place where women and children can come in and get medical treatment and we would give them free food and the like. We went during the day and set up a company patrol base outside of Mushan on a dry

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riverbed. That night, my section was tasked with a patrol to go into the village itself and secure the school so that the company could move in the next day and everything would be good to go. We went on a foot patrol that night ... a recce patrol. We didn't even get inside the town!

It turned out, as we were moving along the riverbed going into the town itself, a group of Taliban was moving in parallel to us, in the opposite direction, and they were going to ambush the patrol base. They hit the patrol base while we were on patrol. I moved my section to a drainage or irrigation ditch, a wadi, which is almost like a fire trench. It goes on forever. We were sitting there and I could see the firefight taking place. The Taliban started running back towards us! The irrigation ditch was their escape route. They were yelling and screaming and I told my guys, "Get ready! They're coming!" Two seconds later, three guys popped up right in front of me. They were literally ten feet away. It was night time and I could see them through my night vision monocular. I just cued my laser and I let them have it. I took three down right there in front of me. Then my whole section just opened up and took down quite a few guys. At one point, I was changing magazines, and my C9 gunner who was right next to me, Private Colin McLeod, was laying down heavy fire, but had a stoppage at the same time as I was switching. I had an M203 round up the spout<sup>6</sup> and decided to hop up over the ditch and fire it at the Taliban's position. It was a lucky shot. I hit a guy in the upper torso with an HE [High Explosive] round and everybody in my section still remembers his last curdled, painful scream.

After that, we had to egress. We were essentially cut off and there were still Taliban everywhere. I had to take my guys out along that irrigation ditch. There were people everywhere. All the civilians were panicking. It was quite chaotic. I had to take them to the riverbed and then back to the patrol base. I remember just as we were getting back, Private Chris Palahicky turned to me and said, "Man that was fucked up!" Master Corporal Tim Fletcher<sup>7</sup> earned a Mention in Dispatches that night for his quick reaction, for firing a mortar barrage that chased off the enemy and probably helped us withdraw. The next day we conducted an advance-to-contact

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operation through Mushan to try and stir up any of the leftover Taliban and try to gain some info.

*The incident for which Harding received his M.M.V. occurred on what was called Op ZAHAR, which had been in the planning stages for a few weeks. Its objective was to find and destroy pockets of enemy fighters.<sup>8</sup>*

The upcoming operation was significant enough that they actually moved us back to Camp Nathan Smith to get a little bit of rest and rearm and get fed and all that sort of stuff. We kind of staged out of there for Op ZAHAR just because we had to meet up with some other attachments and detachments as well. It was kind of a good place to do it. We got all our orders from there. Once the orders procedures were done, we moved out at night in blackout drive<sup>9</sup> through Kandahar City and out to Panjwai. We used the most inconspicuous route we could, which was Route Fosters<sup>10</sup> at the time. It wasn't a well-used route by us. Nothing significant ever really happened on Fosters. So we used that route and went back to Bazar-e panjwa'i and back to the FOB. We got there and just kind of waited for all the other companies that were involved in the operation – because it was a battle group op – to get into their key positions and once that happened, we were able to move into our key position.

It took about two days by the time we deployed onto the actual operation itself. It was well into the second night, at about 0200 or 0300 in the morning, when we stepped off. We had all three companies ready to go. We were trying to trap the Taliban. We had companies coming in from the north and in every direction to herd them into one area where it would be easier for us to get to them. I remember we had just crossed the Arghandab riverbed and Charlie Company was responsible for securing this bridgehead for us. Since the operation was just kicking off, we didn't really expect anything so soon. But as soon as we crossed that bridge, the enemy opened up on us. An RPG almost hit my G-Wagon and it was just craziness. Even though Charlie Company was out there securing that bridgehead, the enemy still managed to surround us.

*Harding was sure that the Taliban knew the Canadians were coming and that's how they were able to get into such advantageous positions so quickly.*

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They are always watching us and they've got inside people everywhere. It wasn't really a surprise that they knew about us. Our job was to get to the White School. I remember on the way to the school, we were driving in single file and every vehicle was just firing left, right and centre, all over the place. The LAVs were just givin' 'er. I was in a G-Wagon because my LAV had already been destroyed.<sup>11</sup> In our vehicle we had a machine gun and my machine gunner, Private Jeff Barwise, was pouring it on. There were hot casings coming down through the roof burning my neck. There were five people in the G-Wagon ... me as the crew commander, the driver, the gunner and two people in the back. We even had the doors open and we were firing out the doors as well. Driving along, we got to the White School and we did an all-around defence with all our vehicles. The Taliban just continued on until the sun was up. They were everywhere, shooting at us, and we were shooting back at them. That's just the way it was until the sun came up and things started to quiet down a little bit. So then I pushed my guys out to firing positions. We found a shell crater that we were kind of hiding out in. We just waited for further orders to start our advance from where we were because we were going to go on foot and advance through the villages with vehicles behind us in support. We were in open ground at the time.

Five Platoon was first to go into the village which was called Haji Musa. They stepped off and, sure enough, right away, they came under contact. A firefight ensued and fast air and artillery were called in. They secured their little section of town. Then it was 6 Platoon's turn to move in. We kind of got split up. We weren't really 6 Platoon anymore that day. Five Platoon had gone in and they needed reserve sections to help bolster the defences of the town that we were taking. So we went in. All the 6 Platoon sections had been split up by this point and were spread out amongst 5 Platoon. There were firefights going on everywhere. You could hear other companies in firefights. There were bullets whizzing by randomly. You just had the sense that they were everywhere. The enemy knew our every move. You just had to be really careful.

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*During the shuffling of personnel within B Company, Harding ended up with two other Canadians and members of the ANA who were there to gain combat experience.*

My section at that time was composed of myself, Corporal Chris Klodt – my section 2IC – and Private Alex Shulaev. Then I had six ANA soldiers attached to my section as well. That was part of the whole process of this operation ... to integrate these newly-trained Afghan Army guys in with our sections so they could get some experience and skills. So I took these guys and off we went. We were given, if I remember correctly, the northwest sector of this village. We were pushed out farther than anybody else was. We were on the outskirts of the village and we were covering to the northwest. We were just helping secure the village. It was hot that day. We were already tired. We were strung out along this wall and taking up proper firing positions, but we were sort of relaxed in an aggressive posture at the same time.

We were like, “Okay, the fighting is over right now. Let’s take a break and get some water into us and just watch our arcs.” Bullets were still whizzing by. You could still hear firefights in the distance. Then the bullets started getting closer. We weren’t really sure what was going on. It seemed like there was a sniper out there trying to get to us. Just as we kind of figured that out, we started getting barraged by RPGs and machine gun fire. So all hell was breaking loose. I went to go give Shulaev and Klodt orders, but they were already in firing positions and putting rounds down range. I didn’t even have to tell them what to do.

Then I turned over to the Afghan guys to get them to do something and they were gone. Half of them were already running away and there was one guy in the fetal position in the ditch, crying, and the only guy that was left was the RPG gunner. He was kind of short and a bit tubby for an Afghan guy, but he actually stayed. I started yelling at him to start firing RPGs. Though he did run away later, he stayed for a little bit. Then I remember trying to grab some of the Afghan soldiers out of a ditch. I was literally grabbing them by the scruff of the neck, pulling them out, and pushing them towards this wall that

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we had for cover and trying to tell them to shoot in that direction. They didn't speak English, so I was kind of gesturing frantically.

*When his exhortations to the ANA members didn't work, Harding realized that he and the other two soldiers would have to go it alone. There was very little choice at that moment.*

So what it came down to was three Canadians holding off at least 20 Taliban. And they weren't just your run-of-the-mill Taliban. Eventually, I gave up on the Afghan soldiers. I was thinking, "This isn't happening!" So I just started putting rounds downrange myself – M203 rounds and bullets and the whole nine yards – along with my other two guys. I was on the radio as well screaming, "We need support! We need help! Get up here!" I think the company was in a state of organized confusion at the time. There was a lot going on and we were just getting set in place and nobody knew exactly where we were located. I think that was the reason for the delay in getting support to us. The barrage just intensified. I remember there must have been about ten RPGs hitting down in succession just over my head. What helped save me was there was a tree behind me that absorbed a lot of the shrapnel and whatnot.

There was a lot of smoke and I remember looking through the haze and I saw one of my guys – Corporal Klodt – lying there on his back. Shulaev was looking over at him and shaking him and trying to help him and seeing what was wrong. I yelled into the PRR [Personal Role Radio] headset, "Do we have a casualty?" "Yeah! We have a casualty!" And it just kind of clicked in. So I crawled over to where he was. He was about ten metres to my right and there was a gap in the wall. So it was open ground. I crawled to the open ground and I got to him and realized that he had been shot in the throat. He wasn't dead. He was still gasping for air. There wasn't a lot of blood, which was a good sign. The artery hadn't been hit. But I wasn't really sure what the extent of his injuries were. All I knew at that time was that we were losing that corner.

We couldn't hold it for very long without help. So I called it right there, "Okay, we're getting him out of here." We put a field bandage

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around him. Then we picked him up and dragged him into the relative safety of a nearby irrigation ditch. I took my bayonet out and cut off his kit to make it easier to carry him. With great difficulty, we managed to drag Chris, with Alex helping me, and we pushed through this ditch around this corner, and then it's like this bowling alley of a lane that we had to get down. It was perfect for bullets just to cruise down. Private John Baron and Master Corporal Collin Fitzgerald<sup>12</sup> heard what was going on and came to our aid. John was a big strong guy and helped us carry him the rest of the way. We lifted Chris' arms on John's shoulders, and between the three of us, we all had a piece of Chris and headed down this lane. Collin was pouring rounds down range and throwing grenades to help cover our egress.

As we were moving down this lane, we were starting to be swarmed at the time. The Taliban were closing in on us and moving around. They were really trying to get to us because they knew we were a very small number that they could get to. We shot a couple while going down this lane. As soon as we got down the lane and around this corner, it was almost like everybody was there, the rest of the company. We were like, "Oh, thank fuck." They were all taking cover. RPGs and machine gun fire were all coming down. They were quite surprised to see us, "What the hell are you guys doing here?"

We put Klodt down and I remember I was just so exhausted and pouring with sweat, trying to gasp for air. We found Sergeant Parnell Pachal who knew where the medic was. We got a medic up and we got Klodt on a stretcher and we carried him to where the company medics were. We had to carry him through holes in walls and through buildings. I wanted to just drop the stretcher because I was so tired. I didn't and I kept going. We had Klodt's kit as well, strewn all over the place trying to carry it out. We finally got him to where we needed to, got him on the chopper, and away he went.

After, I was so hot and tired. I was at that point where I didn't care ... for a little bit anyway. Alex was the same way ... pouring with sweat, dehydrated. I won't say I was hallucinating, but if there was ever a



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point where you come to where you hallucinate because you're so tired, it would have been at that point. I remember thinking, "I don't want to go back in there because it sucks in there." I did though of course. The company commander actually pulled us out – the whole company – out of the village just to regroup and see what was going on because it was quite a nightmare there and we were lucky we didn't have more casualties. During that whole timeframe, which lasted maybe 30 minutes, the company sustained only two casualties. We kind of pulled out, had a break, and watched aircraft come in and bomb the hell out of this place for a while. Then we went back in.

*Harding figured the bombing lasted more than an hour, after which they carried on with the operation.*

We let the aircraft do the job and try to pinpoint where the enemy was located. They had command of the ground. They have very good tunnel systems and they just pop in and out of everywhere. Once that was done, we continued on with our advance. By the end of the day, we advanced to meet up in this graveyard located near the centre of Panjwai that is somewhat of a defensible position. Once the aircraft had their turn, it gave us a little bit more confidence. But I was still a little wary about continuing on because that place had bad news written all over it. We sucked it up, had some water, and got back at it. We carried on and the rest of the day went by without much of a problem.

*While Harding was proud of the way Klodt and Shulaev had instinctively done what they were supposed to do during the firefight, he expressed disappointment at the way members of the ANA had reacted.*

Klodt and Shulaev were ready. They knew what to do. They had already been experienced in the last four months of doing this stuff, so they knew. Because I had been with them for so long and they knew what I needed them to do, the commands were implied. I had taken them and put them there and said, "Okay, I need you here facing this way and you facing this way" beforehand. Then I had given them their arcs of fire from their firing position. So when things did

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happen, there was no need for me to tell them. It's just, "Okay, let's do this."

I focused my attention on trying to get these Afghan soldiers to act. I don't think I've ever yelled and screamed so much as I did in trying to get them to do their thing and hold that ground. The outcome would have been completely different had they stayed. We had to defend the whole position. If we could have had that whole section doing what they were supposed to do, we could have held the enemy off all day long ... no problem. But the ANA soldiers just ran away and there we were just three guys who were soon to be only two. And we only had so much ammunition. As far as I can remember, all the sections were integrated. We – the company – were given a platoon of Afghan soldiers and they were spread out amongst the sections. I think I ended up with a little bit more than the other sections had. That's just the way the numbers work.

The Taliban look for targets of opportunity and that's what we were. They outnumbered us and they knew it. They were definitely coming for us. In my mind, they were looking to take some prisoners. That was definitely a factor in getting Klodt out of there. There was no way I was leaving him behind at all to be subjected to something like that. There's just no way. Not for any reason.

*Harding learned later about Corporal Klodt's condition. While waiting for such news, however, he initiated the necessary processes to ensure that Private Shulaev received some form of recognition for his part in the incident. As Harding realized, he had had a lot of help that day.*

Private Baron and Master Corporal Fitzgerald were also of great help that day, but they did not receive any mention for their efforts though they deserve it. Chris Klodt went back to Kandahar for maybe a few hours before he was off to Germany and then back to Canada. I didn't have any clue what was going on. I wasn't sure if he was going to live or die. We were definitely waiting for news and that didn't come for a while. It turned out he'd been hit with a round from an AK-47 and it lodged in his spine. It's still there to this day. He's in a wheelchair. The bullet didn't sever the spinal cord, but it

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is pressing up against it. A little bit of signal gets through but not enough. No surgeon wants to go in there and take it out because it's such a risk. Alex was Mentioned in Dispatches for what he did that day.<sup>13</sup> I really pushed for him to get that. Without him, I wouldn't have got through that. He stuck by me the whole time. He helped carry Chris out. We were fireteam partners fighting these guys off. He deserved it.

The rest of my section was there as well, but the reason they weren't with me that day was because they were manning the vehicles. My section had two G-Wagons so that takes a lot of guys out of the picture right there. They were behind us, but they were getting contacts as well. They wished that they could have been with the three of us. When Klodt was hit, had they been there, I wouldn't have needed the Afghans at all. My section would have held that ground, no problem. And probably Klodt wouldn't have been hit either.

*For Harding, being a good leader is very important, especially when it comes time to make the hardest decisions on the ground and when lives are at risk.*

Without trying to glorify myself, I try to be about leading by example, professional competence and looking out for my guys. These are all important things. They pick up on that kind of stuff. The soldiers know when they have a good leader or a bad leader just by the way they present themselves. Even just after a week or two of working for a guy, you can pick up on whether he knows what he's doing or not. That's important. I take a lot of pride in the way my career has gone. I've got 14 years in the military. I didn't take any shortcuts. I didn't get any doors opened for me. I started off as a private and I did every job in a rifle company – every single job – and worked my way up. I think that really helped when we deployed to Afghanistan. All the operational experience ... I didn't miss an exercise or a tour. Every tour I was ever told to go on, I went. I did my job. And all that experience from operations and doing all the different jobs gave me a full understanding of what I was doing. When the bullets started flying in Afghanistan, it almost came naturally because I've been doing it for so long. I've been groomed for that. I was able to do that.

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I base my actions solely on that. I gained experience at different levels and that helped me out.

That's one thing that I, and a lot of other guys, noticed ... we don't groom leaders anymore. We just basically hand people promotions nowadays. If you're qualified, it's good enough, but a qualification doesn't really mean anything. We have to go back. We have to slow down and we have to start grooming our leaders again. You start off as a private. You start off as a C9 gunner. You move up to rifleman. And then into platoon headquarters. You become the C6 gunner, then the platoon communicator, then you spend time driving the LAVs, and then you spend time gunning a LAV. You spend some time in stores and just move up and up until you're ready to be promoted. You have to go on these operations. You can't miss operations. It's the only way you're going to get real life experience. Nowadays, guys are getting promoted after only three years in the military to master corporal. It took me ten years to get to master corporal. We do have problems at every leadership level in the CF. You hear about all the good stories about leaders, but there are a lot more leadership failure stories out there that you don't hear. I've got a lot of examples of those. A lot of it has to relate to them not being groomed properly for the job they're going to do. In leadership, you have to be on your leaders to find out what makes them tick. You have to know what their mindset is. You have to know what their breaking point is.

Out in the field, a master corporal or sergeant is just as important as a general. He's making the decisions that could affect what a general has to do later on. We've certainly had a lot of breakdowns. We have to get back to grooming our leaders and making sure they hit all those points along the way. There's no rush to promote people. Well, there is a rush because of operations, but we have to slow that down and make sure that they're ready to take charge and to do their job. You have to make sure that they're ready mentally as well. Sometimes guys just aren't cut out for that kind of stress.

*Harding expressed the belief that if soldiers are prepared – both physically and mentally – for what they will face in the field, it pays dividends for them as well as for the military as a whole.*

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After going through what I did, a lot of times people ask, “Aren’t you mentally screwed up?” or “Have you had any stress injuries?” and things like that.<sup>14</sup> I don’t think so. I think I’m perfectly fine. I’m a stronger person for it, I think. Certainly, after I came back from Afghanistan, I definitely went through a bit of a transitional period, which is completely normal. But you work through that and you carry on. Again, I attribute that to my training and experience. It groomed me for that and when it happened, I didn’t break down. I think it’s important to send that message out there. We have to train our soldiers for what’s coming and they’ll be better off for it. Not everybody who goes into a war zone comes back screwed up ... it’s actually a small percentage. Sure, everybody comes back different, but you would come back different from any experience. I think that’s important.

We have a guy named Lieutenant-Colonel Dave Grossman and his books, *On Killing* and *On Combat*.<sup>15</sup> They have him come up to the battalion once a year and give his speech. We encourage guys to read his books because it certainly helped me out for sure. But we have to put more emphasis on it. We do psychological evaluations after operations, but it’s important to do it *before* operations as well to make sure that guys are mentally fit and find those weak spots and educate them and strengthen their minds through stress inoculation. That’s important too. I might be a bit of a different case because I have a big family – a wife, three daughters and two sons – and that’s everyday stress all the time! Going to work is a break for me. It’s a little different and I can handle these things. I handle it sometimes better than young guys can. Like I said before, you have to groom people for specific jobs. It’s extremely important to not skip steps.

*When he received news of his M.M.V., Harding’s first reaction was a bit negative, but now, after more reflection and the passage of time, he wears his decoration with pride.*

I got the letter, opened it up, and didn’t know what to expect. It’s a letter from the Governor General. I just thought it was one of those things that everybody gets for some reason. I started reading and it

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was like, “Holy crap!” I felt a bit of shock, even maybe a bit of guilt. I’m glad I got the award but, at the same time, Chris is in a wheelchair and he’s not getting any awards. Shulaev at the time hadn’t been awarded anything either. I felt like I was being singled out. I don’t want to be the guy that’s out there trying to get the awards. I felt the decoration meant that it was all me. Me. Me. Me. Me. Me. It wasn’t! I guess it was in a way because I was the guy in charge and I took command and all that kind of stuff. I did what I had to do. I guess that’s why I got the award. It just gives you pride that you did your job.<sup>16</sup>

MASTER CORPORAL HARDING WAS INVESTED WITH HIS MEDAL OF MILITARY VALOUR BY THE THEN-GOVERNOR GENERAL AND COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF OF CANADA, HER EXCELLENCY THE RIGHT HONOURABLE MICHAËLLE JEAN, AT RIDEAU HALL ON 13 FEBRUARY 2009.

## NOTES

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1 *Canada Gazette*, Part I, Vol. 142, No. 48 (29 November 2008), 3031. See also, “Valour,” *Canadian Military Journal*, Vol. 9, No. 3 (2009), 4-5.

2 For his service in Afghanistan, Nicholas James Elliott Grimshaw received the M.S.M.; his citation appears in Appendix 2.

3 For actions performed earlier in his tour, Darren John Hessel was Mentioned in Dispatches; his citation appears in Appendix 2.

4 Master Corporal Timothy Wilson and Corporal Paul Davis were both killed on 2 March 2006 when their LAV rolled over.

5 Captain Nichola Kathleen Sarah Goddard, the first Canadian female combat soldier killed in action, 17 May 2006. For her dedication and exemplary service in Afghanistan, she was posthumously awarded the M.S.M.; her citation appears in Appendix 2.

6 Referring to the M203 grenade launcher attached to his C7 rifle.

7 For actions performed earlier in his tour, Timothy Wayne Fletcher was Mentioned in Dispatches; his citation appears in Appendix 2.

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8 Concerning Op ZAHAR, Harding recalls that it “was supposed to be the big push to try to flush the Taliban from Panjwai completely and gain a lot of media and public attention as to what was actually happening in Afghanistan. But as we already knew, and as some were to find out, there would be a lot more work to do in this region.”

9 That is to say, with none of the vehicles’ external lights turned on.

10 A road linking key towns in Kandahar, providing local jobs, increased infrastructure and added security.

11 Another section had borrowed Harding’s LAV for an earlier operation; during this time it sustained considerable damage from several RPG hits.

12 Earlier, on 24 May 2006, Master Corporal Collin Ryan Fitzgerald performed an act of great valour that would later be recognized with the M.M.V.; his citation appears in Appendix 1.

13 For his actions on 8 July 2006, Alex Shulaev was Mentioned in Dispatches; his citation appears in Appendix 2.

14 Other soldiers included in this book, such as Corporal John Makela in Chapter 11, were subjected to a similar line of questioning upon their return to Canada.

15 Lieutenant-Colonel Dave Grossman, *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1995); Lieutenant-Colonel Dave Grossman with Loren Christensen, *On Combat: The Psychology and Physiology of Deadly Combat in War and in Peace* (PPCT Research Publications, 2004).

16 Additional information concerning Harding’s service in Afghanistan, especially the incident for which he was decorated, can be found in Cameron MacLean, “Ex-Winnipegger an Afghanistan Hero,” *Winnipeg Free Press*, 24 January 2009, A5.





# CHAPTER 6

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## *PINNED DOWN, NOT DEFEATED*

SERGEANT WILLIAM KENNETH MACDONALD

STAR OF MILITARY VALOUR ■ 3 AUGUST 2006

*“I’M PROUD OF THEM BECAUSE THEY DIED AS WARRIORS.”*

On **AUGUST 3, 2006**, amidst chaos and under sustained and intense enemy fire in Afghanistan, Sergeant MacDonald selflessly and repeatedly exposed himself to great peril in order to assist his wounded comrades. Despite the risk, he ensured that his men held on until reinforcements arrived and that the platoon’s focus remained on holding the ground that they had fought so hard to secure.<sup>1</sup>

WILLIAM (WILLY) MACDONALD WAS BORN IN NORTH BAY, ONTARIO, BUT HIS FAMILY MOVED TO REGINA, SASKATCHEWAN WHEN HE WAS LESS THAN A YEAR OLD. HE GRADUATED FROM SHELDON WILLIAMS COLLEGIATE AND ATTENDED THE UNIVERSITY OF REGINA FOR ONE YEAR. MACDONALD SERVED IN THE ROYAL REGINA RIFLES, A RESERVE INFANTRY UNIT, FOR FOUR YEARS AND ALSO PLAYED SOCCER WITH TEAM SASKATCHEWAN. WHILE WITH THE RESERVES, HE DEPLOYED TO BOSNIA IN 1994 (OP CAVALIER, ROTO 1). UPON HIS RETURN TO CANADA, HE JOINED THE REGULAR FORCE, BEING POSTED TO 1PPCLI. HE DEPLOYED TO BOSNIA AGAIN IN 1997 (OP PALLADIUM, ROTO 0), THEN TO KOSOVO IN 1999 (OP KINETIC, ROTO 0), AND AGAIN TO BOSNIA IN 2003 (OP PALLADIUM, ROTO 11). HIS DEPLOYMENT TO KANDAHAR IN 2006 (OP ARCHER, ROTO 1) WAS HIS FIFTH OVERSEAS DEPLOYMENT. LEAVING CANADA ON 29 JANUARY 2006 AND RETURNING EXACTLY SEVEN MONTHS LATER ON 29 AUGUST, HE SERVED IN AFGHANISTAN WITH THE 1PPCLI BG AS PART OF TASK FORCE ORION.

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### SERGEANT PATRICK TOWER

STAR OF MILITARY VALOUR ■ 3 AUGUST 2006

*“EVERY ONE OF THEM DID AN AMAZING JOB THAT DAY AND THEY ALL OWN A PIECE OF THAT MEDAL.”*

Sergeant Tower is recognized for valiant actions taken on **AUGUST 3, 2006**, in the Pashmul region of Afghanistan. Following an enemy strike against an outlying friendly position that resulted in numerous casualties, Sergeant Tower assembled the platoon medic and a third soldier and led them across 150 m of open terrain, under heavy enemy fire, to render assistance. On learning that the acting platoon commander had perished, Sergeant Tower assumed command and led the successful extraction of the force under continuous small arms and rocket-propelled grenade fire. Sergeant Tower's courage and selfless devotion to duty contributed directly to the survival of the remaining platoon members.<sup>2</sup>

PAT TOWER WAS BORN INTO A MILITARY FAMILY IN HALIFAX, NOVA SCOTIA AND LIVED IN SEVERAL CANADIAN CITIES, AS WELL AS IN GERMANY. HE GRADUATED FROM PARKLAND HIGH SCHOOL AND LATER ATTENDED CAMOSUN COLLEGE, BOTH IN VICTORIA, BRITISH COLUMBIA. HE JOINED THE RESERVES IN VICTORIA IN 1989 WITH THE CANADIAN SCOTTISH REGIMENT (PRINCESS MARY'S) AND DEPLOYED TO CROATIA IN 1993 (OP HARMONY, ROTO 2) AS A RESERVE AUGMENTEE WITH 2PPCLI. HE JOINED THE REGULAR FORCE IN 1996 WITH 3PPCLI AND DEPLOYED TWICE MORE TO BOSNIA (OP PALLADIUM, ROTOS 1 AND 6). UPON HIS RETURN, HE SPENT A YEAR AND A HALF AT BATTLE SCHOOL IN WAINWRIGHT, ALBERTA AND THEN DEPLOYED AGAIN TO BOSNIA WITH 1PPCLI (OP PALLADIUM, ROTO 11). HIS DEPLOYMENT TO KANDAHAR IN 2006 (OP ARCHER, ROTO 1) WAS HIS FIFTH OVERSEAS DEPLOYMENT. HE SERVED IN AFGHANISTAN WITH THE 1PPCLI BG AS PART OF TASK FORCE ORION.

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*While reflecting back on their actions of 3 August 2006, both Sergeant MacDonald and Sergeant Tower credited the training that they and their men had received prior to deploying as a vital factor in their ability to deal with the fierce fighting that they came up against in their frequent encounters with the Taliban. On this point specifically, Sergeant MacDonald, a member of Reconnaissance Platoon, vividly remembers:*

In recce, we didn't really get a lot of collective training for ourselves. We ended up running all the live-fire ranges for the remainder of the battalion, so we didn't get a lot of training for the platoon, although what we did get provided some really good opportunities. All the NCOs went on a course called "Rigging for Rescue." Some guys from Ouray, Colorado taught us how to do high-angle rescue, a lot of different sorts of mountain rescue techniques. At the time we thought it would be important. It turned out not to be, but it was still good training. Because of the lack of time that we had to train as a platoon, we had to make it up as we went along. So we'd be driving to the range to set it up and we would go through an ambush drill or an IED drill. We got ourselves a "Rescue Randy" – a 180-pound doll like a sandbag that you see firefighters use – and practised casualty extraction from a vehicle from all the different stations where someone could be sitting. It gave us an appreciation for how difficult extraction could be. As sections, we'd get a helicopter and do maybe three days' worth of an operation. As a platoon, we managed to make the time to be proficient at everything we thought was important. We were very cohesive because we'd been together for a good number of years. We pretty much had our stuff together.

One area of concern, from a leadership perspective, was when the battalion had us running those live-fire ranges and building villages so that the other guys could attack them. We were bitter about that to some extent, figuring here we were, supposed to be valuable assets, and we were doing things that seemed like a waste of time. We knew that Captain Jon Hamilton,<sup>3</sup> the platoon commander, was doing everything he could to get us what we wanted, but it was just a really difficult obstacle to overcome. The troops said, "What's Lieutenant-Colonel [Ian] Hope<sup>4</sup> doing to us?" At my level I understood that he was very low on resources. I told them, "He needs us

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to kind of jump in and help out where we can.” The way I looked at it was that he trusted us enough to say that we didn’t actually require this training, either because we were good enough at it or it just didn’t pertain to us. The other guys really needed the training so we needed to help them. You try to explain that to the guys in a manner that gets through to them without them going, “Oh yeah, now you, eh? You’re the yes-man too.” Most of the time I just joked about it. I had a really tight crew so we were pretty good with stuff like that. As a leader, you have to realize that guys get used to doing things a certain way and then all of a sudden something changes. You have to be able to impart the change to them in a way that is favourable both to them and to the organization. Those guys trusted and respected me so it was never really difficult. Whenever somebody would get out of line, they would know that I wasn’t happy with them. I’d just say, “You stepped outside your lane. Step back in right now or there’s going to be trouble.” And that’s all it usually took.

They were aware of my ability to conduct the types of operations that we conducted and my ability to plan. I always kept them very informed and that’s a big thing too. If you try to hold all the cards, you’re a terrible leader because all it shows the troops is that you’re trying to maintain control no matter what and that you don’t trust them. You have to bring the guys in and say, “Hey, guys, here’s the plan I’ve got laid out for the next operation. What do you think? Pick it apart.” When I brought them in on the process these guys would come up with stuff that I wouldn’t think about. Or, at the very least, they would feel that they’re part of the process – which they were – and so then they had to trust you and they had to trust the plan because they were there when you made it and they contributed to it.

Sometimes you just “click” with guys and they like the way you do business. But it’s not overly challenging in a recce platoon because these guys have been in rifle companies. They’ve gone through the rigmarole of the rifle company. It helps if you have a reputation, which I did. I was in 1PPCLI for 12 years. Everybody knew me. Everybody called me by my first name, Willy. I think that goes a long way too. I was able to influence decisions based on the amount of

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time I'd been in the battalion and the things that I had done. Those guys knew me when they showed up. Right off the bat, I treated them like men. My leadership style is not the typical or "old school" style of an infantry sergeant, where you scream and yell and demand obedience. I expected that I would have to earn their respect. You suffer hardships together. You take point when you have to take point. Basically, I just made myself into one of the guys ... but I was still the guy in charge.

When we found out that we would be going to Kandahar, everybody was excited. When we were told that we wouldn't be going to Kabul where everybody else was and that we were not going there to do presence patrols – we were to actually be going in and doing our business – I was really looking forward to it. Obviously, you always have hesitations in your mind. I'd never really been involved in any sort of big engagement in terms of friendly and enemy fire. There had been a couple of small skirmishes throughout the years. But I think if I hadn't been saying to myself, "Geez, I hope I do this right!" then I wouldn't have been doing my job. So I think we – Jon and I – really convinced the troops that they were as well-prepared as they could be.

Another reason why I was looking forward to going is that we'd be working with one another in really small groups overseas. Everybody there, in recce, was expected to maintain a certain standard in terms of physical fitness, their abilities, their basic soldier skills, shooting and stuff like that. You really do have a good opportunity to take guys that are already experienced soldiers and point them in the right direction. The big thing with that is you don't have to deal with these young guys that sometimes have bad attitudes. Everybody there wants to be there. Every training event that we approached, we approached with 100 percent professionalism, from Captain Hamilton who was in charge all the way down to Private Jeremy Barnes who was a new addition, with only nine months in the Army. You knew that everybody there was a very competent soldier.

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*Like Sergeant MacDonald, Sergeant Tower had first thought Kabul was their ultimate destination, and was somewhat surprised when word came down that they would be heading to Kandahar instead. Nevertheless, he too was confident that wherever he and his troops went, they would be prepared for whatever challenges lay ahead.*

We were a pretty tight group. We knew everything about each other. We had fairly senior people in every position. It was almost like we were this handpicked team to go over there. We had really top-notch leadership. Only one of my troops was right out of training, but we had well-trained privates and corporals. My master corporal had been my 2IC for a bit of time and had been my driver in Bosnia. This was my second tour as a sergeant. When we found out we were going, we were pretty excited about it because that is what you're trained to do. Some guys in the battalion were like, "We'll wait and see what we're going to do when we get there." We'd heard this a number of times in the last 15 years – that we're going to do something big – and then it really didn't turn out to be exactly what everyone had hoped or thought it was going to be. But this turned out to be everything and more. There was more war than anybody was even wanting.

When we first learned that we would be going to Kandahar, we were told that we'd probably be working with the Americans and we started focusing on that training. We were quite fortunate in that I think we probably had the most lead-up time to the deployment of any battalion as far as training together and putting these teams together that would eventually fight in combat was concerned ... probably a year and a half. One of the things we concentrated on was marksmanship training.

In December 2005, before we left, they brought in some Americans from Afghanistan who were with the 173<sup>rd</sup> Airborne Brigade that were in our area of operations. Some of their NCOs and officers came over and we did a week where they were like the observer-controllars watching us go through different training scenarios and then giving us their after-action points. That was probably some of the best training we got because we got to talk to guys that were

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actually there on the ground ... and had been for the last year. Most of them, before that, had been in Iraq for a year. These guys had a lot of good points to offer up.<sup>5</sup> Then we also had a leadership symposium in the PPCLI, at the Edmonton garrison in February 2005. There were guys in from all three battalions and the Infantry School in Gagetown, New Brunswick. They had as speakers a member from every leadership echelon of a Marine infantry battalion that had just come back from Fallujah in Iraq as part of Op PHANTOM FURY<sup>6</sup> and we learned a great deal from them. One of the things that the Americans told us is that we have to be the “hard target.” We pushed that on our soldiers. If you look like you’re “soft,” they [the enemy] will want to engage you. But if they look at you and say, “We don’t want to mess with these guys!” then just the way you handle yourself and the image that comes across from you does so much to change the situation. You’d hang on every word these guys said because you knew that they’d been there and done it. Lieutenant-Colonel Dave Grossman spoke the day before the Marines and his input was invaluable in focusing the way I trained my soldiers. The formal training was good too because you need that to not only work on your own skills, but to build those teams that you need to succeed.

So when the time came to deploy, we all felt prepared. The troops were really confident in their weapons handling and their marksmanship. Based on just the amount of ammunition they were firing during training, these guys were confident that they could shoot. Their battlecraft was good. Their fieldcraft was good. I had confidence in their abilities and I always tried to prepare them and make them confident.

We talk about leading by example. It’s one thing to say it but you have to live it. That’s a harder thing to do. So much more is said by what you do as opposed to what you say. It’s basic leadership. I found out later in combat that it doesn’t matter what rank you’re wearing, your soldiers have to trust you and respect the decisions you make. If they’re in peril and they feel that their survival is in jeopardy, your decisions have life and death consequences. They have to know, “If I follow this guy, I’ll be good to go.” I’ve seen corporals lead sections

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in combat that the troops had no trouble following because they knew this was one hard dude and he was going to get them out of that jam.

*When soldiers from 1PPCLI first arrived in Kandahar, things on the ground were relatively quiet. As a result, Sergeant MacDonald's platoon performed typical reconnaissance-type tasks. Combat, the task for which they had all prepared, would have to wait. Faced with a less than exciting routine, the troops started to grumble.*

Around the beginning of June, we were told that we would be doing convoy escort work getting supplies into Panjwai, making sure the boys got the bullets and water and everything. That was really bad for morale because we were driving all the resupply stuff to the guys that were actually fighting ... and we were supposed to be fighting soldiers. That was a huge obstacle to overcome. We lost hope after three weeks because we were promised that we were only going to be doing it for a week and we ended up doing it for close to a month. After about the second week, I just adopted the same attitude as the men. That way they couldn't be mad at me because I was on their side. In the beginning, you really want to support everybody. I'd say, "You know, guys, these guys are out there fighting and they need their supplies. I understand you guys are frustrated. I'm frustrated too, but how can we turn our backs on that? What we're doing is really important. You guys may think it's sort of a 'joe' job. I would agree with you that it is. You can get some logistics trucker to jump in a truck and drive it out there, but the problem is that the colonel only trusts us to go do this and get the supplies out there on time, on target, and where they need to be. Unfortunately, we're good at what we do and that's why he has pushed us into this task." That line only worked on the guys for about two weeks!

*Sergeant MacDonald took pride in the fact that even though the convoy escort work made them more vulnerable, putting them in a position where the possibility of ambush was that much greater, their professionalism (and a bit of good fortune) saw them through without a scratch.*



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We never hit a single IED the whole time we were escorting convoys, and we rolled in G-Wagons 99 percent of the time. I attribute some of it to luck and most of it to skill. We never left KAF at the same time of day. We never took the same route more than twice unless we absolutely had to. We drove really fast. We were definitely a target, but it was just a matter of time and space and doing the proper planning. If you're travelling during daylight hours you're definitely way more of a target than you would be at night. At night, not every vehicle in the convoy would be in blackout drive;<sup>7</sup> the first three vehicles would be, and then we would have one with headlights, and the next two wouldn't have headlights, but the last one would. It's just to try and confuse them. If you see a convoy of vehicles coming and you see the headlights and they're all evenly spaced – like we like to be in the military – then you can safely assume it's a military convoy and punch your remote control for your IED. We were really short on ECM [Electronic Counter-measures] at the time.

*Sergeant Tower also found that this initial period of relative inactivity had a detrimental impact on the morale of his soldiers.*

When we first got there, things were pretty quiet. My biggest leadership challenge was not dealing with a lot of combat ... it was dealing with NO combat! These young troops had been told for a year and a half that they were going into combat so they had to "train, train, train." Then you get over there and it seems like you're just wandering around the mountains or wandering around the desert. They were like, "This is bullshit!" and "There's no one here!" and all that stuff. The colonel would say, "You know, there's plenty of war to go around for everybody. Be careful what you wish for." After we got that first big contact – the Battle of Seyyedan in May of '06 – one of my most gung-ho troops came up to me and said, "You know, sergeant, I'm glad we did that and got it over with. If we don't have to do that the rest of the time we're here, that's okay by me."

Before the real fighting began, we had to keep them focused on the mission and what we were there to do. I'd tell them that even if we weren't seeing the enemy, we were at least having an impact on them

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and hindering their movement, hindering their operations by just being out there and being all over the place. It was just a matter of reinforcing what their mission was and how every operation affected enemy operations, contributing to the larger mission and its success. In the back of my mind, I didn't know if we were going to meet the enemy either. I was just doing my job as a leader to keep them focused on the mission. Prior to that time, I'd been shot at and shelled and mortared and all that stuff, but I'd never had any direct-action kind of combat. I always wondered too if we were going to meet anyone or what would happen if we did. But I couldn't let on to that in front of my men.

At this time, I was just doing the things that NCOs do ... talking to the men to keep them focused. I made sure that they were watching their arcs and doing their proper, and very basic, soldiering skills. You can tell when the troops become complacent or bored – they become sloppy – and you can tell when they're scared – they do exactly what they're supposed to be doing. For instance, when our company got pushed into Helmand Province for a month, operating out of FOB Robinson, we went on this patrol right through downtown Sangin. The rest of the company was spread around the town in the LAVs. We went down and dismounted with the OC and walked through the middle of Sangin like we owned the place. The way everyone was looking at us was pretty spooky and you could tell the troops were scared because they were watching their arcs and they were doing exactly what they were supposed to be doing.

*Despite the initial lull, things started heating up for Sergeant MacDonald and his reconnaissance platoon at the beginning of July. The quiet was now at an end.*

We had our own area of operations, which was a district called Mian Nashin ... east of Shah Wali Kot and north of FOB Martello. It was sort of the badlands area. July 4<sup>th</sup> was the first time since we had done our handover with the Americans that we had actually gone up there and managed to penetrate any distance into the district. That was when we had our first really big firefight as a platoon. Then basically the entire month of July was one big ambush-firefight. From July 4<sup>th</sup> on, there were maybe two days where we weren't actually engaged in some sort of battle.

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On August 1<sup>st</sup>, we were at Patrol Base Wilson [PBW], the staging area for an upcoming operation called BRAVO CORRIDOR. We convinced the colonel that it would be in his best interest to let us go back to KAF for the night. That was good for morale. There was nobody who had the freedom of movement like we did in recce. We said, "We're going back to KAF to spend the night, and we'll be back out tomorrow morning." The colonel said, "Yeah, whatever." I could get the guys in for a Timmy's<sup>8</sup> and a shower, they could eat a hot meal and head back out. That's what we did.

The next day, back at Patrol Base Wilson, we sort of waited for all the elements to trickle in. We had spent the majority of the day there suffering through rocket and mortar attacks and all that kind of crap. That place was brutal. It wasn't until fairly late in the evening that Captain Hamilton went to receive his orders from the colonel. The guys from Bravo Company, 2PPCLI – who were augmenting the battle group and who were "stationed" at Patrol Base Wilson for most of the tour – were going to assault the North School. We were going to come from the south and east onto the Panjwai School, the White School. They came back and the plan was, "Recce is going to lead, secure the bridge, dismount, and go across." And there was this big fancy plan. So Captain Hamilton came back to us, the various commanders in the platoon, and said, "Here's the plan," and asked us what we thought. I said, "No. We're not doing that. It doesn't work." At the time, I think we were about 20 to 24 troops strong on the ground. I just said, "Listen. We've only got eight or ten dismounts. Plus, we're in the lightest armoured vehicles here, in G-Wagons. How can they expect us to push through first? Why not use the LAV, which has the thermal sights, and we can go do our business, cross on foot, and secure the far side? Then we'll push everybody across." So he went back to the colonel. Even Warrant Officer Shaun Peterson – Pat's warrant at that time – said, "Yeah, you know what? That's a great idea. Why is recce going first? They shouldn't be going first." So everything kind of got jiggled around a bit.

We got ready to leave at about 0100 on August 3<sup>rd</sup>. The idea was to drive in blackout drive through "Ambush Alley" down Highway One back towards the Panjwai District Centre and then come

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across the wadi onto the main road and push up to secure the White School. So we had to secure the bridge, which would have been sort of key terrain, as was a nearby crossroads.

By the time we got to the Panjwai District Centre and were making our way along the route towards the wadi, the colonel was out sort of directing traffic ... telling everybody to go this way and that way and making sure nobody got lost. At one point, the boys saw a whole bunch of movement near a wall. There were about a dozen enemy there so they fired on them with the cannons and the co-ax<sup>9</sup> off the LAV. We kind of waited until the dust settled somewhat and we started moving forward again, still shooting a little bit because there were still some potential contacts.

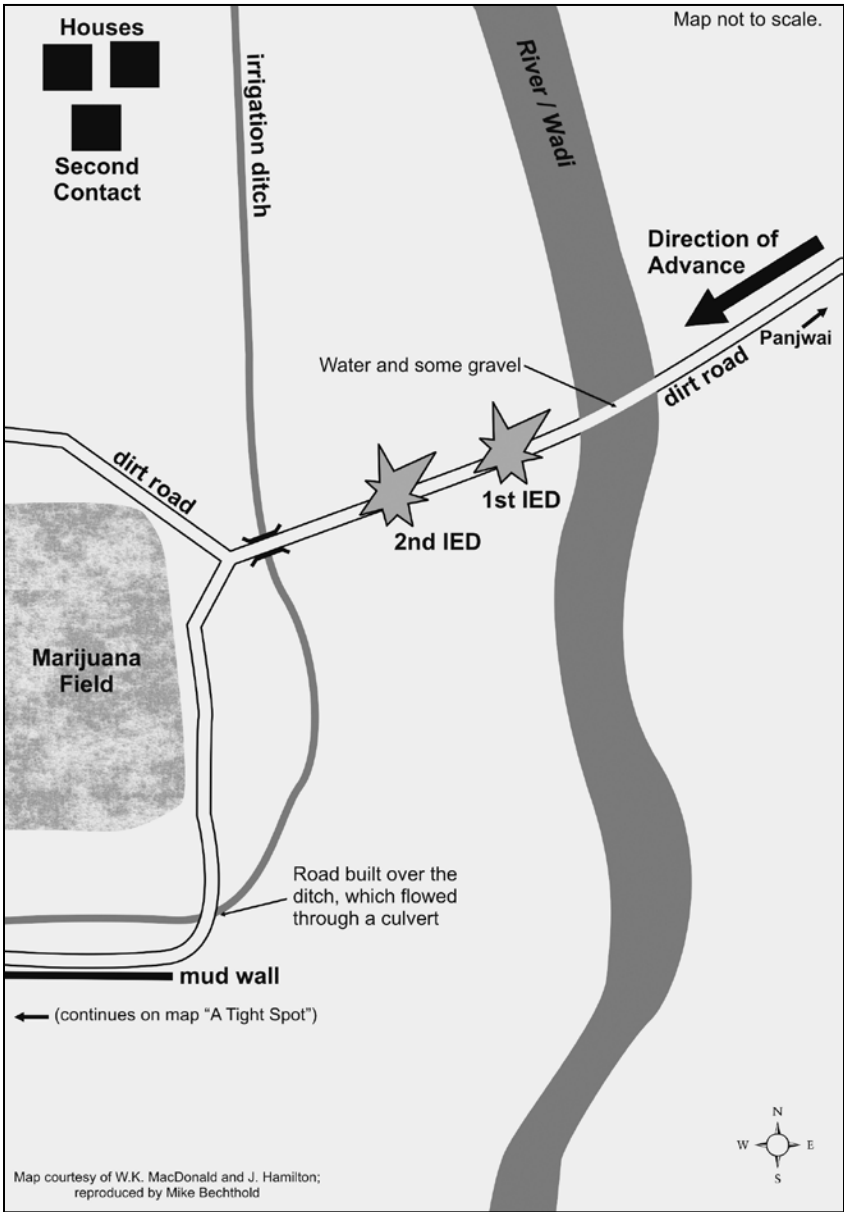
*At this point, a vehicle driven by Corporal Christopher Reid<sup>10</sup> hit an IED, mortally wounding him. Such was an ominous start to a fierce firefight that would ultimately result in a number of Canadian deaths and the awarding of two Stars of Military Valour, as well as a posthumous Medal of Military Valour. Sergeant MacDonald recalls:*

I was about two vehicles behind Corporal Reid. For nighttime and everything, you would think there would be a brilliant flash and explosion. There really wasn't. We all thought the vehicle had been hit by an RPG. Then Corporal Tim Nolan, who was in the back of that vehicle, turned on the radio and started reporting, "We've hit an IED! We've got casualties!" Because I was so close, I thought at the time that I was the only one that could hear him. The radio was inside a steel vehicle, which reduced the signal strength. So I passed the word back and added that we needed to secure the area, and then proceeded in accordance with our normal SOP [Standard Operating Procedure] about 300 metres from the bridge. At the same time, the colonel set up a casualty collection point back in the wadi.

The medics went to work on Chris and got everybody else that was affected by the blast out of the area. One of them was Peterson, who was the acting platoon commander. He wasn't badly hurt, but he was shook up enough that they thought they should medevac [medical evacuation] him just to be sure. This whole process took several hours to get medevacs in and get everybody out. I think

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they medevaced seven other guys. Nolan stayed behind and said he was good to go, but everybody else who was in the vehicle got medevaced out.



MAP 1 – A PERILOUS ADVANCE

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In the midst of all this, Captain Hamilton moved forward with Sergeant Vaughan Ingram<sup>11</sup> and a couple of other dudes to exploit the area where we had seen the bad guys the first time. What they ended up finding was a 155mm shell sitting on a wall, right there, with a detonator on top of it. They found a whole bunch of blood trails and bandages and stuff in behind this wall and a very complex trench system that the Taliban had used to move in and out of the area. There were remote detonators. There was an actual RPG with the round still in it, which led us to believe that we had done some serious damage and so they just took off, hightailed it and ran. And we found another IED in the road. The IED wire was copper and super thin, running along the side of the road. I think the only reason we saw it was because we were there fairly early. I think the whole engagement started at about 0400, maybe a bit earlier. There was a little bit of dew and the sun was shining on the copper wire, so we were able to see it.

So they did their exploitation and the colonel had a look at the stuff behind the wall and said, "Okay, before we proceed we have to get rid of the obvious threat ... the 155mm shell." I remember Vaughan got on the radio and called another sergeant and told him that he was needed to deal with this IED. In reply, the sergeant said, "Okay, should I come on foot or should I bring my vehicle?" Vaughan said, "Go ahead and bring your vehicle." Well, that vehicle made it about 25 metres and up it went. They hit another IED. Miraculously there were no real significant injuries. There was a little bit of ammo cooking off, but everybody walked away. The colonel said we needed to come up with a plan to attack the objective ... the White School. But he didn't want to send any more vehicles down the road because we'd already hit two IEDs. Both the vehicles were totally immobile.

*While the first part of the operation for Sergeant MacDonald and the command team was characterized by trying to adapt and readjust the battle plan in light of a deteriorating situation, Sergeant Tower's experience, being in the lead LAV, was somewhat different. From his perspective, he remembers:*

We got our orders to launch around 0200. Our objective was the White School. The CO led us most of the way, but just before the wadi, my LAV pushed forward and I took the lead. We crossed the

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wadi and went up the road that led to the White School. That's where we made the first contact with the enemy at about 0400. The convoy held up, confirmed that there was no ANP or ANA there, and so we engaged with the LAV's cannon. We had expected "it" to happen because, earlier in July, Charlie Company had gone in there with the headquarters of 8 Platoon and they had been ambushed in that exact same location. Because the enemy isn't all that imaginative, our intelligence told us to expect something in that same area. So as we came up we scanned the area with our thermals and we could see them. Once we got confirmation that they weren't friendlies, well, they didn't even get a chance to fire.

After that engagement, we pushed through and just short of a culvert we heard on the radio that a vehicle hit an IED right behind us. I dismounted my section and we secured the front of the platoon because we were the front vehicle. I went back and by this time they had started removing the casualties from the LAV. I saw that the acting platoon commander – Warrant Officer Peterson – was wounded and out of operation. I went back to the rear vehicle to find Ingram, who was the platoon 2IC at the time. He had to take over the platoon, so I took over as the platoon 2IC. We medevaced the wounded out of there and then carried on with the operation.

We decided to move the engineer LAV up to cover the road. As it moved up, it hit an IED. It was something out of a movie. I was walking towards it to tell them where to put the vehicle on the road to give us some support and it blew up. I heard the sound. One minute the LAV is there, and then it's just smoke. It came rolling through and you could tell it wasn't under its own power anymore. You couldn't hear it. It was really eerie. So now there were three more guys wounded. I had loaned my gunner, Corporal Jason Joe, to the engineers. He was Mentioned in Dispatches for the IED incident because he helped the driver get out of the LAV as ammunition was exploding.<sup>12</sup> So we called in another medevac and got those guys out of there by helicopter.

While this was going on, Captain Hamilton and Sergeant Ingram had gone back to get orders from the CO for what they were expected

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to do next. They came up and we got briefed that we were going to continue on with the assault. There were two ditches that ran up the road towards the White School. We would use those ditches for cover and then cross and seize the school. As we pushed off, Corporal Paul Rachynski,<sup>13</sup> who was leading my section now, was going to stay behind and cover the back of the platoon. As we launched, his dismounted section came under contact, so we went back to support him. The fire soon petered off and we started moving up again. We left cut-offs at one of the locations just to cover our platoon as we pushed forward.

*The commanders on the ground, including Sergeant MacDonald, quickly reorganized and decided on a new plan of attack. He recalls:*

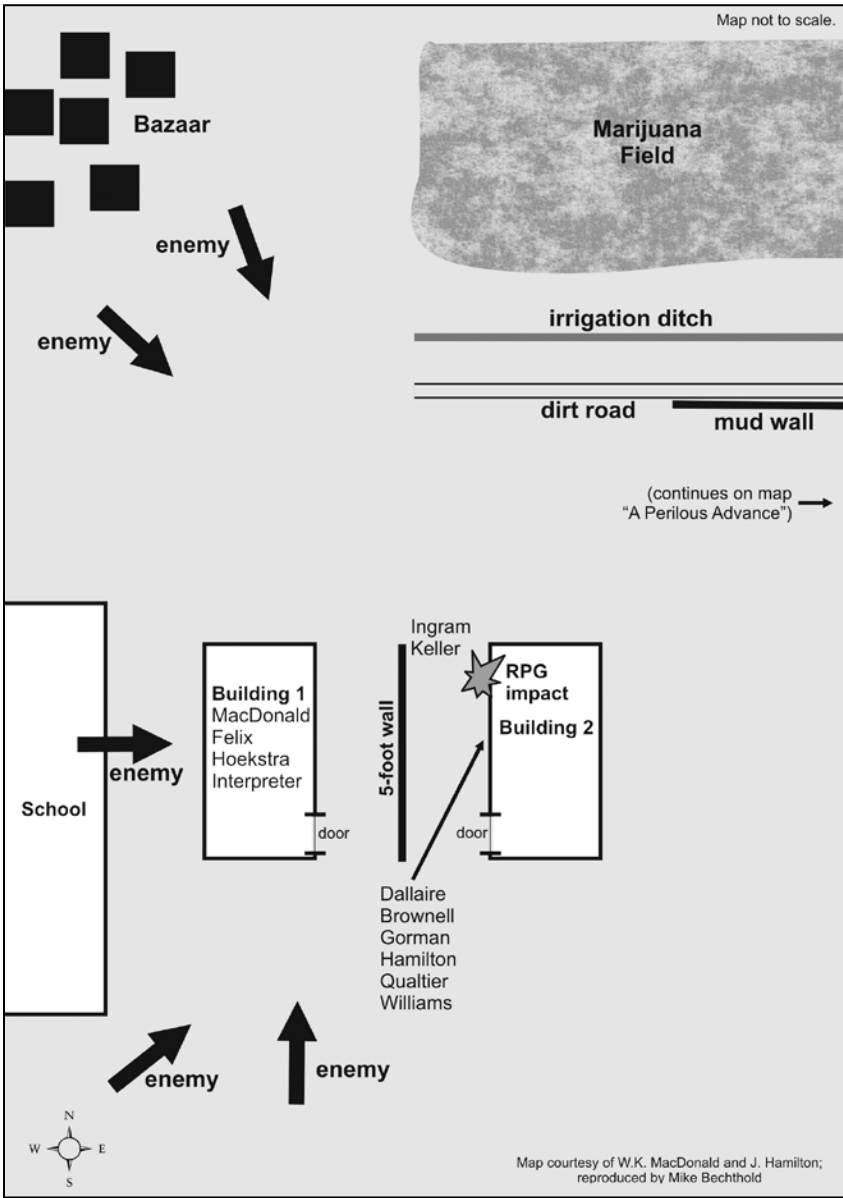
Captain Hamilton, Sergeant Ingram and one Captain Massoud, the Afghan National Police commander for the area, came up with a plan of attack that would involve about 25 ANP. There were supposed to be 40 but only 25 showed up. The plan also included the remainder of 9 Platoon – Pat and Vaughan’s platoon – augmented by Captain Hamilton leading. Recce Platoon was basically sort of flank security, plus a Quick Reaction Force. Captain Hamilton turned to me and said, “You’re coming with me. We’re going on this attack.” It was partly due to the fact that he and I were sort of team partners throughout the whole time so we worked well together, and he knew I had called in a lot of precision strikes,<sup>14</sup> so he could count on me to do that. So I said, “Yeah. Okay. Whatever. No problem.”

The plan was basically a double envelopment. There were two or three LAVs parked in the field that could see on top of these little toilet huts. You could see blue water tanks and you could see the majority of the school. The LAVs were like our firebase and they were supposed to support us as we went in. We ended up at the edge of the bridge sitting in the shade under a giant tree having a drink of water and waiting for Apache attack helicopters for support, but they were busy doing other stuff. Half of our assault force was in a nearby marijuana field where the plants must have been about eight feet high. The idea was for them to come out, push up the road in single file, fan out and assault the enemy. Sergeant Ingram and his



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guys were then going to cross an irrigation ditch from another direction so it would be a double envelopment. We'd assault from two different sides and push the ANP right up the middle.



MAP 2 – A TIGHT SPOT

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Finally, the Apache helicopters showed up. We got in position and we told the firebase to start shooting. But the ANP thought they were actually shooting at bad guys so they burned off almost all their ammo just shooting at absolutely nothing. While this was going on, Sergeant Ingram's crew was coming up on the road to come around and they got bumped from another built-up area. So then obviously the focus shifted to what was going on there. A whole bunch of us peeled out and went back over to fight that battle. It wasn't really a chance contact ... the enemy had been waiting for us. My estimate would be three or four of the enemy with AK-47s on a harassment mission. They were trying to disrupt what we were doing and it worked. And it also bought them time for what I am assuming was to bring more guys into the immediate area. That contact got squared away, so we pushed off and we broke through the marijuana fields. I had really good fields of fire so we put forward a machine gun and one of the ANP RPGs.

Then Sergeant Ingram said, "I can't get across this irrigation ditch. It's impossible. So I'm going to have to come back across the road and we'll have to assault as one force." We said, "Yeah, no problem." A whole bunch of us were engaging some bad guys in some nearby buildings and some of them were still kind of hanging around by the school. We said to the ANP, "Okay, you guys go and put an Afghan face on the operation." So they went up. They made it to the school, no problem. They cleared through it and then they came under contact. As soon as the big shooting started, they all ran back. One of them had been shot, but not grievously. As they were passing me at the end of a wall, I said, "Where are you guys going?" For some reason, we had our two interpreters with us. They said, "We're out of water. We have no ammo left. We're done." I said, "Go get some water out of the stream." There was a huge irrigation ditch and it was probably six feet deep and filled with water. They said, "No, no. We want clean water." I said, "Go back, get clean water, get more ammo, come back and help us out." But they never did return.

By this time, it was getting late. It was probably noon. Sergeant Mars Janek had checked his Kestrel, a digital thermometer, before I stepped off, and it was 67 degrees Celsius. It had been hot and we'd

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been doing a lot of fighting during the day. You don't ever get used to the heat, but you learn to deal with it. Physical fitness is a huge part of it. If you're not in good shape, you're done. You'll never survive. Your body just starts to eat itself away. One of the big things is stuff called *Gastrolyte*. It's basically electrolytes and dextrose and all this other stuff. You pour it in water. It tastes really bad but it sorts you out right away if you're having some serious issues with loss of salt and everything. By this point in time, we started to get heat casualties. There was a sort of little hollow in the ground with a nice big shade tree that was being used as the local casualty collection point. Pat was back there and we left him with four or five heat casualties.

*Approximately ten hours into the operation, Sergeant Tower's platoon had been in position to support the ANP as they approached the White School, but began taking heavy fire. As the ANP retreated, Sergeant Tower set about establishing a casualty collection point. He recalls:*

A key to the whole operation was that there was an ANP platoon-sized element – 20 guys or so – that were going to lead us. We were just going to support them into the objective. As soon as we took some fire – we started taking a lot of fire at that point – the ANP took off and left us holding the bag. I picked a place for a casualty collection point that looked ideal. It was a little dip in the ground and it had a big tree where you could spot it easy enough. I thought, “They can identify this, no problem.” I hunkered down there with the medic and then Ingram told me over the radio that the signaller was down. He was a heat casualty and couldn't go any further. It was a hot day. Personally, I had been sweating like crazy since dismounting at 0430, and it wasn't even light out then. But this was getting close to noon. The signallers were the worst off because they've got all that signalling kit plus a big heavy radio on. The temperature was up probably around 60 degrees Celsius that day. Once contact starts – and we had noticed this before – you don't realize that you're giving it your all. When people are shooting at you, you're just going until you drop. That's what happened. They had nothing left in them. They'd go until they would literally drop. So you're always pushing the water at them.

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At the very tail end of Sergeant Brad Worth's section, I said to one of his privates, "Do you know how to work a radio?" He said, "Yeah." I said, "Well, you're going to be a signaller. Come with me." I brought him up. And this is the last time I saw Ingram alive. I said to Vaughan, "Okay, here's your new signaller." We took the radio off one guy and put it on the other guy. Then I took the heat casualty back to the casualty collection point. He was really messed up.

When we got back to the casualty collection point, the rest of the platoon had moved off to seize the objective. I stayed there and then I started taking a whole lot of fire. This is when I figured I hadn't picked the best location for it! Every shot that rang off, I could hear the crack right over me. I've been on lots of ranges before where there are cracks going over your head, but this was louder than that. Those rounds were right there. All three of us were hunkered down as low as we could get. There was a LAV just off beside me with Master Corporal Matthew "Kiwi" Parsons<sup>15</sup> in it. I got on the radio with Parsons and told him that we're both taking a lot of fire. I could see rounds hitting his LAV. Between the two of us, we figured whoever was shooting was just in front of me in a ditch. So I took a grenade and threw it and nothing happened. It was a dud. I took another grenade, threw it, and it was another dud! Each time, I had to sit up and expose myself to enemy fire in order to do this. I'm thinking, "Jesus!" So finally the third grenade exploded and then we weren't taking any more fire.

*Meanwhile, with the ANP gone, Sergeant MacDonald had to take on the role of 2IC for the assault and began preparing on the fly with Captain Hamilton to take the objective:*

Captain Hamilton got on the radio and said, "The Afghan National Police have run away. We've got a number of heat casualties. What would you like us to do?" The colonel came back and said, "You know what you have to do, so get it done." So he turned to me and said, "Okay, it looks like we're assaulting." Now I'm the assault force 2IC because Pat's in the casualty collection point. I said, "No problem. I'll take that over. I'll stay here with the C6 and we'll provide fire. You guys break out into sort of an extended line and sweep

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across. Then the second half will go.” I told Jon I would come with the second crew. So off went the first crew. I was with Corporal Bryce Keller<sup>16</sup> and Private Mark Bedard. They were the C6 team and they both said, “Listen, we can’t do this. We are at the end of our rope; totally dehydrated.” They probably had a little bit of heat stroke. Keller basically said, “I don’t think I have the energy to run the distance it’s going to take.” So I said, “Okay, I’ll take all your spare ammo. I’ll take your spare barrels. I’ll give you some time to drink some water and have some *Gastrolyte*. You don’t have to come. You can stay and support from here. You’ve got good fields of fire. We’re going to need that C6 to support us into the next phase of the mission.”

The whole time, there were RPGs coming down the road. Machine gun fire was kind of raking the open area. Keller and Bedard both said, “Give us a few minutes. Take our stuff.” So I took the spare ammo and spare barrels and we were there for about a minute. I said, “Okay, guys, are you good to go?” They said, “Yeah.” So I said, “Okay in 30 seconds we’re going to make the run across. We’re going to do it in one bound. Don’t look left or right. Just zero in on where you have to go and run straight there.” I couldn’t see the other guys and there was no way I could communicate with them because both the radios were gone with the main assault crews. So I said, “Listen, those guys aren’t going to be able to cover us.” My plan was to get Jon to provide a firebase so that we could move across. Obviously I couldn’t get in touch with him. I gave them the 30-second countdown. We all got up and off we went. We ran across the field. I think the distance was about 150 metres. We ran across and, strangely enough, Keller passed me. I was weighted down with all his ammo and spare barrels – I was probably carrying 30 pounds on top of the 70 pounds that I had normally – but he was carrying this big machine gun, the C6. My legs were near dead.

We made it across and I saw Sergeant Ingram and I was yelling at him, “Where do you want the C6?” He put Keller in a position to fire at the bazaar because that’s where the bulk of the enemy fire was coming from. Private Kevin Dallaire<sup>17</sup> was lying there. He had been with the initial portion of the assault force and he got shot right underneath his body armour and he was down.

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I came into a building and Jon Hamilton was around. We could see each other across a wall that was about six feet high. There was another building on the opposite side of the wall. I said, "I brought the C6. Keller's here. He's good to go. He's got all the ammo." Jon said, "I want some grid references for this bazaar. We're going to try and call in some artillery and see if we can get some air support. We've got to level this place because we're hurting. How are things over there?" I was there with a few other guys and I was hurting. I was at the end of my physical capabilities because that run totally zapped everything out of me. Once I figured out what Jon wanted, I sat down, took my helmet off, pulled out some *Gastrolyte* and some water, sucked that down, and then pulled out my map and started planning for air and artillery.

Meanwhile, the battle was still going on. There was fire coming from several places. Jon was organizing everything to make sure all the appropriate arcs were covered off. There was a C9 in a doorway and we had a guy in another doorway just watching. Every now and then I'd pop out and fire a couple of rounds one way, then move to the end of the building and shoot another way. At one point, I was back inside the building talking to the interpreter in a corner. The Taliban must have volleyed everything at the same time – RPGs or recoilless rifle rounds – because the side of the building that I was in got hit and I was thrown across the room and into the concrete wall on the other side. I landed on top of Corporal Shaun Felix. From what I could gather afterwards, when I had a look at what had been going on, there was a round that had come in and struck the wall. That's what caused the injuries and the subsequent death of Corporal Keller, Sergeant Ingram and Private Dallaire. The blast and the fragmentation were all concentrated. It was all kept inside by the other walls. Captain Hamilton had been standing in the doorway. That's why he got hit. Private Eric Qualtier, I believe, was on his C9 and he got hit. I don't know where Corporal Mark Brownell or Corporal Andrew Gorman were and how they ended up getting hit.

As soon as that happened, they hit us with another volley. I got thrown across the room again. Then the machine gun fire started. They started to layer their attack. They would fire their anti-tank

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rockets or whatever and RPGs. As soon as those were done, the machine guns would start and fire until they were getting low. Then you could hear the AKs kick in. It was very well-coordinated. It was difficult for us to get anything done. Jon was screaming that he was hit and he was shouting, "Everybody over here is down! You need to come help us!" I was still a bit disoriented from getting blasted across the room. I had a concussion. I said, "Dude, can you do first aid on yourself? I need a minute to get sorted out. I can't get to you right now." Plus there was just an insane amount of fire coming down. I told Felix, Corporal Jason Hoekstra<sup>18</sup> and another soldier, "Listen, the guys over there are hurting really bad. I have to go help them. Put fresh mags on your weapons. Make sure you have fresh ammo for the machine guns because they're coming. They're going to try and overwhelm us. Anybody comes through that door that isn't me – and I'll yell at you 'Friendly coming in!' – make sure you kill them. When I come back, we're going to attack." That was my thought ... we had to attack to regain the momentum of the whole battle.

I ran around and I was yelling the whole time, "Friendly coming in! Friendly coming in!" I ran around the wall and saw Vaughan. It was pretty awful. He was kind of in a sitting up position. I dove into the doorway and landed on Captain Hamilton's foot, which had been injured. He screamed, and I said, "Sorry. And sorry it took me so long to get here." Captain Hamilton tells me it was less than a minute but in my mind it was more like ten minutes from the time he told me he got hurt until the time I actually got up enough nerve to go across the way to help out. I tourniqueted him up and then went to help Sergeant Austin Williams<sup>19</sup> bandage up Qualtier. He was in bad shape. We put three tourniquets on him and probably two or three field dressings because not only had he been hit with shrapnel, he'd been shot as well. I said, "Okay, what's going on with the radios? Does anybody know that this has happened?" I kind of did a quick assessment and I knew that Vaughan wasn't dead but he was going to die, and Keller and Dallaire were both already dead.

Jon said, "What are you going to do?" I said, "I'm going to go on the offensive. I'm going to take the guys from the other building and attack towards the bazaar." He let out a line of curses and said,

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“Are you crazy?” I said, “Well how else are we going to be able to get someone up here or to buy time to get people up here to extract?” He was really calm. I was surprised. He was injured and he was obviously a little bit in shock, but he was thinking pretty clearly and he was trying to get the radio working, but couldn’t. There were two reasons. One was that the temperature that day was causing the radios to overheat really badly. The second was that the LAVs were having a conversation amongst themselves and they have hugely amplified radios. So any time that we would try to transmit on our radio or Jon would try to transmit on his radio, we’d get stepped on. We were saying, “If anyone can hear us, we’ve got three KIAs [Killed in Action] and approximately five or six wounded Pri-Ones [Priority 1s].” I think the last thing the colonel heard from Jon was, “If you don’t come and help us now, we’re all going to fucking die!”

So I went about getting a perimeter set up so we could defend the area and hold off as long as we could. By this point, I’d gone back to the corner of the building to do an assessment of what was going on, because the bazaar area was really where the main threat was coming from. They were coming through the field in groups of five and then they’d stand in line. They wanted to come and get us. We were firing on them with the machine guns and one of the guys was firing the C6 from a window out towards the bazaar. He was hitting most of the guys that were trying to get to us. I was at the corner shooting. Qualtier, who had the three tourniquets and bandages on, came crawling up to me where I was standing in the doorway and said, “I want my gun. Where’s my gun? I want to fight!” And I said, “You can’t fight. You’re in bad shape. Just go back and hang out in the corner.” He insisted, so I gave him a C9 and he started covering us from a doorway. Sergeant Williams was with him. Brownell – “Brownie” as we called him – was the radio guy. He was hurt really badly too, but he was assisting as best he could. One of the interpreters got messed up really bad. I thought he was dead, but he ended up surviving.

*During this lengthy firefight, Sergeant Tower heard the desperate radio transmissions from the besieged buildings and decided to do what he could to help. He remembers:*



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I grabbed the medic, Corporal Nick Lewis, and we headed back up towards the objective area. I ran into Master Corporal Tom Cole and he's another heat casualty. He's just sitting in this ditch with water up to his chest trying to cool off. He's a good buddy of mine. He says, "I'm all messed up." He was upset that he wasn't there with his troops on the objective but he just couldn't go any further. He was the weapons detachment commander and he had started off the day as the crew commander in the LAV that got IED'd. So he had already been IED'd that day. I said, "I'm heading to the objective area. Do you want to come?" and he said, "Yeah, I want to go again." It probably wasn't the smartest thing to do because he was really in no condition to fight. But I could see that he wanted to go up there. So now the three of us head up the river and we see the cut-offs. There's this guy, a private who is one of the C9 gunners at the cut-off. He said, "Sergeant, can we go up there?" I said, "No, you can't go up there. We need you back here as a cut-off." He was really upset because he wanted to be up there.

We kept heading up this creek and I think we went a little further than we should have because we started taking a lot of fire from RPGs. I never really noticed them. It was Cole who told me afterwards. We had eight RPG rounds impact just around where we were on this creek. I got on the radio and I talked to Captain Hamilton who was at the objective and I asked him what was going on. He said by this time they were all heat casualties and they were all a mess and that they were going to pull off the objective. He said, "There's no point in coming all the way up here." Right after that was when they took the direct hit from the RPG in this little outbuilding that they were in. They took a hit and then it came on the radio that they had a bunch of wounded up there. So I told the medic and Cole we had to get up there. We ran through an open field right through the middle of enemy fire. It was really noisy with people shooting at us. Cole had a bullet hole through his equipment that he found later on. We ran up there and as we're getting closer I'm thinking, "I hope our own guys don't shoot us." So I'm yelling, "Friendlies coming up!"

We came up there and there were two buildings, bathrooms for the school with a wall between them. I headed into one of them. Then I

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was just working on setting up a defence and making sure they had troops out to defend. I saw Hoekstra. He had the C6, which wasn't a good sign because he wasn't the C6 gunner. Once I saw that they had a grip on that section, I yelled across and told them I was going to come across to the other building and to give me some fire. One of the young corporals – Gorman – who was from the CQ staff and had never been out before on an operation, was wounded, which I didn't realize. I told him to give me some covering fire while I came across. He was shooting and as I came across I could see that he was wounded. He was bleeding from his shoulder and his hand was kind of messed up, but he covered me anyway. I said, "Good job!" I went inside and I saw Sergeant Williams, one of the section commanders, and I saw Sergeant MacDonald. Right away I was thinking that I'd known Ingram for a long time and he'd have a grip on what was going on here. I said, "Where's Ingram at?" and they both said, "Ingram's dead." I looked outside and saw him lying there. I could tell he was dead. Then I saw the other two dead guys. I came in and we discussed how we had to get out of there and that we would need the LAVs.

*Sergeant MacDonald remembers the ensuing conversation. Although he was certainly relieved to see Sergeant Tower and the two men with him, his relief soon turned to dismay when he realized that they were there on their own without any one else. He remembers:*

Pat ran in. I don't know exactly how he got there, but he was there. He said, "Hey Willy, where's Vaughan?" I said, "Vaughan's dead." He flinched a little bit because he and Vaughan were really tight. I said, "Pat, thank God you're here. You brought a medic. We need the medic. Where are the vehicles?" He said, "What are you talking about?" I said, "You know, the vehicles." He said, "It's just me, Tom and the medic." I said, "Dude, we're in some serious trouble!" Then I heard Kiwi – Master Corporal Parsons – and Master Corporal Tony Perry<sup>20</sup> on the radio telling the CO that they were going to come up with their LAVs. They were asking us, "Where do you need us?" I responded, "One of you go north, one go south." Kiwi pulled up and they were firing the whole way. They went through their entire

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upload of main armament, their entire upload of co-ax and their pintle-mounted machine gun. I asked Tony what it looked like because it was very smoky and he said, "Man, there were bodies everywhere." It was crazy. After we extracted, we saw that their LAVs had RPG and bullet scars all over them.

They parked their LAVs so that we would be able to have the best amount of shelter from enemy fire and so they could support us. I said, "Okay, we'll put all the wounded in one vehicle and all the dead in the other." Pat was still there at the time and he said, "Willy, you go ahead with the wounded and I'll stay back here. I'll make sure that the KIAs get loaded into the vehicle and we can get out of here." By this time, I believe 1 Platoon or 2 Platoon from Alpha Company was coming down the road. We loaded everybody up and closed the ramp and off we went back to the casualty collection point. Then I wanted to go back to the building because I felt a need to account for everybody that I knew was there at the time. I spoke to the colonel and he said, "They're on their way back. Don't worry about it. You don't have to go back up there." I made the decision then to just stay with Jon Hamilton until the medevac came.

When the second vehicle came back, nobody wanted to unload the guys that had been killed. That's probably some sort of mental protection mechanism that guys have. They don't want to see someone they know who's now dead. So me and another guy –Williams – unloaded the three of them. It turned out that Dallaire was actually still alive at that point. They worked on him for quite a while before they said, "Okay, he's done." I remember unloading Vaughan Ingram. We put him down and I straightened him out, his legs were messed up, and I closed his eyes and stuff like that. Then I spent my time sitting with Jon and lit the smoke for him and put it in his mouth ... you know, the old movie thing. I don't know why you do it, but you do.

*Amidst the chaos, Sergeant Tower engaged in a bit of banter with the crew commander of one of the arriving LAVs.*

When those LAVs showed up shooting, it was the best sound I had ever heard. Then a LAV and a platoon from Alpha Company showed

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up and that kind of took us by surprise because I didn't even know the company was there. It was kind of funny because there was this master corporal who I've known for a long time. They pulled up beside the outbuilding so we could get in, but they weren't close enough. They were out about 15 metres. He pulls up and I could see him up there. He said, "Hop in!" I said, "Get a little closer!" So he moved the LAV a little closer so we could get in safely. We tried to get the guys who were okay or only slightly wounded to lay down as much fire as they could to cover us.

A bunch of their guys showed up, dismounted, and he said, "We're out of here." I made sure we had all our guys and our equipment out and we pulled back. Then it was just a matter of setting up some security. We started dealing with the wounded and it seemed like it was just helicopter after helicopter coming in to get the wounded guys out. Then we reorganized the platoon. In my mind, we were still going to fight. We had three LAVs with crews in them and three, three-man sections. We were ready to carry on and then the CO said, "The only place you're going is back to KAF." So we pulled off. By this time it was about 1630, almost 1700, and we'd been in contact since 0400, so we had been at it for at least 12 hours.

*Once the immediate danger was over, Sergeant MacDonald began rounding up the remnants of his platoon.*

I waited until the medevac came for Jon and then I got the rest of Recce Platoon together and told them what had happened because, amazingly, most of them were oblivious to anything that was going on up where we were. Communications were crappy and they had been busy fighting little skirmishes on the side. Later, I asked the colonel how many enemy there had been and I was told that there had been somewhere in the vicinity of 200. They'd known they had us pinned down and they were just flooding the area with dudes, trying to overwhelm us so that they could get a trophy or whatever. It would have been a huge propaganda victory if they had gotten their hands on one of us.

Eventually the bazaar and everything else was levelled by bombers. It had been a really bad day. There were the two IEDs, and then

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the three guys getting killed at the school. Then there was a vehicle suicide bomber at the Panjwai District Centre. Somebody managed to shoot the guy before he got too close but he blew up his package just the same. Then there was a giant cloud – a huge fireball – and the colonel turned to me and said, “What did you do?” There was a B-1 bomber in the area and he thought I was so upset that I called in fast air on the Centre for revenge. I said, “I didn’t do anything!”

The ride back to KAF was quiet. I tried to keep my spirits up as best as I could but I was still focused on getting back and doing our drills properly. When we got back, my role as the leader was to kind of keep it together because most of the guys weren’t involved in the battle. There were only two guys from the platoon that had been involved – myself and Captain Hamilton – and he had been medevaced to Camp Bastion for surgery because there was no room left in the Kandahar hospital. I was the only guy who really knew what had happened. They didn’t ask and I didn’t tell. It was a case of, “Let’s carry on as per normal.” I think, more than anything, the guys just wanted to get back out and get even. The tough part of it was to rein them in and say, “Okay, it’s not about getting even. It’s about doing our job and doing it the way we’ve been doing it thus far.” After the battle we stayed at KAF until we did our handover a few weeks later. We didn’t leave the wire because there was so much to do to get ready for the handover.

*Sergeant Tower found that he had to work hard to improve the morale of his men after what they’d just been through.*

The morale of the troops was pretty low. It was a rough day for them. The amount of fighting, and seeing their buddies dead, really affected them. This happened during the last couple of weeks of the tour. This was another leadership issue. You have to say something to pull them together. I explained that a lot of bad things had happened, but so had a lot of good things. I praised them on the way they fought that day. I was so very proud of them. You contribute so much to training these guys and then you see it all pay off when you see how they fight. I also let them know that the mission wasn’t over. We were back in KAF to put our buddies on planes but then we were

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leaving to go back on operations. So we still had to focus on the mission. I explained to them that I was feeling all the same things. I'd put one of my best friends on that plane too. But as a leader, you can't show that. You have to be that stalwart kind of guy.

One thing the firefight showed us was that our training works. You don't go to Afghanistan and all of a sudden there's a different way of operating. "Okay, this is what we do in Canada and this is what we're going to do here." It's not like that. You do what you're trained to do and you apply that training. You apply those leadership principles and philosophies ... and all that stuff works. That's what I tell everyone. "What we do works. The way we train for the tours. The product we give. It's an amazing product ... these soldiers and our leaders. So just do what you're trained to do."

*Both Sergeant Tower and Sergeant MacDonald were surprised and a bit taken aback when they learned they had been awarded the S.M.V. Sergeant MacDonald suspected that he might be in line for some type of recognition, but certainly not the second highest valour decoration next to the V.C.*

I knew the paperwork had been submitted, but I was thinking along the lines of a Mention in Dispatches. When I realized what it was, I was a little bit blown away. While it's nice to know that a panel of supervisors, peers and subordinates heard the story and respect and trust me enough that they could recommend something like that, I consider I'm representing the rest of the guys who were there as well. One of them said to me, "You saved my life. If it wasn't for you being there, I would be dead." I said to him, "Dude, you saved MY life." Everything is about teamwork. One person cannot accomplish anything unless they're part of a greater good, which is your team. Your team can be two people. Your team can be your section. It can be your platoon. We suffer as a team, our accomplishments are done as a team, and our failures are accepted as a team. There's no way that I would have been put into the situation I was put in had it not been for the fact that Captain Hamilton and I were a team. Corporal Keller and Sergeant Ingram were a team and they gave their lives as a team so that we could survive. A chain of events thrust me into a

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position that I didn't want to be in, but I had the team there and I had the support that I needed to get the job done.

I came about as close as a person could come to becoming totally unravelled ... totally. Jon was down. He couldn't help out. There was no other leadership there that was really helpful.<sup>21</sup> I didn't know any of these troops from a hole in the ground. They're all looking at me, saying, "What are we going to do now?" I had to make the decision to be a leader, to lead these guys and do the right thing, but it would have been just as easy to sit down in a corner and plug my ears and say, "This isn't happening."

Once you've been bestowed with an award of this nature, you have to be responsible enough to live up to it every single day of your life. I appreciate the trust that has been placed in me, but it's a difficult thing. I mean, just because I had one good moment, all of a sudden now I'm the best guy in the army? Come on! It's one of the things I find the hardest.

*Sergeant Tower believed that he really hadn't done anything special and he too felt that he was representative of everyone who fought that day.*

I was literally just doing what I've been trained to do. When someone goes down, the next guy takes over. I feel that if I could, I'd give a medal to every guy in my platoon that day. They all did amazing things. A lot of them have been decorated.<sup>22</sup> Every one of them did an amazing job that day and they all own a piece of that medal. They all contributed. I don't see it so much as a medal for me as for all of 9 Platoon.

A lot of people congratulate you on a medal. But for anyone to get awarded any sort of decoration, something really bad has to happen. If everything is going good, no one is getting a medal. When you read any of these citations, things were pretty much not going as planned. It's always something going bad.

What I did is not something I think is a real mark of incredible leadership based on the rank that I have and the training that I have and the experience that I have. I think what I did is expected

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of any senior NCO in the Canadian military. What I see as the true mark of leadership that day were the corporals with no formal leadership training taking over sections and fighting in combat. In Canada, we wouldn't let these corporals lead a live-fire section attack exercise, based on training safety guidelines. But when they're in combat, they're fighting the enemy and they're doing it really well. That comes from the way they have been mentored to be leaders. In the military, we start developing our leaders very early on in their careers. As an NCO, you have two basic jobs. One is to lead your men in an operation and the other is to train them to get ready for those operations. Even in your battalion, every day you're training your men for operations. Use the time you have to train them and to mentor them ... not just to do THEIR jobs, but to do YOUR job also.

*Sergeant MacDonald was extremely pleased that Corporal Bryce Keller was singled out, although posthumously, for the M.M.V.*

Besides a radio, a machine gun is the next most valuable target on the battlefield. The machine gun that Corporal Keller was manning that day, in that type of heat, would have been producing about three- or four-foot flames out of the end of it, as well as an extremely distinct muzzle signature. So there would have been an awful lot of dust being kicked off the end of it. All of that makes it an easy target to pick out. He knew that he was in an exposed position. He didn't flinch in his resolve to be there at all. He just said, "No, I have to stay here because they need me here." I did the submission to, and I spoke for him at, the Honours and Awards Board. The question I got asked was, "Are you just doing this because he's dead?" I denied this and told the questioner, "There are two ways that you can die in direct combat in Afghanistan. One is that either you or somebody else isn't doing their job properly. The other way is to do it so well that you actually sacrifice yourself so that somebody else can live. Corporal Keller knew he was a target. He knew he was in an exposed position. But he stayed there because he knew he had to stay there. He could have just as easily said, 'No way. This is ridiculous!' and moved on. At the end of the day, the amount of firepower he provided us up until the point that he was killed probably saved



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us from being overwhelmed and bought us a lot of time for those heat casualties to recover and for the guys to work on Dallaire, who unfortunately ended up dying anyway. But in the interim, Corporal Keller saved Dallaire's life."

I get asked a lot, "Do you feel sorry for your friends that died?" My resounding answer is always, "No, I don't feel sorry for them. I'll never, ever feel sorry for them. I'm proud of them because they died as warriors." I'm glad to see that everybody has been decorated in some way because it kind of brings it home for me. Nobody can survive without the team. As a leader, I had to lean on subordinates in order to do my job. I would never, ever disrespect anybody from private recruit all the way up based on rank. Everybody has strengths. Everybody has weaknesses. We cannot, as a military, be successful unless we do things as a team. That goes with everything. There have always been rivalries between the army, the navy and the air force. Then you break down the army and there are rivalries between the engineers, the infantry and the armoured corps. Those walls need to come down because when you look now at the combined arms cooperation that's going on in Afghanistan that's leading to the success of most of our missions, then you have to assume it's because we have a good team.

SERGEANT TOWER WAS INVESTED WITH HIS STAR OF MILITARY VALOUR ON 19 FEBRUARY 2007, AND SERGEANT MACDONALD WAS INVESTED WITH HIS STAR OF MILITARY VALOUR ON 13 FEBRUARY 2009, BY THE THEN-GOVERNOR GENERAL AND COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF OF CANADA, HER EXCELLENCY THE RIGHT HONOURABLE MICHAËLLE JEAN, AT THE FAIRMONT CHÂTEAU LAURIER AND RIDEAU HALL, RESPECTIVELY.

## CHAPTER 6

### NOTES

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1 *Canada Gazette*, Part I, Vol. 142, No. 48 (29 November 2008), 3030. See also, “Valour,” *Canadian Military Journal*, Vol. 9, No. 3 (2009), 4-5.

2 *Canada Gazette*, Part I, Vol. 141, No. 8 (24 February 2007), 324. See also, “Valour,” *Canadian Military Journal*, Vol. 7, No. 4 (Winter 2006-2007), 4-5.

3 For his actions on 3 August 2006, Jonathan Hewson Hamilton was Mentioned in Dispatches; his citation appears in Appendix 2.

4 For his service in Afghanistan, Ian Hope received the M.S.C.; his citation appears in Appendix 2.

5 American assistance was also very valuable on other occasions too. As Tower remembers, “When we were getting 3PPCLI ready to deploy on Roto 0 of Op ARCHER, the initial set up of the PRT in Kandahar, a bunch of Americans were brought up from a United States Marine Corps facility in California – Victorville – that trains guys prior to them going to Afghanistan or Iraq. The input they had was very valuable.”

6 Conducted in 2004.

7 That is to say, with none of the vehicles’ external lights turned on.

8 That is to say, the soldiers could visit the Tim Hortons located at KAF.

9 A machine gun mounted in parallel with the main chain gun.

10 For actions performed earlier in his tour, Christopher Jonathan Reid was Mentioned in Dispatches; his citation appears in Appendix 2.

11 For his actions on 3 August 2006, Vaughan Ingram was posthumously Mentioned in Dispatches; his citation appears in Appendix 2.

12 For his actions on 3 August 2006, Jason Joe was Mentioned in Dispatches; his citation appears in Appendix 2.

13 For actions performed earlier in his tour, Paul Daniel Rachynski was Mentioned in Dispatches. On a subsequent tour, he earned the M.M.V. Both his citations appear in Appendix 2.

14 Using both artillery and air assets.

15 For his actions on 3 August 2006, Matthew Parsons was Mentioned in Dispatches; his citation appears in Appendix 2.

16 For his actions on 3 August 2006, Bryce Jeffrey Keller was posthumously awarded the M.M.V.; his citation appears in Appendix 1.

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- 17 For his actions on 3 August 2006, Kevin Yves Royal Dallaire was posthumously Mentioned in Dispatches; his citation appears in Appendix 2.
- 18 For his actions on 3 August 2006, Jason Hoekstra was Mentioned in Dispatches; his citation appears in Appendix 2.
- 19 For his service on a subsequent deployment to Afghanistan, Austin Kane Williams received the M.S.M.; his citation appears in Appendix 2.
- 20 For his actions on 3 August 2006, Tony Wade Perry was Mentioned in Dispatches; his citation appears in Appendix 2.
- 21 That is to say, being unable to effectively command during the battle because of their injuries.
- 22 As the number of Mention in Dispatches cited in this chapter readily attests.

DND, AR2010-0046-01, MCPL MATTHEW MCGREGOR



A CHINOOK AMONGST THE MOUNTAINS.

DND, KA2003-A056D, MCPL BRIAN WALSH



A SOFT-SKINNED ILTIS,  
WITH A SOLDIER PROVIDING REAR SECURITY.



DND, IS2004-0598A, CPL ROBERT BOTTRILL

SAFETY AMONGST DANGER: THE MANY WHITE ROCKS  
DENOTE AREAS FREE OF MINES.



DND, KA2005-R106-0029D, MCPL KEN FENNER

A BRIEF HISTORY OF CONFLICT IN AFGHANISTAN:  
A CANADIAN LAV PASSING A VEHICLE ABANDONED  
DURING THE RUSSIAN OCCUPATION.

DND, AR2006-G007-0057, MCPL YVES GEMUS



AN ORDERS GROUP:  
MANY LEADERS SOLICITED THE INPUT OF  
THEIR FOLLOWERS WHEN MAKING THEIR PLANS.

DND, IS2006-0344, MCPL ROBERT BOTTRILL



INTO THE BREACH:  
CANADIAN SOLDIERS ASSAULTING A BUILDING.





DND, AR2006-H0233-0010D, SGT CAROLE MORISSETTE

PREPARING FOR BATTLE: "BOMBING-UP" A LAV.



DND, AR2006-P005-0002, SGT LOU PENNEY

A LAV ON OPERATIONS, WITH ITS CREW  
POISED TO TAKE ON THE ENEMY.

DND, AR2006-G007-0070, MCPL YVES GEMUS



CONTACT! CANADIAN SOLDIERS  
ENGAGING INSURGENTS.

DND, AR2006-H051-0001D, SGT CAROLE MORISSETTE



COMING DOWN OFF OF AN ADRENALINE SPIKE.





DND, AR2008-K123-48, MCPL KARL MCKAY

A FEMALE SOLDIER ON PATROL:  
ABLE TO GO WHERE OTHERS COULD NOT.



DND, AR2006-B046-0002D, MCPL DOUG DESROCHERS

MEDIUM-LIFT AND HEAVY-IMPACT:  
A CHINOOK AND AN M777 ARTILLERY PIECE.

DND, AR2006-P008-0007, SGT LOU PENNEY



**PARTNERS: A BULLDOZER CLEARING A PATH FOR A LAV DURING OP MEDUSA.**

DND, AR2006-P007-0011, SGT LOU PENNEY



**IN THE WEED(S): A LAV SUPPORTING CANADIAN TROOPS FROM A MARIJUANA FIELD.**



DND, AR2006-H016-0005A, SGT CAROLE MORISSETTE

MEDEVAC: MANY CANADIAN CASUALTIES WERE REMOVED FROM THE BATTLEFIELD BY BLACKHAWK HELICOPTERS.



DND, AR2006-B002-0003D, MCPL DOUG DESROCHERS

HELPING A WOUNDED CANADIAN AT KAF.



# CHAPTER 7

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## *MA'SUM GHAR BY NIGHT*

CAPTAIN MICHAEL JOHN REEKIE

MEDAL OF MILITARY VALOUR ■ 19 AUGUST 2006

*“WE HAD TO GIVE UP OUR OWN SAFETY IN ORDER TO ENGAGE A LARGER NUMBER OF THE ENEMY...”*

On **AUGUST 19, 2006**, while deployed with Alpha Company, 1st Royal Canadian Regiment Battle Group, in Masum Ghar in Afghanistan, Captain Reekie carried out valiant actions during an intense firefight with Taliban insurgents. Displaying superb judgement, he assessed the changing tactical situation and repositioned his vehicle to maximum advantage, enabling the successful interception and defeat of a numerically superior enemy force during the ensuing three-hour firefight. His outstanding initiative prevented the enemy from outflanking the position. Captain Reekie's selfless courage and exceptional leadership undoubtedly saved the lives of numerous Alpha Company soldiers.<sup>1</sup>

MICHAEL JOHN REEKIE WAS BORN AND RAISED IN ABBOTSFORD, BRITISH COLUMBIA. HE ATTENDED THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA IN VANCOUVER AND GRADUATED IN 2004 WITH A BACHELOR'S OF ARTS DEGREE IN HISTORY. AS A YOUTH, HE WAS A MEMBER OF THE ROYAL CANADIAN AIR CADETS. HE SUBSEQUENTLY JOINED THE RESERVES AS A PRIVATE SOLDIER, SPECIFICALLY THE ROYAL WESTMINSTER REGIMENT, AND DULY ACHIEVED THE RANK OF LIEUTENANT. DURING UNIVERSITY, HE DEPLOYED TO BOSNIA IN 2002/03 (OP PALLADIUM, ROTO 11) WITH 1PPCLI AS A RESERVIST. HE EVENTUALLY TRANSFERRED TO THE REGULAR FORCE, JOINING 2PPCLI IN 2005. REEKIE DEPLOYED TO AFGHANISTAN IN LATE JULY 2006 (OP ATHENA, ROTO 2) WITH TASK FORCE 3-06.

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### MAJOR MICHAEL CHARLES WRIGHT

MEDAL OF MILITARY VALOUR ■ 19 AUGUST 2006

*I WAS NOT HESITANT, BUT I WAS CONCERNED ABOUT GOING BECAUSE I KNEW ABOUT THE THREAT DOWN THERE.*

On the night of **AUGUST 19, 2006**, Major Wright of Alpha Company, Task Force Afghanistan, demonstrated outstanding courage and exceptional leadership in combat. Directed to move to the Panjwayi District Centre to enhance security, his troops were rapidly engaged and encircled by a significantly larger enemy force. Under intense fire from small arms and rocket-propelled grenades coming from all directions, he refused reinforcements for safety reasons and led his embattled force to outmanoeuvre the enemy, inflicting serious enemy casualties. His courage and his leadership led to the defeat of a much larger enemy force without a single Canadian Forces casualty.<sup>2</sup>

MICHAEL CHARLES WRIGHT WAS BORN IN ETOBICOKE, ONTARIO AND GREW UP IN NEARBY OAKVILLE. HE JOINED THE CF IN JUNE 1990 AND ATTENDED RMCC UNDER THE REGULAR OFFICER TRAINING PLAN, GRADUATING IN 1994 WITH A BACHELOR'S OF ARTS DEGREE IN HISTORY AND POLITICS. UPON COMPLETING HIS INFANTRY TRAINING, HE WAS POSTED TO 2PPCLI IN WINNIPEG, MANITOBA. HIS FIVE YEARS WITH THE BATTALION INCLUDED A TOUR IN BOSNIA IN 1997 (OP PALLADIUM, ROTO 0) AS A RIFLE PLATOON COMMANDER. IN 1999, HE WAS POSTED TO THE 2<sup>E</sup> BATAILLON, ROYAL 22<sup>E</sup> RÉGIMENT (2R22<sup>ER</sup>) AT LA CITADELLE, QUÉBEC CITY AS AN EXCHANGE OFFICER. DURING THAT POSTING, HE DEPLOYED TO BOSNIA FOR A SECOND TIME, IN 2002 (OP PALLADIUM, ROTO 10), AS THE 2IC OF A RIFLE COMPANY. UPON HIS RETURN TO CANADA, WRIGHT SPENT TWO YEARS AT THE CANADIAN FORCES JOINT HEADQUARTERS IN KINGSTON, ONTARIO AND SERVED FOR TWO MONTHS IN KABUL ON THE THEATRE ACTIVATION TEAM, FROM MAY TO JULY 2003, THAT PREPARED BOTH KABUL AND CAMP JULIEN FOR THE INCOMING 3RCR BG. IN 2004, HE WAS POSTED TO SHILO, MANITOBA WITH 2PPCLI, SERVING FIRST AS ADJUTANT, THEN AS BATTALION OPERATIONS OFFICER, AND FINALLY AS OFFICER COMMANDING ALPHA COMPANY. HE DEPLOYED AGAIN TO AFGHANISTAN (OP ATHENA, ROTO 2), THIS TIME AS A COMPANY COMMANDER, WITH TASK FORCE 3-06.

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*As Canada continued to deploy forces to Afghanistan, 2PPCLI provided an additional company to each of two different battle groups in order to augment their respective strengths: Bravo Company served with the 1PPCLI BG,<sup>3</sup> while later, Alpha Company joined the 1RCR BG. As Major Wright, who commanded the latter company, remembers, such an arrangement caused little friction, largely due to the excellent leadership displayed by the command team. The fact that a Patricia company was serving within a Royal battalion made little difference in the end.*

My first experience with 1RCR was in early December 2005 going out for a computer simulation exercise in Petawawa, Ontario. I had met Lieutenant-Colonel Omer Lavoie,<sup>4</sup> the battle group commander, briefly in Wainwright, Alberta. We were made to feel part of the team by Colonel Lavoie making sure that there were no “cap badge issues.”<sup>5</sup> He did that through personality and through example, not only himself, but, just as importantly, through his RSM, Chief Warrant Officer Robert Girouard, who was killed in Afghanistan in November 2006.<sup>6</sup> When we actually went to Petawawa in March 2006 to do an exercise they spoke to the entire company before we started and there was no doubt in anyone’s mind that we *were not* the “poor cousins from Shilo” or the “Army of the West” or anything like that. We were fully part of the team. There were little things. For instance, he didn’t nickname the battle group or anything like that. We were the Task Force 3-06 Battle Group. We weren’t the 1RCR Battle Group. That was just to show, really, that the battle group was comprised of elements from across the Army. This gave me a lot of confidence. I’ve served with all three infantry regiments in Canada now so I know that when it comes down to it, there’s not that big a difference. There are some cultural differences between the three regiments. Colonel Lavoie made his command philosophy very clear and I felt very comfortable there.

*Pre-deployment training has often been cited as a crucial factor in the success of operations in Afghanistan.<sup>7</sup> Both Major Wright and Captain Reekie were particularly grateful for the intense preparations prior to their tour, all of which ultimately made their troops battle ready. Major Wright felt that the skills learned before leaving Canada gave his soldiers the self-assurance they needed to confront a formidable, resilient, and often unpredictable, enemy.*

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I took command of the company in January 2006. I was extremely fortunate because the company was already very well-trained. They had been involved as the enemy force in the brigade training event in Wainwright the previous fall, the first Exercise MAPLE GUARDIAN.<sup>8</sup> They were very good at employing the LAV, the mechanized drills, and were very confident with the vehicle. So the company was already operating at a very high level. When I took over the company, they were already pretty mature in terms of experience, and particularly field time.

In January/February, we ran some courses to continue building up our LAV skills, particularly in order to get the ratios that we wanted for Afghanistan in terms of drivers, crew commanders and gunners. At the same time, we were doing some professional development related to the theatre in general – counter-insurgency [COIN] and the contemporary operating environment – just to get the soldiers ready. That was the individual training. Our collective training started in March with an exercise in Shilo, Manitoba where we basically did live-fire exercises up to platoon-level in order to get us to arrive at Exercise THUNDERING BEAR, which was the validation exercise for 2 CMBG [2 Canadian Mechanized Brigade Group]. That was the last two weeks of March 2006 in Petawawa, Ontario. Third Battalion RCR set up a fantastic set of ranges for us there. It was outstanding. They built an actual village based on feedback from guys who had been in Afghanistan ... going through narrow corridors and urban settings and they had music playing and burning hay and things like that. It was good for realism, for getting everyone focused. It was good for us because we were able to kind of prove ourselves competent and good to go.

Afterwards, we, the command team comprised of the CO and the sub-unit commanders in the battle group, went on a tactical reconnaissance to Afghanistan where we spent five days at Camp Nathan Smith, the PRT location in Kandahar City, and about five days outside the wire. It was fortunate that the company I was taking over from was led by Major Nick Grimshaw,<sup>9</sup> who was the company commander from 2PPCLI working with 1PPCLI and also a very good friend of mine. So I got to go out in the area a little bit



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with him. That reconnaissance gave me a good idea of the operating environment there, but at the time, the threat hadn't really built-up to what it would build-up to over the summer of 2006.

Immediately upon returning from Afghanistan, we went out to Wainwright for about a month for our own Exercise MAPLE GUARDIAN. Wainwright was a pretty good experience. I think again the company proved itself to be very competent and tactically sound.

I was very confident in the abilities of our team. I knew what was happening overseas and that it was inevitable that we would come in contact with the enemy. I remember wondering while I was on leave how long it would take and what my initial reaction would be and what the team's initial reaction would be. In terms of our mechanized skills – particularly in the LAV – we were probably the best trained LAV company to go over there. And again, that's a lot of credit to the previous company commander, Major Dave Beyer, and the company sergeant-major, Master Warrant Officer John Hooyer,<sup>10</sup> who had a massive *Excel* spreadsheet to make sure that every soldier in the company that was going over there had the skills that were required ... and redundancy as well in positions.

We also benefited from the fact that at CMTC they were trying to inject some reality into the training. The best information was coming from the soldiers. We were lucky in that there was a company from our battalion overseas. The soldiers would come back on leave to Canada and they would speak formally to my company. There were also numerous times when they would come back and just informally talk to their peers and give them some updates as to what was happening.

*During the pre-deployment phase, there were a few leadership challenges. Major Wright remembers:*

One of my platoon commanders was replaced right before our final leave period. So I had a new platoon commander come in right at the last minute who had to do some extra training before going overseas. One of the biggest advantages I had though was my company sergeant-major, Hooyer. By the time I took over, he had been

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the company sergeant-major for a year and a half and knew it inside and out. He was a very charismatic guy and a very personable man. He was able to relate to soldiers on a personal level. He had a tremendous amount of respect from the troops, the senior NCOs, and the officers as well. I first met him in 1995 when he was a sergeant in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion PPCLI when it was in Winnipeg. He also had time in the Canadian Airborne Regiment. He was in Somalia.<sup>11</sup> He had been to Bosnia a few times. He was a mountain operations instructor. He is the guy, both in terms of his looks and his bearing, who was the typical infantry company sergeant-major. He was tall and fit. He had the right type of relationship with the soldiers. He was respected, but not feared. They were able to joke around with him, but knew where the line was. He very much provided an example for the NCOs ... particularly the sergeants in the company. He helped them out a lot. He took the time to mentor them.

*Captain Reekie also had high praise for the pre-deployment training; his soldiers were fortunate in that they had had the opportunity to participate in two different and intense training regimens.*

In 2005/2006, 2PPCLI was designated the army's Operational Reserve. We were to train two high-readiness companies, but without a theatre to which to deploy. By the time that we received notice that we would deploy to Afghanistan, we had already done one set of work-ups to bring us up to that Operational Reserve level. Once it was announced that we would deploy with 1RCR, we commenced training again, in January 2006, with them.

It didn't necessarily seem so at the time but certainly, in hindsight, we were very fortunate in that we actually did two sets of work-up trainings. You're always learning new things in training, but by spending so much time in the field, we had a well-integrated company. We had really good camaraderie within Alpha Company and everybody knew everybody else. We really didn't change the TO&E [Table of Organization & Equipment] during that year and a half timeframe at all. So we weren't really bringing new guys into the company and guys weren't leaving. It was fairly well intact in that we had probably six months out of twelve in the field training, which is really good

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just in terms of the state that we were in by the time we deployed to Afghanistan. Things were pretty slick across the company.

At the time, Canada was still very early into its Kandahar deployment, so we only had the experience of 1PPCLI to draw from. In terms of the actual situation on the ground, we didn't have the understanding that we had in a place like Bosnia, where Canada had been for 15 years. But in terms of the training itself, it was very good. Intelligence briefings to the company in Canada prior to deploying gave us an understanding of the situation on the ground in Afghanistan and of the role of the 1PPCLI Battle Group, allowing us to focus our training to better suit us for that situation. I would say that across the company, soldiers were very confident. Morale was very high and the troops were very excited to deploy.

*The deployment was staggered over a number of weeks because the air capability to fly in hundreds of troops at any one time was not available. Once on the ground, Major Wright was surprised to find an entirely different situation facing his soldiers from what he had witnessed during his earlier ten-day tactical reconnaissance.*

The majority of the company deployed on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of August 2006. In the weeks leading up to our deployment, from what we could see on open source intelligence, things were heating up quite a bit in Afghanistan. Casualties were mounting. As we were flying over, we stopped for fuel at the Glasgow Airport and somebody got on the computer and saw that Corporal Christopher Reid<sup>12</sup> from 1PPCLI had been killed. By the time we got to the Theatre Support Element, located "somewhere in the Middle East," they had announced that three more Canadian soldiers – it was the White School incident on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of August – had been killed and numerous others injured.<sup>13</sup> It was 45 degrees when we finally arrived at the Theatre Support Element. You sweat through your clothes immediately. There was a little bit of stress there as you heard that news about the casualties and then you quickly got ready to jump on the Herc into Afghanistan. With the jet lag, having said goodbye to your family, and hearing what had happened in Afghanistan, there was a little bit of trepidation there.

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It was an incredibly quick turnaround. From the time we got off the Airbus from Canada, got our ballistic plates, loaded up our magazines, and got on the Herc, it was probably about an hour to an hour and a half. We got into Afghanistan and did two or three days of update training at the Kandahar Airfield about medical procedures, IED threats, and things like that in theatre. Then Bravo Company started the handover with us. Major Grimshaw came into camp and gave me and the leadership – sergeants and above – a little update as to operations they had been doing and the threat picture. It was on the 8<sup>th</sup> of August that we moved out to Patrol Base Wilson in the Zharey District. Patrol Base Wilson was north of Highway One and to the south was more or less the frontline of the Taliban. It wasn't in enemy territory, but it wasn't too far from it. Within Kandahar Province, there are a number of districts. Each of these has a district centre with a district leader who has an office and the chief of police has an office as well. There is also a garrison of police in location. Where the district leader operates is where the Shura<sup>14</sup> – the elders for the district – have meetings and make decisions. It's kind of like a city hall or a county office in Canadian terms. Knowing the “ins” and “outs” of the Shuras, and understanding the tribal dynamics in the various districts, was just as important operationally as having eyes on the enemy's movements.

It wasn't long before we had our first casualty. On 9 August, Master Corporal Jeff Walsh was killed in an accidental shooting. Less than 24 hours outside the wire and all of a sudden we had a casualty, which was not by enemy fire. That was obviously a huge shock. Master Corporal Walsh was very well-respected in the company. He was one of the few guys with previous experience in Afghanistan.

*Captain Reekie also recalled the operational challenges the company faced upon its arrival in theatre:*

The Zharey and Panjwai Districts were very much Taliban-controlled. We did not control ground outside of Patrol Base Wilson itself. It wasn't a particularly good situation. The Afghan National Security Forces [ANSF] in that area were probably on the verge of collapse and they certainly weren't fighting a very defensive battle. The

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PPCLI had done several large operations inside this district in July of 2006, which were successful in disrupting and stunting the Taliban, but the Taliban continued to flow fighters into that area at the time. When we got there, we were certainly outnumbered in terms of Taliban fighters to coalition forces in those two districts. We really had a very limited coalition presence. We had no freedom of movement south of Highway One. Any move at all was a very deliberate combat operation. Even a convoy was a combat operation because the enemy had such a consolidated control of that territory at the time. The IED threat was certainly not what it is now [*as of mid-2009 – Eds.*], but there were certainly IEDs. But there were also very large direct fire and indirect fire threats. We were being mortared daily at Patrol Base Wilson in August of 2006. It certainly took its toll. Pretty much every convoy that went through just south on Highway One was ambushed as well by insurgents.

We were in contact within hours of arriving at Patrol Base Wilson, so it was right into the fire, but there were some later benefits to that. Our soldiers had their game faces on right away because there was no alternative to it. So in terms of their readiness, they were “already there.” If there was a positive from that, it was that there was no sort of “slow roll” into it.<sup>15</sup> They were right into it and everything else was really better from then on.

*With the emotional wrench of going overseas, coupled with news of four Canadian fatalities on 3 August and then the tragic loss of Master Corporal Walsh, morale suffered noticeably, but Major Wright realized that there was nothing for the troops to do but continue on and remain focused on the mission.*

With all these things happening at once, it was like drinking from a fire hose. We were just trying to learn the Area of Operations itself, personalities – being introduced to the chief of police and the district leader – finding out there were some areas that we weren’t going to have time to go to because of the threat, and adjusting to the climate as well. So, it was adding some stress, but I did have the confidence in the company from the training that we’d gone through and from the leadership that we had. And again, Company Sergeant-Major Hooyer was outstanding in talking to the soldiers.

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I think you could probably sense tension amongst the company, and so he did a lot to try to get the guys at ease, but also to make sure that they knew we were playing for real now.

The first time we were in contact, we were driving back to Patrol Base Wilson and we went through an ambush. At the time, we weren't yet a full LAV company. We had about seven LAVs and a bunch of the G-Wagons and Mercedes Jeeps. Giving orders before going out, we were saying that if we come under contact, all the vehicles will do certain things, one will do this, one will do that, and so on. Contact happened. I was trying to concentrate on where the Taliban were. My gunner was firing away at the enemy. I just glanced over and saw certain vehicles exactly where they were supposed to be, exactly as we had practised in Wainwright and then as it had been detailed in orders. It happened seamlessly without anything being said over the radio. That was good to see.

*On 19 August, Major Wright received orders that started in motion a chain of events that eventually led to the incident for which several members of his company would be decorated, including himself.*

From Patrol Base Wilson, as the crow flies, directly five kilometres south of us, was the Panjwai District Centre at the foot of Ma'sum Ghar, right by the town of Bazar-e panjwa'i, the largest town in Panjwai. From our observation posts at Patrol Base Wilson, we could see Ma'sum Ghar. It's a high feature that starts with a hill about 50 metres from the PDC and it goes up to what you'd call a mountain ... a little ridge. On the one side it flattens out. There were a couple of compounds there. They were later torn down when we moved in for the forward operating base. There are probably about 100 metres of grape fields and then the Arghandab River, in which there is no water except for about six weeks of the year. To the south, there are grape fields for almost as far as the eye can see until the next high feature, with a dirt road going along.

For a few nights leading up to the 19<sup>th</sup> we could see firefights of increasing intensity happening in Ma'sum Ghar. You'd go up to the observation post at night and see what was happening. We knew it was

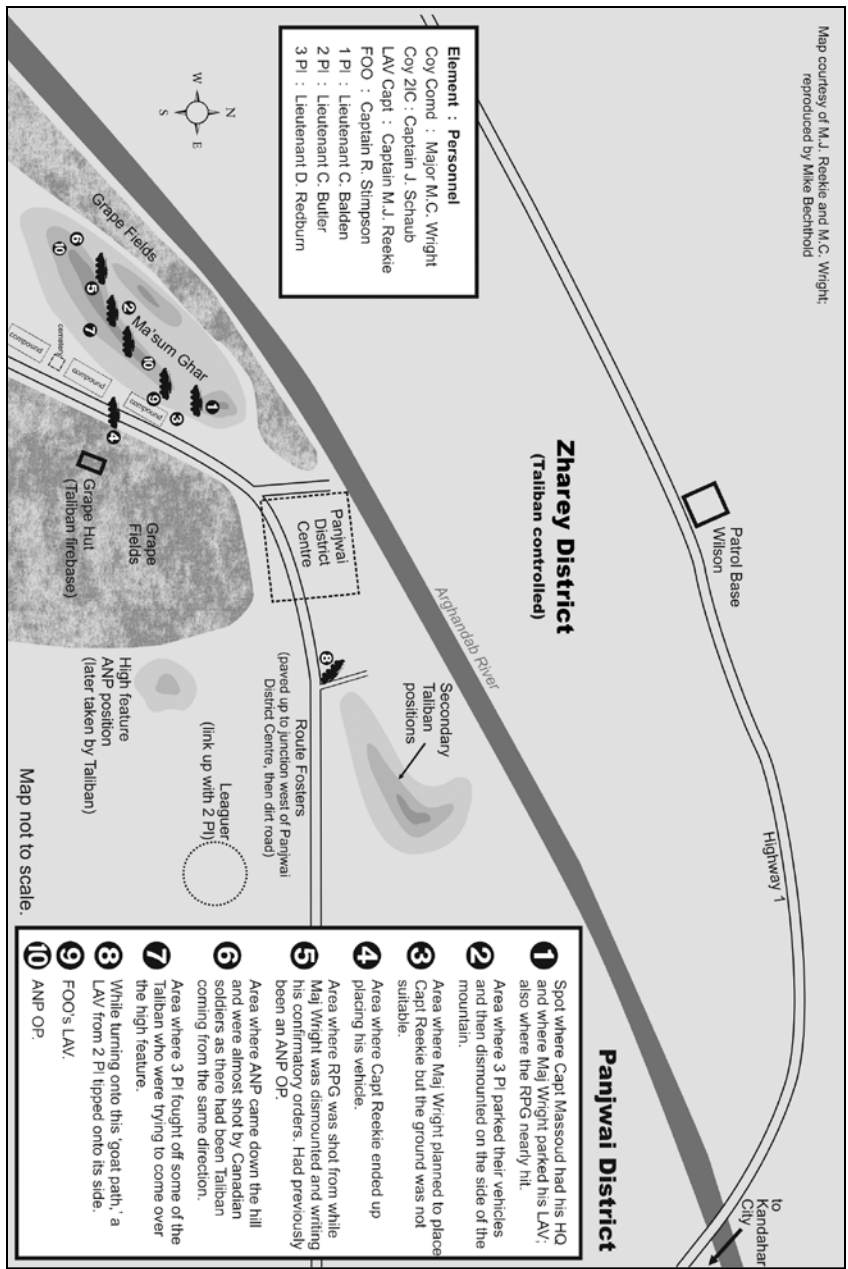
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between the ANA and the ANP at Ma'sum Ghar, and the Taliban. The intelligence that was being received was that the Taliban were trying to make a push for the Panjwai District Centre. On the morning of the 19<sup>th</sup>, Colonel Lavoie phoned up on the satellite phone and instructed me to move to Ma'sum Ghar and bolster and reinforce the ANA and the ANP before last light that evening.

I was not hesitant, but I was concerned about going because I knew about the threat down there. I had only been down there once and other than the crew in my vehicle, no one else from the company had been down there and had never actually walked the ground that we were going to be going into. I gave a warning order some time before noon and then orders to move down there in mid-afternoon. A platoon remained back at Patrol Base Wilson to provide security there and we decided just to take one platoon ... 3 Platoon, commanded by Lieutenant Duncan Redburn. We started to move down to Ma'sum Ghar. At that time, it was a long route we had to take, through the first part of Kandahar City and then down Route Fosters.<sup>16</sup> There was me, my forward observation officer, Captain Ryan Stimpson, my LAV captain,<sup>17</sup> Mike Reekie, with his crew, and 3 Platoon. I'd say we were probably about five LAVs with an assortment of G-Wagons as well.

When we got there, I thought that we were just going to reinforce the ANA and the ANP. We didn't have any hard intelligence as to the direction of the attack. What I hoped to accomplish that night was to determine where the Taliban were firing their mortars from, which were impacting at Patrol Base Wilson, and neutralize them. So I put the forward observation officer in a good spot for observation where he could see across the river, because we were facing north looking at the White School and up towards Patrol Base Wilson. I put 3 Platoon also facing north. I didn't have much time to place them so I basically gave Lieutenant Redburn some instructions and told him to go start placing his guys and then I'd come and see him. Captain Reekie actually couldn't get his vehicle up to where I thought I was going to place him. However, I realized there were large open grape fields to the south that were our back door. I had to put someone around there.

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MAP 3 – OVERVIEW OF THE ACTION AT MA'SUM GHAR



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I spoke to Captain Massoud from the ANP. He didn't wear a uniform. He basically had a cell phone and an AK-47. When I went to see him that night, he had a *Dolce & Gabbana* hat on. It wasn't exactly what you'd expect from a member of the police or the army. He showed me onto Ma'sum Ghar where they had ANP and ANA observation posts. I asked him about where he expected a threat to come from. He never said anything about the south, maybe because I was leading him. I was asking him about the other side of the river, but he definitely never said anything about the south. I said to Captain Reekie, "Go there and cover our back." Where he ended up going was probably about 300 to 400 metres farther than I imagined he was going. He realized that from where I was originally going to place him, he couldn't see well enough because there was a rise in the road. By him moving to that new location, he was able to stop the main wave of the attack and stop guys who would have ended up coming onto 3 Platoon's rib.

I was able to go over to 3 Platoon and talk to Lieutenant Redburn to find out where he was placing his soldiers. It was getting late. It was close to last light at that time. I had given initial orders to everyone – the orders that I'd given at Patrol Base Wilson and the orders that I'd given on the position – then went back to our location right by Captain Massoud's control post, which I think he was using. I can't remember if it was a tent or just a little area in the rocks. I was just sitting down to write confirmatory orders when I heard a "whoosh." I looked up and I could actually see the RPG flying by ... and it was coming from an area that, ten minutes earlier, Massoud had told me was an ANP observation post! My signaller, Corporal Jeff Burtch, and I talked about it for the rest of the tour because I couldn't remember exactly how close it came. Jeff said it actually landed about five feet behind us but didn't detonate. RPGs being fired at us by guys in an area that had previously been an ANP observation post ... things weren't looking good. Shortly after that, there was small arms fire and more RPGs. Three Platoon, with a number of soldiers dismounted, were actually pinned down at one point. It was all coming from the higher areas of Ma'sum Ghar. I got into the vehicle to get on the radio to try to get some better situational awareness of what was happening. Sergeant-Major

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Hooyer, at the time, came up in a G-Wagon and he was, being the typical company sergeant-major, crouching behind a rock trying to see what was happening and then picking out where the enemy was. But RPGs were being fired, so I yelled at him to get into the LAV for protection. I'm glad I wasn't in the back of the LAV because I think we had about seven people; there were the three people who had been in the G-Wagon as well as my crew there.

I don't recall what the timing was, but for the next couple of hours we were engaged in a firefight. My guys and 3 Platoon were specifically engaged with the Taliban that were trying to come over the top of Ma'sum Ghar. I was looking through the sights as my gunner was firing at the guys who kept coming over some rocks until my men made all the rocks go away and probably the Taliban as well. At the same time, Captain Reekie was telling us about these waves of Taliban. As he kept reporting them, we realized there were about 45 or 50. They were coming from the grape fields to the south.

*Having been sent to a southern position to provide security, Captain Reekie and his LAV crew quickly and unexpectedly found themselves in close contact with a large number of Taliban forces:*

To be honest, initially I was disappointed with having been placed in the south because I also thought the main effort would be from the north. But I was placed to the south to provide security and to reinforce the two southern Afghan positions. My LAV was positioned on a road that's called Route Fosters. Initially we tried to position ourselves on the mountain but the terrain was too rough. We couldn't get an angle to get the LAV in a firing position there. So we were right on the road. The Taliban were coming from our south and they were sweeping up the mountain on our flank, putting themselves in a position higher than our forces on the north side of the mountain. They had a good position, making it very tenuous for our platoon that was in that location. So I pushed my vehicle farther south to try and cut off their access up onto the mountain and that put us sort of into the Taliban's route of advance. We were fairly exposed in that position because we were on the road. We couldn't find a piece of covered ground due to the terrain. On the left of the

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road were all grape vines and on the right we had the mountain going up. We couldn't get up on the mountain because of the steep slope and there were also mud-wall compounds built into the side of it. So our ability to manoeuvre was very limited to advancing up and down the road, but nonetheless, my driver was very skilled, and kept us moving. It helped as well that we had the cover of darkness. They clearly knew we were on the road – the LAV is not a quiet machine – but they could never tell exactly where we were. So that prevented us from being hit by any RPGs, which was good, and it allowed us to use that road as our killing zone because they had to cross it.

In the first phase, as it started, we were back where we could engage some guys from a relatively safe position, but it was apparent from the radio traffic that we were getting from the soldiers on the other side of the hill that they were starting to get guys coming up too. And, as we were seeing guys come through here, it was clear tactically what they were doing ... crossing the road and then going up the mountain to attack. So we really had to get into a more advanced position. We had to move forward to stop that. We had to give up our own safety in order to engage a larger number of the enemy who were using this piece of ground. I think it was important. I made an assessment in my head. It was all very much automatic and from training. We had done it a thousand times before. It really was no different than training. Yes, there were six of us and we would be put in greater danger in that area, but there were 45 soldiers on the other side of the hill that would be in *much greater* danger if we did not go forward. So the simple numbers sort of dictated that we had to advance to engage the enemy before they were able to flank the dismounted elements, who were out of their LAVs and didn't have armoured protection. I think the guys were saying to themselves, "This is necessary and this is my training."

To be honest, there was probably that feeling of bloodlust you get in combat. They were into it. When you're on that adrenaline spike, you're really good to go, but when it's over, you crash really hard. When we came back in the morning after everything was done, it was a struggle to keep awake and to keep everybody else awake. It's

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not that anybody is letting their guard down or becoming lazy or complacent. It's a physical reaction to having eight hours worth of adrenaline expended and then that's it. When we did pull out just to rearm, we were drinking three bottles of water. I hadn't realized up to then, but it was 45 degrees out. You're fighting in the LAV and it's really hot.

If there's one thing that I really want to make a point of, it's that everything we did was very much as a crew. Every member of that crew that night was recognized formally for their valour, which I think is a fairly unique circumstance. All the work-up training was with that same crew, so I had been with these guys for a long time. I knew them very well and we were tight. That cohesion that the training had built for us definitely allowed us to be successful that night. We were in a situation where we were fighting 360 degrees. The enemy would have come around our vehicle. Almost every guy in the crew was fighting in a different direction, with our backs together. We knew what everybody else was doing. We trusted everybody else was doing their job. That clearly paid dividends for us. I did not honestly think that we would come out of that situation alive and it was only due to the skill of our crew that we did – and by the grace of God – but those guys are very good soldiers and they fought very hard.

I had Corporal Chad Chevrefils as my driver. Because some equipment broke on the patrol down, and without my knowledge, he actually had his hatch open and had his head out and had his NVG on and was trying to identify Taliban fighters as they came towards us. So he had no weapon that he could fire from his position in the hatch, and he was manoeuvring the LAV up and down with his head totally exposed, trying to identify these insurgents for us. He got an M.M.V. for that.<sup>18</sup>

Enemy sections were attacking from the front and then there were a few individuals that had infiltrated the right. There was a large volume of enemy fire but it was not accurate. They had no night vision capability. They could never precisely locate our vehicle. We walked away from it totally unscathed, which again really talks to the skill of the driver manoeuvring the LAV and the skill of the rest

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of the crew firing from the LAV, suppressing enemy fire and keeping them dislocated enough that they could not keep their heads up long enough to firmly identify us. Instead, they were firing over our head or firing as quickly as possible and then getting back down without taking a well-aimed shot.

Myself and Sergeant Dan Holley<sup>19</sup> were in the crew. Sergeant Holley was my 2IC and the company weapons commander. We were taking turns firing the chain gun on the LAV with the other guy up with the NVG on and firing the pintle-mounted machine gun.<sup>20</sup> So that way, we directed the main armament down the road engaging the targets that Corporal Chevrefils was observing. They were advancing in section strength. We would switch one-up and one-down because you can only look at the thermal site in the LAV for about half an hour before your eyes start to go a bit buggy. You need to take a break so that you don't miss something. The two of us were working as one in the turret of the vehicle. In the back of the vehicle I had my other three soldiers – Corporal Nigel Gregg,<sup>21</sup> Private Timmy Wilkins<sup>22</sup> and Corporal Will Elliott.<sup>23</sup> Private Wilkins had a general purpose machine gun in the left sentry hatch engaging an enemy fire base about 75 metres to our left off the road. He was fighting that piece of the battle. Corporal Gregg and Corporal Elliott were on the right side with their C7s engaging guys as they swept around the mountain and into the compounds trying to flank us on that side. So they were picking guys off on that part. Cohesion was key. Everybody was working together ... driver, gunner, crew commander, guys in the back loading ammunition, fighting off the flanks, calling in targets for the turret to engage. It was a good, tight team. If there's one thing that I was really proud of at the end of the day, it was not just being awarded the Medal of Military Valour, but having had the honour to serve with such an excellent group of Canadian soldiers.

That phase of the battle lasted approximately three hours, until about midnight, at which point we were pretty low on ammunition. We had broken the back of the Taliban, so they called off that attack from the south.

*Being in overall command, Major Wright listened intensely over the radio to the ongoing battle to the south:*

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As I was hearing that, I was a little bit concerned because we hadn't thought anything was going to be coming from the south. I remember telling the guys that we still had to keep focused on the north because there could be something up there as well. I didn't have radio contact with the CO or with the 2IC back in Kandahar Airfield because of the area that we were in. We didn't have clear communications. Most of the communications were going to my company 2IC back at Patrol Base Wilson and he was relaying the information that we had.

We were getting some intelligence reports as to how many enemy was in the area. We were also starting to run low on ammunition in the vehicles. So, I remember talking to the CO with a relay through my company 2IC over the radio and expressing concern about the amount of ammunition we had left. He was concerned about the number of enemy that we were encountering. By that time it was dark and I didn't want anyone else trying to reach us because there was the danger of vehicles tipping over and mass confusion with them trying to get to us. So I said, "I don't want anyone else coming in." Eventually, we made the decision that we would withdraw off the position and meet up with 2 Platoon from Patrol Base Wilson and they would bring us an ammunition resupply. Again, I don't recall the exact timeline, but we had definitely been in a firefight for a couple of hours by this time.

I gave the order to withdraw. Captain Reekie and his crew were the only guys who were seeing sections of Taliban cross the road; they were mowed down as they did. Three Platoon was reporting some Taliban on the high ground. We were pretty confident as we were withdrawing that there was going to be no mass Taliban attack onto the position and that we had pretty much eliminated them there. Where Captain Massoud and his guys went, I have no idea. I remember the CO saying on the radio, "Coordinate your withdrawal with them." I looked around and had no idea if the ANP were still there or exactly how I was going to do that. During the first few minutes of the contact, I told my guys to make sure they didn't fire on the ANP. As the Taliban started their attack, the ANP were running from position to position. We couldn't just fire at anything that moved. At one point, there was a truck that came over a hill and was

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initially fired at by 3 Platoon until they immediately realized, "Shit! That's the police. We can't fire at them!" We were able to talk to the police the following morning at the district centre, but in terms of actual coordination, it was extremely difficult. We weren't on the same radio frequency or anything like that.

Three Platoon was going to be the first to withdraw from the position because they were going to come through us and we were going to provide cover for them. It wasn't a pretty withdrawal by any means because we had not only LAVs, but G-Wagons. Whereas the LAVs have very good night vision equipment, for the G-Wagons, it's guys driving with NVGs, with glare coming off the windshield. As well, my vehicle got stuck on a rock because we were being extra careful about not falling into the wadi on the way out. As we were getting off that rock, I was concerned about being hit by an RPG or small arms fire because there were grape fields about 15 metres to our north. But eventually we got everyone out.

It was really confusing going through the built-up area of Bazar-e panjwa'i. There was a little market there. I remember seeing a guy on a rooftop and with the night vision goggles it was difficult to tell what he was wearing. To this day, I always wonder if he was Taliban and if I should have shot him on the way by. But I couldn't tell. At that time, 2 Platoon was coming down Route Fosters and they were starting to come under contact as well. So, we set up a *rendez-vous* point with them outside of Bazar-e panjwa'i and linked up with them, did an ammunition redistribution, and got orders to move back in. We got the order because the intelligence coming in said that an area to the east of Bazar-e panjwa'i had a number of Taliban going into it.

At the same time, two of the G-Wagons that 3 Platoon had wouldn't start up. We couldn't wait any longer. I had to order that everything be taken out of the vehicles, specifically ammunition and, of course, all the radios. So we stripped everything and loaded the stuff into the remaining vehicles that we had and then started to move back into Bazar-e panjwa'i. It was just at the entranceway where we were going to take a small road, which, when I saw it in daylight later,

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I'm glad we didn't go much farther than we did ... the second vehicle from 2 Platoon, as they turned down the road, tipped over and luckily no one was seriously hurt, although I believe somebody broke their wrist. Obviously the concern was that we were coming under contact from the high feature to our right and we had a vehicle that was tipped over on its side. So Sergeant Vince Adams jumped out. He got out there and got it done. He got everyone calmed down. He arranged for LAVs to go in and put the tipped-over LAV back on its wheels. For that, he ended up being given a Mention in Dispatches.<sup>24</sup> The calm that he showed under fire was absolutely incredible. At the same time that was happening, again with not being able to talk directly to the CO, we were getting very sporadic reports of, "Ten Taliban here. 20 Taliban here. 30 Taliban here." They were all pretty well in the area directly north of us ... where we were supposed to go.

*Captain Reekie distinctly remembers that specific moment:*

We pushed through under contact but we had the upper hand by this point. Then we pushed north to go clear another mountain pass just north of the village of Bazar-e panjwa'i where we were starting to get intelligence reports that insurgent fighters were massing in the high ground. As we were going north, the situation was starting to be better developed by our intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance assets to the point where it became apparent to Major Wright that we were actually proceeding into a kill zone of approximately another company worth of enemy. It looked like they had three pretty good positions, so we halted the advance and waited until first light, at which point they had dispersed.

*Continuing on from Major Wright's perspective:*

It was very low light conditions. I remember saying to my company 2IC on the radio, "Pay very close attention to the words that I'm saying because you have to say them back to the CO exactly as I have said them. We are going on an unknown route in low light conditions into a potential..." and I can't remember if I said "Taliban platoon" or "company position." "I recommend that we do not do this." It was just not a good idea that we were going up there and I



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was quite concerned that we were going to be travelling single file into an area we'd never been before ... on this goat path. The orders eventually came back, the CO concurred, and we were to withdraw back to the area where we had left our G-Wagons and remain there until first light, which at that time was probably about 0400 in the morning and was not that far away. We linked back up with the G-Wagons. Somehow we got them working. It was really, at that point, the first time I had the opportunity to sit back and say, "Holy crap! I guess I have been in contact now and in combat."

At that point, the sun was just starting to come up. Then we got the order to move back into Bazar-e panjwa'i because I think there was information coming through the ANA and the ANP that some of their men were injured. So I was a little bit hesitant again, going back into the town that we had gone through the night before. As we were doing so, I took one of the platoons with me, leaving Captain Reekie back at the area in the desert – at the leaguer<sup>25</sup> – that we had set up. We actually saw some Taliban bodies on the road going in there. They are very, very good about picking up their dead and about making it seem like they'd never been there. So it was quite significant that there were still bodies there. We didn't really know it at the time because it was only a week and a half into our tour, but by the end of the tour, we had found out that there was actually an agreement between the elders in Panjwai to allow the Taliban to come in at a later time and recover their bodies to give them a proper burial. We went into the district centre. There were guys walking around with AK-47s with no uniforms. I remember giving Colonel Lavoie a sit rep [situation report] on the radio and he said that was probably the point that he was most concerned because it was reporting a bit like a "Wild Wild West" situation. I had brought my medic in with me as well, trying to help out and figure out what ANA and what ANP were injured. We were trying to get them into our vehicles, but they loaded all their injured guys into a flatbed pickup truck. We escorted them halfway up to Kandahar City and then they took off on their own. Once we had them moved back, we linked up with the LAV captain and the rest of the platoon and made our way back to Patrol Base Wilson. That was, more or less, the end of the contact.

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*Major Wright was never quite sure how many Taliban the company had faced because of conflicting reports.*

I have no idea how many were actually there. I always say that Afghan math isn't an exact science. The company probably saw somewhere around 70 to 100, but that's guesswork. We've heard a few times that there were 200. The Governor of Kandahar at one point said, "Oh yes ... you've killed 400 people and saved the Panjwai District Centre," which I don't believe.<sup>26</sup> There were probably about 200 that came to attack. I know that *The Globe and Mail* reported that there were 72 Taliban killed that night. Like I said, we didn't have any firm counts of either the enemy who were dead or the number that attacked.

*Captain Reekie was likewise unaware of the number of Taliban casualties, yet whatever their number, the Canadians had dealt them a stinging defeat and prepared the way for further operations:*

We had no injuries and nobody killed in that operation, which was miraculous really. The Taliban casualties were very heavy, and this was good in terms of hampering their combat power in that region. This helped us set the conditions for Operation MEDUSA, which was the big subsequent brigade-level clearance of Bazar-e panjwa'i.<sup>27</sup>

*Once this "baptism of fire" was over, Major Wright noticed an upsurge in the morale of his troops.*

It gave us a lot of confidence because we didn't have any casualties that evening. Obviously the death of Master Corporal Walsh at the beginning of the tour was a big shock, but we had reacted well to the enemy ambushes we'd been under. I think the guys probably felt that it had been a pretty dicey situation with 3 Platoon being dismounted and pinned down by fire. But at the end, I think the guys felt that they had kicked ass. I know Captain Reekie's crew was on cloud nine because they'd seen waves of Taliban and had been able to stop their attack.

*Captain Reekie saw other beneficial results:*

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The experience validated our training too. The training is just as intense. The only thing different is that it was live rounds. We came away from that with even greater confidence in what we'd done to train and prepare. It also gave us even greater confidence in the vehicle itself and the armament it possessed. And certainly it gave us supreme confidence in each other.

*Reekie also felt some important inroads had been made in terms of the relationship with the local population.*

It was a definite victory for us in terms of cementing our relationship with the Afghan National Security Forces ... to know that we wouldn't leave them out there on their own when they needed assistance. And I guess, most importantly, it helped with the people there as well who saw that we came and we repelled the Taliban from taking their village. We actually stayed there and to this day [*as of mid-2009 – Eds.*], Canada has a very large FOB in Ma'sum Ghar.

It was very good for us to work with them and to meet Afghans that felt strongly about the defence of their country and about the direction that they were trying to take their country. Certainly, in the south it's a little easier to become discouraged when the only locals that you meet are insurgents or those supporting the insurgents. The Afghan National Security Forces were good and we worked with them very closely, from the officer commanding the Afghan National Army company and his counterpart, the battalion commander, down to the pile of soldiers that we were going on patrol together with. That part was very good. With the Afghan National Police, there were some units that were very good, very fierce fighters, like Captain Massoud's unit that fought with us that night. But there were certainly some of the district Afghan police at that time that were not very professional. They had very devious loyalty and were not a professional security force by any means. They had a whole range, I guess, within the Afghan National Police, but the Army was fairly professional across the board.

*Both Captain Reekie and Major Wright felt that the deployment to Afghanistan afforded them a solid opportunity to hone their leadership*

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*skills. Reekie suggested that, for him, being with his soldiers was the key to his leadership style.*

We lived in that LAV. That was our only home. We didn't have shelter or somewhere where we had quarters or nice bed spaces. We lived in a vehicle. We all slept in the vehicle or right around the vehicle. And that certainly helped in terms of integration. When the soldiers see you sharing hardships with them, to see you as one of them as opposed to some distant, aloof kind of guy, I think that helps build credibility. I have heard of different leadership models. One is where the officer should stay aloof so the troops don't get to see his flaws. I think in that kind of situation that we were in, if you're going to be flawed, they're going to see it because there is nowhere for you to hide.

I was very great friends with the company 2IC, Captain Jordan Schaub. We worked very closely together on all aspects and we had a very close relationship with our company commander, Major Mike Wright, too. He included us more than other company commanders would. We learned a great deal from him and he was an exceptional leader. He really developed us, myself and the company 2IC, I think, by including us so much in his thought process and his planning process.

One of the advantages we had going right into the fire was that we never had issues with battle complacency. We never had guys complaining about having to keep their body armour or their helmets on. We never had issues with guys being lazy and not wanting to clean their weapons or do vehicle maintenance because they knew that that vehicle or that weapon would save their life. They had their game face on for that six months. The last part of the tour was more of a defensive phase, but we were still very busy. It wasn't down time. We certainly never had issues with complacency.

*When they learned that they had been awarded the M.M.V., both Major Wright and Captain Reekie were pleased that others in the company were also being recognized. Major Wright was reluctant to have the news about his award made public until it was known that others had been recognized as well.*

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I knew immediately that Captain Mike Reekie and his crew were going to be put up for some form of formal recognition. In the end, Captain Reekie and his driver, Corporal Chevrefils, received the Medal of Military Valour, and the rest of Mike's crew received a Mention in Dispatches. The thing that got Chevrefils his Medal of Military Valour, as mentioned by Captain Reekie, was that a particular piece of equipment wasn't working so he was actually opening his hatch to identify the enemy ... exposing himself to fire to let the guys know who to aim for! It was pretty impressive. There's a humble Manitoba boy who didn't want any of the attention. As for my award, I figured there would be some kind of announcement and I didn't feel comfortable going back and saying, "Hey, I am going to be awarded the Medal of Military Valour!" especially knowing that there were still awards pending for some other guys in the company.

I was proud and humbled as well to receive the award because I knew that my leadership helped us get through that night, but it was also very much the skill of the company and the actions of Captain Reekie and his crew and the skill of 3 Platoon and 2 Platoon. It was the calm under fire of Sergeant Adams who got the overturned LAV back on its wheels. There was Lieutenant Duncan Redburn and his platoon 2IC, Warrant Officer Mike Jackson,<sup>28</sup> and his section commanders, Sergeant Darrel Sherington and Sergeant Bryce Piukkala. There was no commander that night who I would say lost their cool. There were so many things that contributed. My medal was really an award for the company for that evening. I'd say that the company was the best company on the tour. We were told that numerous times. It was a big source of pride because we were a Patricia company working with an RCR Battle Group. So there is a little bit of regimental pride ... as well as personal pride.

*Captain Reekie was elated that his entire crew was recognized for their actions on the night of 19 August.*

Clearly I was honoured. I would be lying if I said I wasn't. But I was very happy that it was my whole crew. The way we fought as one. I was glad that we were all recognized. That was really cool. And I was happy for Major Wright. He's a good example of valour. He

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made two very tough calls that night. The first one, when we first got into the big fight, he was told that he should withdraw and that the enemy force was too big. He said, “Nope. We will fight and we will hold this ground.” That was very brave and valiant.<sup>29</sup> Then, later on again, he was being urged to push forward when he realized the tenuous position he would be in ... that he would potentially be leading his company into a kill zone and not a victory. He said, “No. We will develop this before we assault it. We’re not going in here blindly into a bad situation.” That’s valour too. To accomplish your mission regardless of the cost, but to look after your soldiers in the process, is valour. And so were the actions of my troops. I told them when we advanced forward, “Guys, we have to do this. We have no choice but to do this. Our guys are going to be in a bad situation if we don’t do this, but I think that this is probably a one-way trip.” Their response? “Nod to that Sir. Let’s go.” That was it. That is valour. There was no questioning or fear or hesitation. It was automatic and it was aggressive and those soldiers were “valorous” for sure.

That battle really cemented my confidence in all of the training and all of the people and all of the equipment and all of the missions and everything that we were there for and all that we had done to prepare. If there was one lesson that I took away from it, it’s supreme confidence in the abilities of the Canadian soldier and in the aggression of my soldiers in particular. We were victorious. We killed a lot of enemy that night. There are guys like Captain Jon Snyder<sup>30</sup> who did really valiant things. I certainly never would consider myself in the same category of person, in the same class, as someone like Captain Jon Snyder and what he did, or even what Major Wright did on that night. I consider myself very fortunate to have been there and to have been there with the people I was there with.

It was a good, good team, and like I said, if there’s one thing that I was really proud of at the end of the day, it was not being awarded the Medal of Military Valour *per se*, but having my whole crew honoured for their valour and my whole crew flying to Ottawa with our wives together to receive our decorations. It was really, really cool because we’d been together for so long.

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MAJOR WRIGHT AND CAPTAIN REEKIE WERE INVESTED WITH THEIR MEDALS OF MILITARY VALOUR BY THE THEN-GOVERNOR GENERAL AND COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF OF CANADA, HER EXCELLENCY THE RIGHT HONOURABLE MICHAËLLE JEAN, AT RIDEAU HALL ON 12 OCTOBER 2007.

## NOTES

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- 1 *Canada Gazette*, Part I, Vol. 141, No. 25 (23 June 2007), 1718. See also, “Valour,” *Canadian Military Journal*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (Summer 2007), 4-6.
- 2 *Canada Gazette*, Part I, Vol. 141, No. 8 (24 February 2007), 326. See also, “Valour,” *Canadian Military Journal*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (Spring 2007), 4-5. Major M.C. Wright also received the M.S.M. for his professional conduct over the entire span of his tour; his citation appears in Appendix 2.
- 3 See Chapter 5.
- 4 For his service in Afghanistan, Omer Henry Lavoie received the M.S.C.; his citation appears in Appendix 2.
- 5 That is to say, no divisions, real or imagined, between members of the RCR and PPCLI; all were made to feel part of the same team despite the fact that members of the BG wore different cap badges, coming as they did from different regiments.
- 6 For his service in Afghanistan, Robert Michel Joseph Girouard was posthumously awarded the M.S.C.; his citation appears in Appendix 2. He was killed on 27 November 2006 in a suicide attack.
- 7 As earlier chapters readily make clear.
- 8 A training exercise, one of the final steps, held to prepare Canadian soldiers for service in Afghanistan.
- 9 For his service in Afghanistan, Nicholas James Elliott Grimshaw received the M.S.M.; his citation appears in Appendix 2.
- 10 For his service in Afghanistan, John William Hooyer received the M.S.M.; his citation appears in Appendix 2.
- 11 The Canadian Airborne Regiment deployed to Somalia in the early 1990s on Op DELIVERANCE.

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12 For actions performed earlier in his tour, Christopher Jonathan Reid was Mentioned in Dispatches; his citation appears in Appendix 2. He was killed 3 August 2006 by a roadside bomb.

13 See Chapter 6.

14 An Arabic word for “consultation.” At such meetings involving community elders, major decisions are made.

15 As opposed to what some other Canadian soldiers experienced. See, for instance, Chapters 3 and 6.

16 A road linking key towns in Kandahar, providing local jobs, increased infrastructure and added security.

17 The LAV captain is the 3IC of a company, commanding the vehicles once the soldiers dismount. He controls the LAVs as an integral sub-component, allowing the company commander to employ them in support of the overall plan.

18 His citation appears in Appendix 1.

19 For his actions on 19 August 2006, Dan James Holley was Mentioned in Dispatches; his citation appears in Appendix 2.

20 A light machine gun mounted on a post on the highest point of the turret.

21 For his actions on 19 August 2006, Nigel Jason Gregg was Mentioned in Dispatches; his citation appears in Appendix 2.

22 For his actions on 19 August 2006, Timmy Dean Wilkins was Mentioned in Dispatches; his citation appears in Appendix 2.

23 For his actions on 19 August 2006, William Jonathan Elliott was Mentioned in Dispatches; his citation appears in Appendix 2.

24 For his actions on 19 August 2006, Brian Vincent Adams was Mentioned in Dispatches; his citation appears in Appendix 2.

25 A defensive formation adopted by armoured or mechanized forces while they conduct replenishment, maintenance and rest.

26 Wright recalls that the governor made this comment during the early stages of Op MEDUSA, approximately 4 September 2006.

27 Stages of Op MEDUSA are described in Chapter 8.

28 For his actions on 19 August 2006, Michael William Jackson received the M.M.V.; his citation appears in Appendix 1.

29 On this point specifically, Wright remembers, “I cannot clearly recall the exact conversation or sequence of events, although I do remember being asked if I wanted to



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withdraw. I said 'no' for a few reasons. First, although we were caught by surprise with the timing and the direction of the attack, we were more than holding our own. Secondly, pride was on the line. I was not willing to let the Taliban see us withdraw, or to allow the rest of the battle group to be able to say that the Patricia company was giving up a fight. I wanted no question about our warrior spirit."

30 Captain Jonathan Sutherland Snyder earned the S.M.V. for his actions on 4 June 2008; his citation appears in Appendix 2. He unfortunately died soon thereafter, on the night of 7/8 June, after falling into a well while on patrol.



# CHAPTER 8

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## *AN OMINOUS START: THE OPENING BATTLE OF OPERATION MEDUSA*

CORPORAL JASON FUNNELL

MEDAL OF MILITARY VALOUR ■ 3 SEPTEMBER 2006

*“YOU NEVER LEAVE A WOUNDED ROYAL BEHIND.”*

On **SEPTEMBER 3, 2006**, during Operation MEDUSA in Afghanistan, Corporal Funnell of 7 Platoon Charles Company braved intense enemy fire to come to the assistance of his comrades trapped in a disabled vehicle in an enemy kill zone. Ignoring his personal safety by twice crossing ground covered by effective enemy fire, Corporal Funnell successfully assisted in the treatment and evacuation of his injured and killed comrades while returning effective fire. His brave and professional actions saved lives and allowed the orderly withdrawal of his platoon under heavy fire.<sup>1</sup>

JASON FUNNELL WAS BORN IN HALIFAX, NOVA SCOTIA. HE ATTENDED ESCOTT PUBLIC SCHOOL AND THEN ATHENS DISTRICT HIGH SCHOOL, BOTH IN ONTARIO. IN 1998, HE JOINED THE BROCKVILLE RIFLES, ALSO IN ONTARIO, BUT LATER TOOK HIS RELEASE IN 2002. DURING HIS TIME WITH THE RESERVES, HE DEPLOYED IN 2001 TO BOSNIA (OP PALLADIUM, ROTO 8). RETURNING TO THE MILITARY, HE JOINED THE REGULAR FORCE IN 2005 AND SUBSEQUENTLY DEPLOYED TO AFGHANISTAN (OP ARCHER, ROTO 2) AS PART OF 7 PLATOON, CHARLES COMPANY, 1RCR BG, TASK FORCE 3-06.

## CHAPTER 8

### MASTER CORPORAL SEAN HUBERT NIEFER

MEDAL OF MILITARY VALOUR ■ 3 SEPTEMBER 2006

*“ I SWEAR I COULD FEEL THE WIND FROM ROUNDS PASSING BY, NOT MORE THAN AN INCH OR TWO IN FRONT OF MY FACE, JUST A STEADY STREAM OF MACHINE GUN ROUNDS GOING PAST. ”*

Master Corporal Niefer was a member of Charles Company, 1st Royal Canadian Regiment Battle Group, in Rotation 2 of Operation ARCHER in Afghanistan. On **SEPTEMBER 3, 2006**, while engaged in combat operations in support of Operation MEDUSA, he selflessly ordered his vehicle into the enemy kill zone to support extraction of wounded comrades trapped by an enemy ambush. He subsequently provided covering fire from a highly exposed position to facilitate their evacuation and, by doing so, saved the lives of numerous fellow soldiers. His outstanding leadership, courage and valiant action brought great credit to Canada and the Canadian Forces.<sup>2</sup>

SEAN NIEFER IS FROM ONTARIO. ALTHOUGH BORN IN WHITNEY, HE GREW UP PRIMARILY IN APPLETON. HE RECEIVED HIS EARLY EDUCATION ENTIRELY IN CARLETON PLACE, FIRST AT ST. MARY'S CATHOLIC SCHOOL AND LATER CARLETON PLACE HIGH SCHOOL. BETWEEN 1997 AND 1999, HE ATTENDED ALGONQUIN COLLEGE. HE JOINED THE CAMERON HIGHLANDERS OF OTTAWA (CH OF O) IN JANUARY 1996 WHEN HE WAS ONLY 17 AND STILL IN HIGH SCHOOL. BETWEEN APRIL AND NOVEMBER 2001, HE DEPLOYED TO BOSNIA (OP PALLADIUM, ROTO 8). IMMEDIATELY UPON HIS RETURN TO CANADA, HE TRANSFERRED TO THE REGULAR FORCE, IN DECEMBER 2001, TO 1RCR. HE HAS DEPLOYED TWICE TO AFGHANISTAN. HE FIRST DEPLOYED TO KABUL WITH THE 3RCR BG BETWEEN AUGUST 2003 AND FEBRUARY 2004 (OP ATHENA, ROTO 0) AND LATER TO KANDAHAR BETWEEN AUGUST 2006 AND MARCH 2007 (OP ARCHER, ROTO 2). ON HIS SECOND TOUR IN AFGHANISTAN, HE SERVED WITH 7 PLATOON, CHARLES COMPANY, 1RCR BG, TASK FORCE 3-06.

## CHAPTER 8

### PRIVATE MICHAEL PATRICK O'ROURKE

MEDAL OF MILITARY VALOUR ■ 3 SEPTEMBER 2006

*“IT'S YOUR OWN COMRADES THAT GET YOU THROUGH IT AND KEEP YOU GOING.”*

On **SEPTEMBER 3, 2006**, Private O'Rourke, a member of 7 Platoon Charles Company participating in Operation MEDUSA, selflessly ignored his personal safety by braving intense enemy fire to assist in the treatment and evacuation of his comrades trapped in a disabled vehicle. Twice crossing through sustained enemy fire, Private O'Rourke returned effective fire and successfully assisted in the evacuation of injured or killed personnel. His brave and professional actions saved lives and allowed the orderly withdrawal of his platoon under heavy fire.<sup>3</sup>

MIKE O'ROURKE WAS BORN IN LAHR, GERMANY. AFTER HIS RETURN TO CANADA, HE ATTENDED GENERAL PANET HIGH SCHOOL IN PETAWAWA, ONTARIO. JOINING THE CF IN NOVEMBER 2004, HE LATER DEPLOYED TO AFGHANISTAN BETWEEN AUGUST AND NOVEMBER 2006 (OP ARCHER, ROTO 2). WHILE IN KANDAHAR, HE SERVED WITH 7 PLATOON, CHARLES COMPANY, 1RCR BG, TASK FORCE 3-06.

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### CORPORAL CLINTON JOHN ORR

MEDAL OF MILITARY VALOUR ■ 3 SEPTEMBER 2006

*“HEAVY ENGINEERING EQUIPMENT DOESN'T GO WHERE WE WENT.”*

Corporal Orr was a member of 23 Field Squadron, 1st Royal Canadian Regiment Battle Group, in Rotation 2 of Operation ARCHER in Afghanistan. On **SEPTEMBER 3, 2006**, he was operating an armoured vehicle attached to 2 Troop during an assault in Pashmul. Amidst intense combat action and under direct enemy fire, he placed himself at great risk by manoeuvring to recover one light armoured vehicle and only ceased his relentless attempts to extract a second one when informed that the vehicle's crew had withdrawn to safety. His focus on the mission and his courage in the face of danger have brought great credit to the Canadian Forces and to Canada.”<sup>4</sup>

CLINTON ORR WAS BORN IN CHILLIWACK, BRITISH COLUMBIA WHERE HE SPENT MOST OF HIS EARLY YEARS. HE JOINED THE CF IN JULY 2000. HE HAS THREE TIMES BEEN DEPLOYED TO AFGHANISTAN: FIRST TO KABUL, 2003/04, THEN TO KANDAHAR, 2006/07, AND AGAIN TO KANDAHAR, 2008/09. DURING HIS LAST TWO TOURS, HE DEPLOYED AS A HEAVY EQUIPMENT OPERATOR. ON HIS SECOND TOUR, DURING WHICH HE EARNED THE MEDAL OF MILITARY VALOUR, HE SERVED WITH 23 FIELD SQUADRON, 1RCR BG, TASK FORCE 3-06.

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*Operation MEDUSA began in early September 2006 after the Taliban took advantage of the fact that Canadian and Afghan forces had left the region earlier that summer. With no one there to stop them, the enemy re-established their presence in what was referred to as the White School and Canadian troops were ordered to attack the complex ... with deadly results for both sides.*

*Corporal Clinton John Orr saw events unfold from the cab of the bulldozer that he was operating, totally exposed to enemy fire, in an attempt to clear a path for the LAVs and other vehicles engaged in the attack.*

I'm a heavy equipment operator. When I knew I was going overseas, I talked to my friends who were already there. They mainly stayed in KAF. They did maintenance at some FOBs and construction on the main camps. So I was like, "Okay, sweet!" I got to Afghanistan on the 13<sup>th</sup> of August. So we were doing maintenance for the first couple of weeks. I'd wake up in the morning, do some PT, go do some maintenance, chill out, have something to eat, whatever, and then off at four. Just like a normal day. This is the way I thought the tour was going to go. Then they said, "We're going on Op MEDUSA." And I was like, "All right." And then they said, "You're operating a back hoe." I'm like, "A back hoe that's not armoured down in Panjwai District?" It was all civilian equipment that I'd been using. Then they said they were going to put armour on it. It was ridiculous. It was homemade. Every time you would shut the door, pieces of armour would fall off. The same was done with the small bulldozer that I actually ended up operating. It had a plastic roof on it with four clips. Every time a Chinook would land close to where I was, my roof would blow off! Heavy engineering equipment doesn't go where we went. This was all totally out of the blue. They said we didn't need the Badgers ... they have a Leopard chassis with a blade on the front and an arm that comes around; they can go pretty fast; they can do more than we do; they push more; they push faster. Dozers are used for finesse. If we had had a Badger on the day of Op MEDUSA, I think things would have been totally different.

On 2 September 2006, the battle group brought me to a battle position, which is now known as Ma'sum Ghar. As things turned out,

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I ran the dozer pretty much the whole time I was there. I knocked down all the walls, from Ma'sum Ghar into the Arghandab River. I was ordered to fill in a wadi to get ready for the attack of Op MEDUSA. It was about six or seven feet deep and about eight feet wide. That is their drainage system in Afghanistan and they needed me to kind of build a road over it ... to breach it. It was just under two kilometres away from the objective, the White School. We were going to come in from the south and we were going to cross that wadi to start our attack.

For half a day, I worked on filling in the wadi and then the battle group pulled me back and took me to a different battle position, which was on the east side of the Arghandab River. I got really sick because the dozer had no air conditioning and the bottles of water were hotter than coffee. I was dehydrated and I was puking. I was just getting ready to get into bed when they came and told me that I had to take the dozer back up to the battle position near Ma'sum Ghar, where I had just been. That was about a 20 to 25 minute dozer ride through Panjwai, the actual town. They told me that during the assault I was pretty much going to be in front with the guns behind me because I had to fill in all the wadis that the LAVs couldn't get through and the vehicles like the G-Wagons couldn't get over. I had to make them all a path.

So we stayed there that night and then early on the morning of the 3<sup>rd</sup>, around six-ish, we started getting ready. First, the battle group sent people out through the road I had made the day before, just to kind of show presence. Then they sent me with some LAVs and a G-Wagon in behind me and we started off through the Arghandab. On the way, I was filling in stuff they couldn't go over, and then we came up out of the river bed. From there you could see all the different compounds because you were now on the other side of the Arghandab. This is where the White School is situated. We stayed there for a little bit to observe the area.

Then the battle group had me go west. I had to fill in two more wadis because all their drainage is connected and square, just like farming



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in Canada. At that point, Master Corporal Lance Hooper,<sup>5</sup> who was driving the Zettelmeyer [ZL], came over with me. We were about 50 metres away from the White School. The battle group wanted us to do two breaches into the compound, so that when the vehicles came, they could take separate ways in. Basically, he and I were up there on our own. The LAVs were covering as far as they could, and they were looking our way, but other than that, it was just me and Hooper going in and doing our breaches.

When we were finished, Warrant Officer Richard Nolan's G-Wagon went left and a LAV went right, out of a breach, and as soon as they stopped, they were RPGed from both sides. It was an ambush! The enemy set it up. I saw the top pop off the LAV. All the kit that was strapped on there just exploded right in the air. I'm thinking, "Wow; it's a LAV; it's armoured; it's supposed to protect the guys." The G-Wagon got hit too. As soon as that happened, I'm like, "Why did the G-Wagon go in first? It shouldn't have been in there. It's crazy." All of a sudden nobody was moving, and then there was just chaos, with all the LAVs' cannons letting fly. All I had for communications was a personal radio, so all I could hear was my section commander, Sergeant Ronnie Dix, back in the rear telling me what he was hearing on the main radio. I'm not hearing anything directly from the guys upfront. I'm just seeing all this stuff happening and it's just unreal.

*While Corporal Orr was exposed to enemy fire and his life was certainly at risk, his account of the battle was largely from the perspective of a "non-combatant." Three others – Master Corporal Sean Niefer, Corporal Jason Funnell and Private Michael O'Rourke – experienced the firefight from the inside, as it were. Throughout the battle, Niefer repeatedly exposed himself to withering enemy fire to lay down fire of his own. Having different responsibilities on that day, he remembers the lead up to the operation, and its initial phase, somewhat differently. He recalls:*

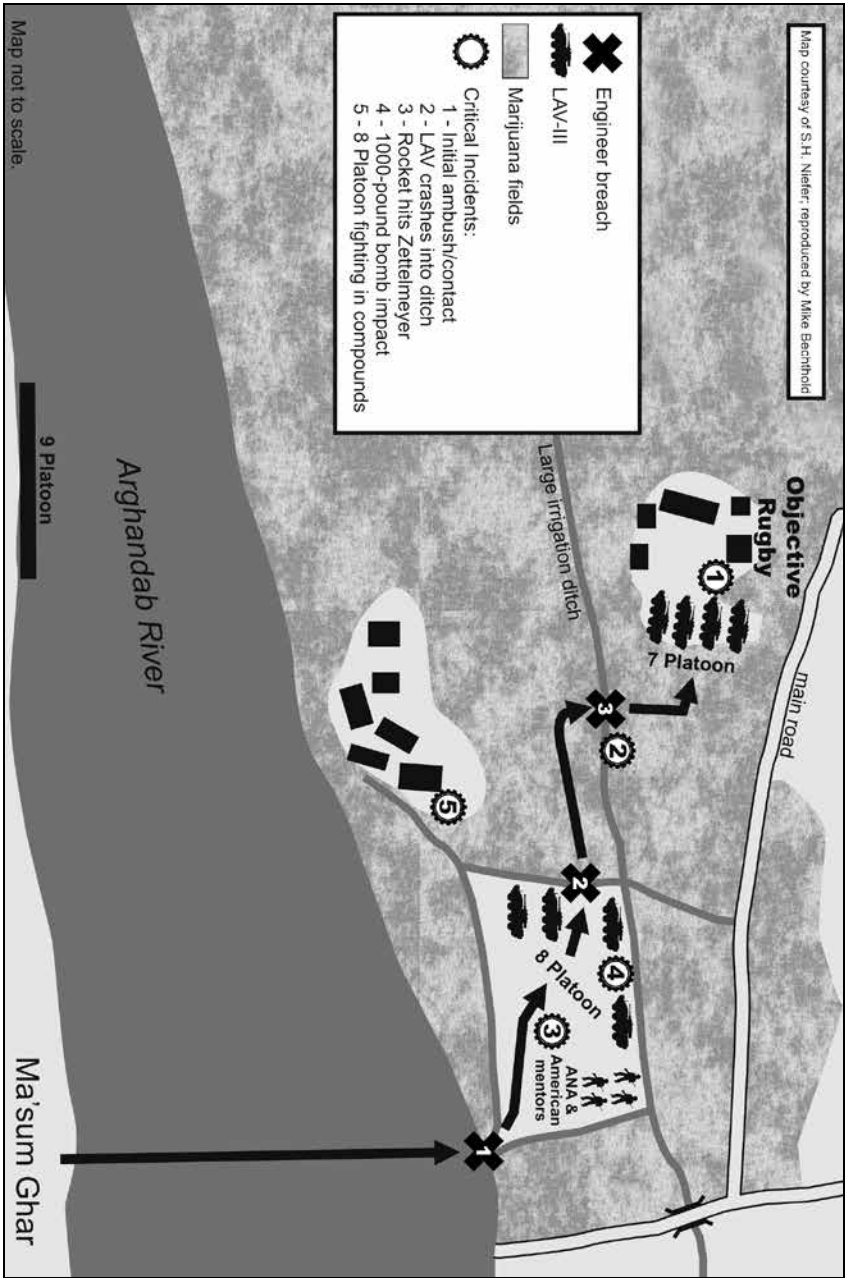
The main objective for Op MEDUSA was the White School ... the same place where the Pats had had a lot of issues on the previous tour.<sup>6</sup> It was the headquarters, the node, for the Taliban in the area.

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The initial plan was to have three days bombardment – JDAMs [Joint Direct Attack Munitions], artillery, air strikes, as well as LAVs – and then go across and take the objective. On the morning of the 3<sup>rd</sup>, we were told to mount up. We asked what was going on and they told us we were heading across the river to do a recce on the opposite side for a breaching point for the engineers. So we thought, “Yeah, we’re just going to go across, help the engineers identify where we’re going to breach, and then pull back.” So we mounted up.

Objective Rugby, the schoolhouse, was kind of on an angle off to our left, so we pretty much headed straight across the river, which was fairly dry but there were pockets of water here and there. We didn’t want to land right in front of the school and we didn’t want to take the road that was further to the right of where we landed because of the IEDs. Where we landed was kind of in an open field. We, 7 Platoon, were in the lead going across the river, followed by the engineers, followed by Company Headquarters, followed by 8 Platoon. Once we hit the other side, the engineers put in a breach, at which point we were expecting to get pulled back. That’s when we got the word to filter through and exploit the field. So then 8 Platoon bounded through our position with four LAVs, along with Company Headquarters with two LAVs, while we held the breach. We had four of our LAVs, as well as one engineer LAV, and a G-Wagon that was the platoon warrant’s vehicle.

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MAP 4 – OVERVIEW OF THE ATTACK ON THE  
WHITE SCHOOL HOUSE, OPERATION MEDUSA

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As everyone came in, we took up almost a half-moon offensive posture along the edge of the field oriented towards Objective Rugby. So 8 Platoon took up their positions and then Company Headquarters, and then 7 Platoon came up behind and we filled in the gaps. We sat there for a bit. As soon as another breach was done, 7 Platoon got the word to head through. So the order of march going through the second breach was the engineer LAV, then 3-1 Alpha, 3-1 Charlie and then 3-1 Delta – the G-Wagon – and then my vehicle, 3-1 Bravo, was the last. As we came through the breach, we flanked out into an extended line and approached on an axis. We had that same order of march, but spread out from right to left, with my vehicle taking up the extreme left as we were going through. As we were moving through, we were in this forest of marijuana. The drivers couldn't see where they were going because it was too high. The only ones who could really see where they were going were the crew commanders because their heads were sticking out the tops of the LAVs. We probably got another 50-some metres and then we had to stop because we came onto a berm of earth that was blocking our advance. So we sat there for about a minute talking about the next obstacle and our next step. We were going to call forward the dozer again to doze the obstacle down so we could approach onto the objective. We all had our heads out, looking around and then, all of a sudden, that's when we got ambushed by the enemy.

*The attack came as a surprise because the early intelligence reports indicated that there was little activity, if any, around the schoolhouse. Private O'Rourke described the scene as weirdly, even disturbingly, quiet.*

The morning was very quiet. It was dead quiet. Not a thing moving, not a bird chirping, nothing, dead quiet. I don't think anybody really knew what we were walking into so there wasn't a lot of talk. Some people were kind of anxious, some were nervous. I remember I was nervous about it because it was my first big op. But I definitely didn't think we would be walking into a huge ambush.

The assumption was that the enemy had pulled out, but we were still wary. We had heard stories about the underground cities that they have. The place had been a Taliban stronghold since the Russians

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went in.<sup>7</sup> But the Russians couldn't take them at the schoolhouse. It was well-fortified, and the network of tunnels was probably how they withstood the twelve hours of shelling we dropped on them. I don't doubt that those tunnels played a role in the ambush on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of September. They probably came out of the ground just like ants and swarmed us. But it was so quiet ... I was thinking this was going to be a cakewalk.

We crossed the breach and took our positions ... 7 Platoon was on the left and 8 Platoon was on the right. I didn't see this, but apparently as soon as we had moved in, somebody on the roof of the schoolhouse stood up and set off a pen flare and then pretty much all hell broke loose. I was sitting right beside the platoon commander, Captain Derek Wessan, who was up in the hatch and I said, "Whoa! What the hell was that?" All of a sudden I heard a rocket going over ... to me it sounded like a little girl screaming over top of my LAV. Then all I could hear was machine gun fire all around us and bouncing off our LAV. It was just craziness.

*Niefer recalled that the attack was so sudden that it took everyone a few seconds to realize what was going on.*

I remember kind of looking around and it looked like flashes all the way around. It was like in a stadium where you see the photographers' flashes going off ... lighting up all around us. It took us a couple of seconds to realize what it was. We were kind of transfixed. Then it dawned on us that we were under attack. I remember looking straight ahead at the building and seeing that place light up with muzzle flashes and then scanning all the way around to my side. And even looking back over my shoulder ... there were muzzle flashes behind us as well. So they had formed basically a horseshoe right around us, almost enveloping us on all three sides, leaving just the back end where we had approached from as the only kind of open area. So we immediately dropped down into our LAVs and I think that's maybe why I didn't see the G-Wagon that was next to us get hit by an RPG. It went through the front windshield and killed Warrant Officer Nolan and injured the medic in the back, Corporal Richard Furoy, as well as severely injuring the interpreter. The

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only one that was still pretty functional was the driver, Corporal Sean Teal.<sup>8</sup>

Then on the far right flank, the engineer LAV – the first one through the breach – also took a couple of rounds. One ended up killing the section commander. That was Sergeant Shane Stachnik. As well, the concussion from the round they had taken injured a lot of the guys in the back of the vehicle and knocked the driver unconscious.

In our vehicle, the radio started right away and the platoon commander ordered us to engage. So the LAVs immediately started pounding the position. Wherever we saw muzzle flashes, whether it be in the marijuana or in the actual building, we just started pounding it with high explosive rounds. My LAV got maybe 20-some rounds off and then the cannon jammed. So we started going through our drills right away, trying to unjam the cannon and get it going again, but nothing seemed to be working. It remained jammed. Then my gunner noticed the cord from his headset had got wrapped up in the rounds and got fed up into the feed chute and jammed it. We tried pulling out the cord but there was no way we could do it. So we switched to the co-axial machine gun mounted inside the turret. We just had to get rounds on the enemy. We started raking through the muzzle flashes wherever we saw them ... just laying down fire. The container on the turret for the ammunition holds about two boxes worth, plus whatever is in the tray. So we went through that fairly quickly.

We ran out of ammunition on the co-ax, so the only weapon left was the pintle-mounted machine gun. So I went up on top of the LAV. At the time, we didn't have spade grips with two handles and a butterfly trigger like we have now. The only way to get a really good grasp of the weapon and actually aim it so you're not just shooting for the sake of shooting is to get the butt of the weapon into your shoulder. The pintle-mount itself is basically like a metal post about a foot high to give it some angle clearances, but we had to aim down because of the angle at which we were shooting at the enemy. So to get the butt of the weapon to that position, to get the body to that

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position, you had to stand completely out of the turret. Well, I was standing on top of my seat. At the very top of the chair there's a little ledge, and I remember putting my foot on that and kind of standing out of the turret. So here I was exposed from just above my knees to enemy fire.

I was firing on any muzzle flashes I could see and there were a lot of them. To this day, I don't know if I hit anything or didn't hit anything. I just fired into any flashes I saw and I would stitch the area around them to try and make sure I got whomever was firing. I'd just work from muzzle to muzzle. Then I ran out of ammunition. I yelled down to the guys to hand me up some more ammunition and they handed me up a couple of boxes. I put one on my seat and brought the other one up with me and dumped it out on top of the turret. Then, after finding the end, I reloaded the machine gun and tried to fire. I would get about two or three rounds off and the belt would snap because obviously it was just a rat's nest, just a pile. It wouldn't feed properly and it would snap. I did that a couple of times and it wouldn't work.<sup>9</sup>

*Up to this point, Niefer had been completely oblivious to the shower of enemy rounds directed at him. With the latest firing problem, he realized just how great the danger really was.*

The fire coming in on us was just unbelievable. It was almost like a laser show. I swear I could feel the wind from rounds passing by, not more than an inch or two in front of my face, just a steady stream of machine gun rounds going past. I could feel them coming from almost all directions, including from behind. It was just an absolute chaos of angles and a mishmash of rounds. It was a perfect kill zone. I also saw RPGs and rockets flying by. I'm pretty sure we got hit by an RPG then. I just can't explain how intense it was! I remember feeling the rounds kind of graze by and there must have been tens of thousands flying all over the place. Thank God the Taliban weren't very good shots because I remember sitting up there thinking, "It only takes one. It only takes one guy to aim one good round and that's it." But then it's also weird because at that point I felt like I was in a bubble of my own. I was sitting there and it was almost like a glass

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bubble all around me. Almost every single round that looked like it was coming straight on always seemed to veer off or just miss. It was the most eerie feeling. I knew that I was going to be completely safe. There was just no question about it. I knew nothing about what was going on elsewhere. I didn't know whether the vehicle or the guys inside would be impervious to enemy fire like I was. I just knew that by some kind grace of God, I could stay up there and it would be okay, because I had this little glass bubble around me.

*Niefer was able to work out a system for feeding the machine gun in such a way that it would keep firing without the belt breaking. He continued to send machine gun bursts towards the muzzle flashes all around him.*

I ended up having to stay up there and lay out the ammunition in a neat row, get it all sorted out, snake that ammunition into the weapon, and fire it off.<sup>10</sup> I got that second box away and then went down, got my third box, went up, dumped it out again, did the same thing, and got off about 20 rounds when I heard in my earpiece, "Start the withdrawal." So I stopped firing and gave my orders to my driver to start reversing and to take us out of there. We started getting turned around and as we were driving back towards the breach, that's when I looked over and saw Corporal Teal, the driver of the G-Wagon. He was outside waving us down. I noticed he had bodies lying around his legs and stuff. I told my driver to stop and we reoriented our vehicle kind of between him and the enemy and we backed up. I told my driver to drop the ramp. We started dropping the ramp and Sergeant Brent Crellin in the back was like, "Whoa, whoa, whoa, what are you guys doing?" So I told him, "We've got wounded. We need you guys to jump out and grab the wounded to evacuate them."

*In another LAV that was close by, Private Mike O'Rourke and Corporal Jason Funnell were ordered to help with the wounded. O'Rourke recalled that his training immediately took over and he braved the withering enemy fire outside the LAV without giving it very much thought at all.*

Me and Funnell were closest to the door, so I knew we were going out. Pretty much as soon as that ramp went down, I shut off and "Soldier Mike" kicked in. All the training and everything that you ever had took over. I knew we were going out so I grabbed the oil



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and I automatically oiled up my weapon really well, cocked it, readied it, put it on safe, and then waited for the word to dismount. We got the word and then we're running through these pot fields and we're low to the ground ... you can see that the pot plants above you are just getting chopped up by bullets and there is pot flying everywhere. You could hear the bullets whizzing past you. We came out near the G-Wagon and Sergeant Scott Fawcett<sup>11</sup> assessed the situation, "Okay. Troops hurt. Doc's hurt.<sup>12</sup> Rich's dead.<sup>13</sup> Take the terp or take the doc." So I grabbed the doc and started doing first aid on him, which, looking back on it, I found kind of ironic. I felt like, "Aren't you supposed to be treating me?" So I did first aid on him, picked him up, carried him back to my LAV, put him on the ramp, ran back down, went down on one knee, and waited for the word to come back if they needed more help, which they did. So back I went. Funnell had brought the terp back to the LAV. He came back to the G-Wagon with me too. Then we had to get the body of Warrant Officer Nolan off the battlefield.<sup>14</sup> We were going to carry him back to the LAV, but then the word to withdraw was given, and you could see LAVs pulling past us and we had to get one of them to stop to pick us up. Me and Corporal Teal loaded the warrant into Niefer's LAV, I think, and it took off.

*Corporal Funnell vividly remembers the scene when he and O'Rourke were making several returns to take care of the wounded and to retrieve the body of Warrant Officer Nolan:*

The terp was pretty mobile, but he couldn't see, so I just grabbed onto him under the arm. I said, "It's all right. Stick with me. Let's go!" I was pulling him along. Doc was a little bit messed up. He was starting to black out, in and out a little bit, but he was more or less good to go. He was able to keep conscious.

*During their efforts to load the dead and wounded, Private O'Rourke and Corporal Funnell's actions were covered from several angles, including from the top of the LAV where Master Corporal Niefer had again returned to fire the exposed pintle-mounted machine gun. Niefer remembers:*

As we positioned ourselves, and just before they dropped the ramp, I went back up onto the pintle-mount to lay down covering fire for

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the guys since they would be exposed. So we dropped the ramp. I managed to get off that full box and then I went down, got another box, had enough time to reload again, and got off about half a box. Then I got word that we were all loaded up with the body of Warrant Officer Nolan and we were good to go. So the ramp was up and I told my driver, "Okay, get us out of here. Bring us back to the breach and then we'll head back to the lines." So we wheeled around and started racing off towards the breach.

*While Niefer, Funnell and O'Rourke were scrambling to retrieve the casualties and fall back to a safer position, all the while under an intense enemy fire, Corporal Orr felt isolated sitting in his dozer with the makeshift armour and flimsy roof. He had no communications other than his personal radio, so he was not totally aware of what was taking place. All he could do at this moment was sit back and watch.*

I'm in a box with small windows on three sides. It was like watching a TV in my dozer with no volume. I would see stuff happening. At least I didn't get hit with anything big. I got shot at a little bit, but I didn't hear that stuff because when the dozer runs, it's so loud. I saw things happening and I'm like, "Okay, we're shooting back at them. There can't be that many." I didn't know anything. I'm pretty sure if I'd had a radio and I could have heard all the contact reports and people saying that people were dying, I would have freaked out because I couldn't defend myself. I was probably one of the only vehicles on the battlefield that couldn't shoot back. If I saw something – like the one Taliban I saw – I couldn't do anything. Because I couldn't hear radio traffic from the LAVs, I didn't know if they wanted me there; I didn't know if I was in their way; I didn't know if they wanted me to do something. Whatever came over the radio to the LAV that my section commander was in, he would pass it on to me.

To be honest, because I didn't know what was really going on, it was one of the coolest things I've ever seen ... *at the start*. I didn't know people were dying until later. So looking at what was going on, I saw all the firepower that Canada had on this one battlefield shooting at this one school. It was just exploding with bullets. I'm kind of scared, but I'm kind of enjoying it too because I'm watching

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these things happen that are just unreal, that I've never seen and I'll probably never see again. I could see all my guys kicking ass. To me, everybody was alive at that point.

*Niefer's LAV sped towards the breach and greater safety, away from the White School. At this time, he dropped down to help his gunner try to get the cannon up and running. Then the LAV came to an abrupt halt that sent everyone flying forward ... violently. More danger and complications awaited Niefer and his crew.*

We must have been going a pretty good speed, about 50 or 60 kilometres an hour, when we slammed headlong into the ditch. BOOM! We missed the breach by about 10 or 15 feet and slammed full force into the irrigation ditch. It was a good thing we had those armoured plates and our body armour on because we got thrown forward right into the controls of the LAV and it just crushed into me. Without that armour plating, I would have had a busted up chest. All I remember is a lot of yelling and screaming. Guys in the back were in pain, of course. I was kind of dazed for a couple of seconds and then we realized what had happened. I got up, looked around, and saw that we had missed the breach. I got onto the radio, told the platoon commander that we were stuck and requested the dozer to come by and try to pull us out.

*In due time, Orr received word to go and help the LAV that was stuck in the ditch. As before, confusion reigned supreme.*

I got a call on the radio saying that I needed to go in and recover Sergeant Shane Stachnik's LAV.<sup>15</sup> I'm like, "Okay." I opened the door of the dozer and Hooper opened his on the ZL. We looked at each other and neither of us was getting out, so he threw me a chain and I started heading out in my dozer. I crossed the breach I had just made to the other side. There were marijuana fields everywhere. My dozer was a small one. It was a D6 dozer and compared to the eight-foot-tall marijuana plants, it was pretty much covered, just like a G-Wagon. You couldn't really see it. By this time there were more LAVs through the breach and all their cannons were firing. I

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had to stop because the guns were traversing. It was like a game of *Frogger* or something. Their guns were turning and I didn't want to be in their line of fire, so I stopped, I'm turning, I'm going, I'm stopping. I don't think anyone told the LAVs that I was coming in. So I'm wanting them to see me. I'm driving up and they're shooting. Then they see me and I can see them kind of traverse the other way.

*As if Orr's movement forward wasn't confused and complicated enough...*

I probably got about 20 metres in and the LAV I'm heading for – Stachnik's – is about 25 metres from the White School, not very far at all. So I get to him and I'm like, "Why am I out here?" They thought the LAV that got hit was a mobility kill – I was going in to tow it out – but it wasn't. The turret was shot, it was done, so they couldn't shoot back, but they were still mobile. When I got there, I said, "Every LAV is moving. I don't know why you want me here." They told me to back up. So I backed up and I got to the same spot I was at with the ZL originally. Then they called me again. They said, "There's a LAV there that needs to be pulled out." So I'm like, "Okay." So I go back in and cross the breach again. I get there and I look around and all the LAVs are moving. So I'm thinking that I can't keep doing this. This is getting crazy. So I look around and I tell them the LAVs are all moving. There is nothing here. I pulled out and a third time I got called back in. I get up to the breach and I look to my left and there's the LAV<sup>16</sup> in the ditch. I'm like, "Okay, I see the LAV now."

*Having discovered his purpose, Orr continued on with his task.*

The LAV had been coming back, away from the school, but they came back through the second breach the ZL had made, and what happened was that they came at it at an angle. The breach was only so wide. We only made them about a blade and a half width wide, about five metres. It was a hasty breach, as in, "Let's get there quick and get back." So he came at an angle because the driver's hatch was down and he couldn't see the breach. But when he came at it at an angle, he pretty much went straight into the ditch because he missed

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the road. So when the LAV hit, the guys couldn't get out of it. Their back door wouldn't come down. They were wedged in and couldn't swing their door open. They were sitting ducks.

*Having witnessed Niefer's LAV crash headlong into the irrigation ditch, O'Rourke's LAV moved into position to try and cover them until help arrived. O'Rourke recalls:*

We watched Master Corporal Niefer's LAV take off with Warrant Nolan inside, but they crashed right into this ditch. So we decided our LAV was going to stay and give them cover. We'd try to take out any machine gun nests or anybody trying to hit the LAV. The fire was constant ... bombs going off left, right and centre. There were bullets flying everywhere. It was something you would only see in the movies. You would think it doesn't happen in real life. But it does! Meanwhile, our LAV was a sitting duck. Sergeant Fawcett said, "We'll dismount in the ditch." We're infants. The safest place to be is in a trench. So we hopped into the ditch.

*And from Niefer's perspective, from inside the stuck LAV:*

While we sat there waiting, we tried using the turret, spinning it around and the turret stuck because the force of the impact had jammed it. So even if we had our co-ax up and running and the cannon up and running, they were still useless. I had grabbed more ammunition for the pintle-mount when we got word that the dozer was coming by. We needed someone to hook it up. The sergeant in the back tasked two of the guys to jump out and go forward to get the towing cable off the front of the vehicle and hook it up to the dozer. They got out, maybe through the air sentry hatch or the escape hatch in the back ramp, went forward, but couldn't find it. I guess they thought it was in one spot underneath the vehicle, whereas we kept it on top. So they raced back and they were like, "We can't find the towing cable!"

*With Niefer's LAV crew occupied in trying to effect their extraction from the ditch, Corporal Orr arrived at the scene and, working with Corporal Jason Ruffolo,<sup>17</sup> set about trying to tow the LAV and the men trapped inside out to safety. Corporal Orr recalls:*

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I went up to them and I backed up to the front of the LAV. I looked back and you could see the turret with the hatch open. I see this guy, Corporal Ruffolo, and we looked at each other ... we were doing the same thing me and Master Corporal Hooper had been doing earlier, "Uh, who's going to get out?" Somebody's got to hook it up, the LAV to the dozer. So he got out and he hooked up to me. Once he got back in the hatch, I gave it to 'er. I tried three or four attempts to do a running start because the angle of the LAV in the ditch was so severe and I needed as much leverage as I could get. I moved the LAV enough that they could get their back door open a bit. There was pretty much no way I was going to pull him out with my small dozer though. So I backed up, Ruffolo unhooked, and left the SWR [Steel Wire Rope] on the LAV. Then I went around to the back. I knew I could get it from behind because the way it goes in is the way it's going to come out.

*O'Rourke remembers watching the scene unfolding in front of him:*

We were sitting there waiting and I could see Corporal Ruffolo from the stuck LAV get up and do what he had to do, which was to try to hook the cable up to the dozer to get her out. They didn't get it out, but they got it out just enough so that the back door could open somewhat. We then got the order to mount back up. We had two extra guys with us because two of them had already dismounted from another LAV to try to help Ruffolo. So we fit a section-plus in the back of the LAV, which apparently you're not supposed to do, but you can.

*From inside the stuck LAV, Niefer watched on in disbelief as his driver very calmly carried out the task at hand while still under intense enemy fire.*

The dozer arrived at our position and that's when Corporal Ruffolo, my driver – I think he must have been feeling guilty for missing the breach – volunteered. He was like, "Okay, I'll do it. I know where the cable is." So he jumped up on top of the LAV and I remember sticking my head out too and watching him stand in full view on top of the LAV, unhooking this cable with rounds pinging off the vehicle. The intensity of the incoming rounds never let up. He just stood up

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there in this crossfire and calmly hooked the towing cable up to the dozer. He jumped back in and I asked him, "What the hell were you thinking?" And he said, "Oh, I didn't even think about that actually." So they tried towing us out. When we initially crashed, our nose dug into the opposite side of the ditch and that made our ass end a little higher. They tried pulling us out from the front. All they did was pull us forward a bit and our ass end – BOOM! – clunks down and we levelled off. But they didn't have the power to drag us up and out. What was happening now was our nose and ass were sitting on the ledges of the ditch and our wheels were spinning in the air. So I told the platoon commander, "This is a no-go. We're pretty screwed." He told me, "You have one minute to decide if you're going to try pulling out the vehicle again or if you're going to abandon boat." I told him right away, "Fuck it! We're going to abandon the vehicle!"<sup>18</sup> Then we disconnected the towing cable – Ruffolo went ahead and did it – and the dozer took off. Ruffolo got back into the LAV and I got on the intercom and told everyone we were going to abandon the vehicle. I said, "Get your fighting kit and get prepared to dismount." Just before they tried to dismount, I went back on the pintle-mount to fire off the last of the box to provide them with cover and any type of chance of getting out alive without getting cut down.

Because of the way we were sitting, I guess, we were kind of pinched, jammed, and the back ramp could only drop maybe 30 centimetres at most. We couldn't dismount that way, so the ramp was put back up and, just then, an RPG came our way and hit the very top of the ramp. If the ramp hadn't been jammed, it would have flown right into the LAV and probably taken out the entire section. Then we took RPG hits from the left and right. The enemy, I'm pretty sure, was getting into the ditch on both sides of us, as well as behind us. We were taking crossfire from RPGs and machine guns. The machine gun and the AK-47s, or whatever, were rattling off the side of the LAV. It was like a hard rain on a tin roof, it was just constant, with a few of these RPGs flying in and rocking the vehicle. We knew it was just a matter of time before one got through. So the guys opened up the escape hatch<sup>19</sup> and they were able to jump down into the ditch. They put down some of their own covering fire both

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ways and then scrambled up the side of the ditch and then booted it back ... about a 75 to 100 metre sprint down the route that the dozer had originally laid down. I got off the pintle-mount, came down, looked at my gunner, Corporal Dan Rosati, and we suited up, got our tac vest on. We slithered out through the side of the turret and through the back of the LAV. I don't know why we stopped, but I remember looking at the ground and seeing puffs of dirt kicking up all around our feet. I was thinking, "This is very weird and surreal." The whole time, right from the initial ambush until that point, for me the whole thing had been void of emotion. There was no fear, it was all kind of robotic, very methodical. I knew in my head it was real – that it only takes one round or one piece of shrapnel and it's all over – but there really wasn't any excitement of any kind. I felt nothing.

*Corporal Funnell, who had earlier risked his life to help with the dead and the injured from the G-Wagon, had been picked up by Niefer's LAV. He vividly remembers what happened after the section had exited the LAV through the escape hatch.*

We were thinking, "We need to get out of here, kind of now-ish. It's only a matter of time before the 82 [an 82mm recoilless rifle] starts firing at you. Just before I was about to get up and out the air sentry hatches, Sergeant Brent Crellin booted open the combat door and yelled, "Get out!" I pick up a C6, get out, go to fire, and the gas collar busted. The gas collar is a part that controls the gas, and without that piece, the action will not cycle. With a broken gas collar, it's manual cocking only. I shot about one burst and that was it. I had the biggest bolt-action rifle going. We run down into the ditch and make it to the Zettelmeyer where they're setting up a company casualty collection point. It was too close though to the action.

*When Niefer and Rosati left the LAV and began moving to the rear, they sat down in the ditch to catch their breath before carrying on. They looked back and Niefer realized he had to return to the abandoned LAV.*

Inside the vehicle was a bunch of weapons – M72s and C7s – left behind from the wounded and the dead. I thought, "The vehicle is going to get overrun. They're not going to be able to use it, but the



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last thing we want is those weapons falling into their hands.” I said to Dan, “We have to bring all these out.” So we jumped back into the LAV and we distributed the weapons. I think he had something like three M72s and I had a few. He also had a couple of rifles on his back and I had two or three on my back. We jumped out and that’s when we started our open dash down that 100 metres towards life, back to friendly lines. We sprinted back to where 8 Platoon had set up in the original position and they were still putting out supporting fire. We ran through their lines and there was what looked like a huge pile of dirt. We dove into it, only to find out it was just a pile of straw. So we came up coughing. It obviously wasn’t the cover we were looking for. So we looked around and I saw the rest of the section taking cover behind the Zettelmeyer ... that big engineering piece of equipment. It was armoured, so we thought, “Good place to go!”

The front end of the Zettelmeyer was positioned pretty much towards Objective Rugby, so we went behind it. We were all kind of huddled around the back end. I was kind of towards the edge of the right-hand side. I got a count of my section, got my numbers, made sure I had all my guys. Everyone had made it back without a scratch on them, unbelievable as it was. At that point the exhaustion just set in – it was 45 or 50 degrees, maybe more – and I was dry and my lungs were on fire. It felt like there was no moisture in my body.

*When Niefer’s section, including Corporal Funnell, had finally been able to exit the LAV and begin their withdrawal to the Zettelmeyer, Corporal Orr also began his slow trek in the dozer back towards safety.*

Once the escape hatch popped open, the guys in the LAV jumped out and started booting it out of there. Then the section commander came out. He knocked on my window and said, “Get the fuck out of here!” We’re not just talking to each other. Everybody is screaming and it’s intense. There is still firing going on. There are still RPGs flying everywhere. There are still bombs going off, dropped by the planes up above us. Stuff is dropping 50 to 100 metres away from us and it’s not going off. It was crazy. You can’t see anything. I can’t see any Taliban. I can’t see anybody moving around. When I started leaving, everybody left. I’m the slowest vehicle out there. I can only go three, four, maybe five

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kilometres an hour. So I start leaving and all these guys are trying to go around me ... “slow guy, get out of the way!” kind of thing.

The guys on foot jumped in another LAV, Private O'Rourke's vehicle, that pulled up and those inside were yelling, “Get in! Get in! Get in!” It was packed. When I crossed the breach, they escorted me back, away from the chaos. I got parked, so the ZL and the dozer were beside each other facing the White School. Beside me was a bale of hay. It was probably not the best place to be because it's not going to stop anything. I was kind of laughing nervously because I didn't know what was going on. I had no idea that two guys had died.<sup>20</sup> All I had was the personal radio and they talked to me once in a blue moon. So I see some guys by the hay bale and I'm like, “Move your tail, guys.” About four minutes later, the ZL got hit by an 82mm round. It's a tall machine ... a big, armoured German loader. All I see is black smoke and liquid. Everything close by got covered with diesel fuel and shrapnel. All I'm hearing on the radio is, “Holy fuck, I'm hit!” I said, “Hey, Hoop, you all right?” After all the chaos was over, I heard my section commander trying to call Hoop, asking him if he was able to move the ZL. “Hoop, Hoop, can you move the ZL?” At the same time that he was asking, I look over and I see Hoop. He's bleeding; he's hurt; he's burnt; and he's getting on a Blackhawk helicopter to go back to KAF.

*From Funnell's perspective at the casualty collection point:*

I was talking to Corporal Derick Lewis<sup>21</sup> who was setting it up and it's like, “We're in contact within 400 metres of here. We need to push back.” Just then, an 82mm round sailed through and killed Warrant Officer Frank Mellish. The sergeant-major, Master Warrant Officer John Barnes,<sup>22</sup> just took a concussion injury. It took down Lewis. It killed Private Will Cushley. It blew me back six or ten feet. Corporal Rodney Grubb was there, and he took a piece of shrapnel, but it was a minor injury.<sup>23</sup>

*Master Corporal Niefer was amongst those thrown by the blast.*

After we had got behind the Zettelmeyer, a rocket came screaming in. At first, I didn't think it hit because I remember looking over

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my right shoulder and seeing a flash. The immediate reaction of my body was to duck away from it and kind of get low. The next thing I know, I found myself on the ground and my face in the dirt. I knew it was a rocket, but I thought it may have flown over top of us, and for some reason, I thought that the force of it flying over top was enough to knock us down. I didn't realize it had impacted on the side of the vehicle. I remember sucking dirt and then starting to get up. My ears had a really intense ringing in them. It took a good ten seconds for that to go away. I kind of opened my eyes and got up on my knees. I looked to my right and saw Private Cushley lying there on his back, not making any moves at all. I thought he was unconscious. We were still taking incoming fire and the threat of another rocket coming in was pretty high. I crawled over to Will and grabbed hold of his vest and started hauling him towards the left-hand side of the vehicle to get away from where the rounds were coming in. I looked over and Warrant Mellish was on the ground and he was screaming. Ruffolo had gone over to him and started applying a tourniquet to his leg. He thought he got the major bleeding and he started hauling him off to the side of the vehicle as well. It was then Ruffolo noticed that a piece of fragment had gone in either through or just above the warrant's vest. It pierced through his chest and he was gurgling out blood. Unfortunately, he didn't make it.<sup>24</sup>

As I look back on it, I realize I had been standing in perfect line between Cushley and Mellish, and they both were killed. There were a couple of guys in front of me who took shrapnel wounds. The sergeant-major behind me was knocked to the ground. He took blast injuries. And I was right in the centre of the thing ... totally unscathed. I think I was still using my little glass bubble because I didn't have a scratch on me other than the ringing in my ears. So we pulled them onto the left-hand side of the vehicle out of the way of the incoming fire. That's when the medics jumped on Will and started going to work on him, but he also passed away. We then got the rest of our guys who were still functional and set up a little defensive perimeter around the casualties to provide whatever covering fire we could.

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*As if the strike on the Zettelmeyer was not quite enough, after all that had already happened, another terrifying event was in the offing. O'Rourke remembers what occurred next:*

At this point, I was up on top of the LAV, and that's when a big, 500-pound bomb comes out of nowhere. It hits the ground without detonating, and then all we can do is sit there and watch it pop up and start to skip and tumble towards us. It looked just like this giant football flying through the air end over end, and my only thought was, "If that goes off, I'm dead." I ducked down and closed my eyes and just hoped it was done. I heard the big thud. It finally stopped without going off and we all breathed a pretty big sigh of relief. Then I got back to work loading the LAV.

Bullets continued to fly all around us. Looking back on it, I can't really recall ever seeing any of the Taliban up close. It was morning and we had daylight, but they were ghosts. At one point, when I was back at the G-Wagon applying first aid on the doc, I caught a glimpse of sandaled feet running through the pot fields, but I was so focused on the job in front of me that I didn't see anything more. Even after we started to withdraw, I was so focused on doing what I had to do that I didn't see anything else. The whole thing only seemed to me to last for 30 seconds, but apparently it was somewhere along the lines of five or six hours.

After the bomb dropped without going off, Sergeant Fawcett took off because the sergeant-major was hit so he assumed the position of the sergeant-major and decided what the casualty collection point was going to be. He got the collection point together, we pulled back to there, and that's when everything kind of set in for everybody. No one could really wrap their head around what had just happened. I think most of us were in shock and completely at a loss as to what to do. I was just so full of adrenaline, but also sorrow after seeing my warrant officer killed and then seeing them still extracting bodies. We were stunned.

*As they began their withdrawal, Corporal Funnell also found himself trying to sort out in his mind exactly what had happened. He too reflected back on the day's events.*

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A 500-pound bomb came in and fell short, rolled 25 metres ahead of us. Thankfully, it didn't go off. We were there for a while and then an American SF patrol came up and started giving us a hand there at the Zettelmeyer. Then we all started making our way back on our withdrawal. We were five hours, six hours maybe, in the kill zone. The Taliban had a textbook ambush set up. As soon as we rolled in, there was a horseshoe around us, and then when we punched through that, they had a secondary horseshoe, which was even bigger. So we pretty much drove straight into it.

Losing our warrant [Nolan] right off the bat was pretty significant because that's, I'd say, more than 60 percent of your platoon's knowledge and experience right there. Corporals are fairly smart, but you're not going to, in six years or eight years, know the same as a warrant who's been in for a while. He was qualified. He was probably one of the best people I ever worked under in my whole career. He gave you pretty wide arcs to work in. If you screwed up, you were on your own. But if you were doing good, he'd tell you so. If you needed help, he was there.

I never got to fire my M72 that day. The last thing Warrant Nolan said to me was, "You want to fire that today, don't you?" It was while we were making our second breach and I went over to the G-Wagon and started talking to him. He was dead the next time I saw him.

*As he sat in his dozer during the strike on the Zettelmeyer, the full weight of reality set in and Orr likewise realized the enormity of what had just occurred. As before, he was frustrated because he was aware that there was very little he could do. Events were happening around him that he was largely powerless to influence.*

Everybody that was around that area got hit with shrapnel. It killed Warrant Mellish. Now I'm like, "Do I get out? Do I try to help him?" Then I saw an American medic and then our medics and our guys come up to the ZL. When I looked down, I saw the warrant there. He wasn't moving and there was blood everywhere. There were other guys wounded. They were safe behind the ZL because it's an armoured vehicle, but because of the shrapnel, it took them out.

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So there were a couple of guys injured and obviously the warrant is dying. So I'm looking there and I'm like, "What do I do? I'm by myself. I'm not in the LAV with eight guys. All I have is this dozer." Afterward, we found out that the Taliban were targeting heavy equipment and that's why they hit the ZL. We – Hoop and I – were the ones that got the LAVs into the place; we got them to the school without using the roads; we could get them out if we had to ... which made us a target.

Throughout the whole tour, we didn't use a single road that was already there. Obviously, IEDs are on the roads. That's how the tour before us got caught because they would go in on the roads that were already there. But now the Taliban got all screwed up because we're coming through their grape fields and here come these LAVs. We fill in the wadi and they're waiting by the road, but all of a sudden these trees start crashing down on them and it's like *Jurassic Park*. Trees are coming down and they see them shaking and then the LAVs come in. It's totally new to the Taliban. They had no idea that that was going to happen. That's why we were the number one target for a while, because they realized that we were getting them in and they couldn't do anything about it.

After the ZL got hit, the battle group said, "Okay, everybody pull back." So we pulled back about a kilometre to the middle of the Arghandab River.<sup>25</sup> You could still see smoke from the school, it was on fire. The ZL was still smoking. That's when one of our master corporals came up and asked me if I was all right. I said, "Yeah, I'm good." And then he said that Shane Stachnik had died. I'd known Shane for pretty much my whole career. Even at that point, I thought, "It can't be real." It doesn't happen, a buddy of yours dying like that. And then I'm by myself again. He closed the door and I have nobody to talk to. So I'm sitting there again and now all I have to do is think because we're waiting, we weren't going to pull back all the way yet. I'm sitting there thinking that my buddy just died. I just started thinking about how he got hit. How did he look? The battle went on for hours, so just a few hours ago I had seen him. And now I'm never going to see him again. I'm wondering why the LAV didn't protect him. I saw the LAV get hit. I didn't see anybody

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sticking out. Did it penetrate? There were a lot of “what ifs.” What if he wasn’t there? Why did the G-Wagon and the engineer LAV go in first? Should it have been infantry? If his LAV wasn’t there or if someone else’s LAV had been there, would the RPG have missed? Those things went through my mind and I had nobody to talk to.

I looked over and they were taking the bodies to the LAV and everyone started moving back. That kind of hit me pretty hard. After seeing all that firepower, now you see everybody pulling back. Nobody is left up there. Just Hoop’s ZL and the LAV in the ditch.<sup>26</sup> They just left them there and a couple of days later they dropped a couple of 500-pound bombs on them.<sup>27</sup> The ZL is made of magnesium – most of it – so for about four or five days straight all you would see is sparks. A piece of magnesium would go up and the flame, from where I was, looked about eight feet high. But I was two kilometres away so it’s hard to imagine how intense that fire really was. And it burned for about a week because magnesium burns for a while.

*The loss of a LAV and the many sustained casualties meant that the remainder of the platoon had to overload the remaining vehicles to effect their withdrawal. Niefer recalls:*

We eventually got the word, “Okay, we’ll start loading up the wounded and dead into the vehicles.” One LAV had the ramp down. We took Warrant Mellish and laid him on top of some other bodies and then we were all loaded into the vehicle, so it was jammed. I’d never seen guys jammed like that into a LAV before. Me and Master Corporal Max Smith<sup>28</sup> – my 3IC – helped the sergeant-major walk over the bodies. I think he had some type of collapsed lung – something in his chest was pretty serious – but he was jammed in there trying to breathe. It was just insane. Then we still had Will. So we put him on the back ramp, laid him across, and then we gave the word. So Master Corporal Smith, myself, and our medic kind of held on to Will as we drove away. I remember having to sit on Warrant Mellish’s bloodied leg. It was the only place I could sit. I could tell that it was him because of the tourniquet and the blood.

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We managed to get back to the new casualty collection point in the middle of the Arghandab River and Master Corporal Smith and I decided that we'd send the guys away, unload the bodies, and put them into the body bags so that the others wouldn't have to deal with that. We unloaded them and the first thing we did was take care of Will. So we took care of the bodies and then we joined some other section – I can't remember who – and pulled back to where we had started on the mountainside.

*When Orr got back to Ma'sum Ghar, the "what ifs" were still eating away at him; others who had been involved in the battle were asking questions as well.*

We were talking amongst ourselves. They had previously told us there would be three days of bombardment and that they were going to just flatten the area before the attack. But then, suddenly, a day or so early, they said, "We're going in tomorrow morning." We were asking some of the leaders, the sergeants, why we went in so early. Maybe some anger came out of it. Why did our intelligence say there was nobody there? They didn't see any movement around. Then the CO of the battle group pulled us in. He talked to us about the fact that he too was upset about the decision to go in early because it wasn't his decision. It came down from a lot higher than him. I think the decision was made because no movement was happening there and they thought they should take it when things were quiet.

Those "what ifs" also had me thinking about if they'd shot at me first, then maybe those guys wouldn't have died. I also thought that maybe I could have done things better. I was pretty much a new heavy equipment operator going into that battle. I got my course in 2005 and I went on tour in 2006. Now that I have been operating for a few years, when they say there's a LAV out there that you have to get, my first instinct now would be to go right to the back of it because when a vehicle is stuck, the best way to get it out is to look at the way it went in. You want to try to pull it out on the same tracks it went in on. I should have known to go to the back and hook up from the back and pull it out. But I had no communication, so how would I have talked to the LAV driver to tell him that I was behind



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him? The guys told me later that I moved it forward enough that they could get out through the escape hatch. They said that I saved their lives. But to me, getting the LAV out would have been better. I picture that LAV every day. I picture the LAV right now. I know I could have pulled it out. Heavy equipment operators are brutally stubborn. It's like when we get stuck, we'll try to get unstuck for an hour before we ask for help. We're really stubborn that way and I just see it and it bugs me to death. When I heard Ruffolo and the boys say that I did help them by pulling them forward enough – it did move but it didn't move very far – it helps me a little bit. It makes me feel better.

*Niefer was looking forward to a good night's sleep, but a nasty reaction to the day's momentous events soon set in. As well, unaware of it at the time, another real-life nightmare was soon to occur that he would be intimately involved with.*

So I thought that that was it and we tried to relax that night. I mean, we had kind of just shown up. We had no LAV. We had no vehicle. Later they called in air strikes and blew up the LAV we'd left behind with 1000-pounders and whatnot. That's when things became a little bit more real. So that night, when I went to sleep, I started having dreams, just kind of reliving everything. I remember waking up and thinking to myself, "This is crazy!" Then I told myself, "Don't keep thinking about stupid shit. Think happy shit." And so I thought about barbecues back home with my wife, friends and family, and I had the best sleep of my life that night on that rocky mountainside. That was the last time I ever had any bad dreams.

But then, unfortunately, the next morning, at about 0500 or 0530, we were woken up by an American A-10 strike. Eight Platoon and 7 Platoon were side-by-side on the mountainside, separated only by a small rise. I remember I was lying down on the ground, kind of just opening my eyes to the light that had come up and kind of taking my sweet time getting up when all of a sudden I heard a huge noise. I looked up and there was a waterfall of sparks raining down on us. I remember turning over on my stomach and covering my head with my hands and just waiting for the shit to fall. It was the

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sparks from the high explosives from the A-10. So we jumped into the back of whatever vehicles were there and took cover, making sure there was nothing else incoming. Then we ran over that crest and we were literally stopped in our tracks. You could see 38 guys from 8 Platoon – plus or minus one or two – all lying there in one area in a pool of blood. Thirty-eight guys! It's just insane how many that is.

*Private O'Rourke was also nearby when the off-course A-10 strike landed on 8 Platoon, injuring many soldiers that he knew personally.*

Once we were out of the firefight, the fatigue really set in. I didn't realize it at the time, but during the battle there was so much dust kicked up and I had gotten so dehydrated that I was literally spitting mud. My body was completely exhausted, so after I got some food into me, I tried to get as much sleep as I could. I was completely spent. I didn't want to move, but I couldn't sleep. My eyes just couldn't close. We got our orders that we were going to go back there in the morning, and no one was happy about it.

Then the morning rolled around, September 4<sup>th</sup>, but it looked like the 4<sup>th</sup> of July. It was an A-10 strike that went off-course. I was standing right below the ridge where it hit and it looked just like one of those handheld sparklers, except it was a huge one. I dove for cover and then someone shouted, "It's an A-10 strike! Get all the first aid kits you can!" After a moment I realized that the bomb had come right down on top of 8 Platoon who were down in this little gully on the other side of the ridge. I know a lot of guys in 8 Platoon, so I was sure to grab every piece of first aid kit I had. I came up over the ridge and it was just a sea of bodies. Everybody was hurt. Everybody was hit. Nobody was moving. My first thought was that the whole platoon was dead. We immediately went back into our first aid training and went to work. As it turned out, there was only one fatal casualty,<sup>29</sup> which is still horrible, but better than the whole platoon.

The A-10 strike had put about three dozen guys out of commission for at least a week or two. They had to reconstitute all of 8 Platoon. They had to get guys to come back from Canada just because guys

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were hurt so bad. I sat there with my buddy who was hit. I sat there with him, kept him covered when the dust would blow in and then helped put him on the helicopter. That was pretty much it. We ended up going for the ramp ceremonies a day later. The ceremony was important ... it was a huge pay of respect to your fallen comrades to see the whole base shut down and line up. But even more important is the support you get from your section. It's your own comrades that get you through it and keep you going.

*The events of the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> of September were just the start of Op MEDUSA for Charles Company. As Niefer attests, however, their efforts would not be in vain:*

So that pretty much marked the beginning of Op MEDUSA for us. It was definitely not on a good note. Op MEDUSA went for a good month, and in the end, Charles Company was the one to go in and take Objective Rugby. We sat there on Objective Rugby for a good week or so in a defensive position. It took us probably a good week of advance to contact, slow approach, and we ended up taking it with no more casualties on our side. Not necessarily no more bad luck. My section alone had three IEDs or mines or something within a three-week period through that whole process and we went through a lot of vehicles ... three or four as I remember. We became known as "3-1 Boom" because every time we'd go out, we'd hit something. If I was a cat, I had probably used a good seven or eight lives in that first month alone. So I was getting a little antsy about whether I could stretch out the last one for the remainder of the tour. But thank God, things got a little better. We were still in contact quite often for the remainder of the tour. Charles Company was there for seven months by the time we rotated out and for the entire tour – probably a good six months of it – we were in the field.

We would be out in the field for about two months, hard living on rations, no showers. Basically just what you were carrying on your back. No laundry unless you found a well and you could rinse something out. We were living on the rocks and dirt. We did that for a couple of months and then we'd rotate in for about two days and then we'd go back out for another two months. After MEDUSA, we moved

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into a strong point along Route Summit<sup>30</sup> so it got a little bit better. We weren't doing advance to contact every day. We were now on the defensive. We could kind of step back. We still had some large battles around those strong points, but they were less intense than the 3<sup>rd</sup> of September. The 3<sup>rd</sup> was really what I consider getting our baptism by fire ... and it hurt. It was absolutely insane. All the subsequent battles after that were nothing. They paled in comparison and they were very relaxed, which sounds kind of weird. I mean, a "relaxed" battle? Guys were joking, passing gum along the line and stuff. But in comparison to the 3<sup>rd</sup>, it was almost like being on the ranges.

*Corporal Orr also had a relatively easier time of it for the last part of his tour ... finally getting to operate a Badger, a piece of kit that he and the other Canadians certainly could have used at the White School.*

I'm not a qualified Badger operator, but one of the guys got hurt, so they pulled me out of heavy equipment and put me in the Badger for the last three months of the tour. When I got that – having a radio and everything – I felt a lot better. I could talk to my section commander and to anybody I wanted to, and I could hear everything. I got scared a little bit, though, because I could hear the intelligence reports, like, "20 expected Taliban coming from the west." But I got to see two different worlds, and it was a lot harder in the dozer world with no radio.

*Private O'Rourke was rotated back to Canada halfway through the tour, but he took away many memories of excellent leadership and camaraderie.*

When it comes to leadership, Sergeant Fawcett did everything exactly right. He took time to assess the situation and got done what needed to be done. He did exactly what he needed to do and what he had to do. I've heard stories about crew commanders cowering in their turrets. When there's no one else in the LAV but you and your driver, you don't want your crew commander weeping in the corner. All my leadership that day was fantastic. That's why I think, even though it was horrible casualty-wise, it was still a success. In the end we took the objective. We took the White School. No other army has been able to do that. And when I think of Charles Company ... fantastic. They are one of the best companies that I have served with

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so far. Every man, every soldier in that company that day, did what they had to do to hold down the fort ... to make sure that everybody got out alive and safe.

*Corporal Funnell also had high praise for the soldiers of his platoon.*

Everybody in the platoon stepped up and did what needed to get done. Nobody shut 'er down. Nobody found a hole and laid down. It's "close with and destroy," which everybody in 7 Platoon did. As a platoon, we were very tight, close and all hard working. You had your jokers and you had guys that were fairly serious ... and it was all good. After September 3<sup>rd</sup>, the morale within the company went down significantly because we were down a platoon plus. Two of our most experienced warrants – Nolan and Mellish – were down. It was pretty rough. But nobody shut 'er down. After MEDUSA, we kept our morale up by just talking to each other, shooting the shit and carrying on. You just carry on. It's not that anything is changed. It's just that you get used to dealing with it better. It's just that you don't really stop and think about it.

*Numerous decorations for bravery were awarded for actions taken on 3 September 2006 given the intensity of the combat during the opening stages of Op MEDSUA. Master Corporal Niefer sums up the matter best:*

I received my M.M.V. for the 3<sup>rd</sup> in particular ... for going back-and-forth, up-and-down on the pintle-mount, providing covering fire from the highly exposed position to facilitate the evacuation of "friendlies." My driver, Jason Ruffolo, got the same award for a combination of going out to hook up that cable under fire voluntarily, as well as for when we took what they think was an 82mm rocket behind the Zettelmeyer. Most of the guys jumped to cover behind the vehicle, except for the wounded, whereas he went right away to Warrant Mellish without taking cover first. As well, there was Private Mike O'Rourke in 3-1 Charlie. He got the M.M.V. for consistently traversing back-and-forth between the G-Wagon and his LAV. Jason Funnell, who also received the M.M.V., was with him. Sergeant Scott Fawcett got the M.M.V. for his leadership. First, he took over the platoon warrant's duties and then, when the

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sergeant-major went down, he took over his job. But he also went back-and-forth with Funnell and O'Rourke, bringing casualties back and exposing himself to machine gun fire. Corporal Sean Teal got the S.M.V. He was the driver of the G-Wagon. He pulled the bodies out of the G-Wagon, which was on fire, and he laid down covering fire with his C7 to protect the medic and the interpreter. He maintained order and good leadership as well.

*Niefer, Orr, Funnell and O'Rourke had varying reactions to the fact that they had been awarded the Medal of Military Valour. Niefer, for instance, doesn't like to talk about it when he's with his fellow soldiers.*

It's kind of weird. In terms of being with your peers, it's almost embarrassing. Not ashamed – it's a great honour – but it's not something you talk about at work, that would seem like gloating or bragging or something. It's awkward even talking about it just to my family. I mean, why are there some of us who got recognition, whereas a lot of guys didn't? When I look at the medal, I immediately think of my section of guys, so really I would say it's almost like an award for the section.

*Corporal Funnell felt that his actions during the battle were what he was trained to do.*

That's what we do and we're good at it. But nobody does anything on their own. The whole platoon was actually doing their jobs. Yeah, I ran back-and-forth to the LAV and G-Wagon twice, or three times, but we were still just doing our job as infantry. You never leave a wounded Royal behind. Everybody was working with you. Winning the medal makes you feel good, but at the same time, there are other guys that are right beside you putting first aid on a guy or whatever. Everybody knew their job.

*Corporal Orr was told early on that he was being put forward for some type of recognition, but he was surprised to learn that it was the M.M.V.*

A superior told me, "I put you in because I watched you and I've got stories from people that saw what you were doing and said, 'What the hell is a dozer doing between all those LAVs?'" When I saw that it

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just blew my mind. I put you up for a commendation.” I said, “Okay, thanks. That sounds awesome!” What do you say? I was told to do something; I went in; I did my job; I came out. I knew something was coming, but I didn’t know that it was going to be so big. My dad is not an emotional guy. He’s a retired military engineer. He did exactly what I do ... heavy equipment operator. And he cried. You don’t see that very often, my dad crying. It was cool. It was really neat to see. But you know, if you would have told me pre-tour what I’d be involved in, I would have said, “I’m not doing that. No freak-ing way am I doing that! I’m not going in like that.” If someone had said, “You’re going to go in and you’re going to get shot at to win this medal,” I would have said, “I don’t want the medal.” It’s the same with the V.C. If some guy came up to me and said, “I bet you’d like to have that too,” I would say, “No, because then I would have to be put in a situation that was out of my hands, and I don’t want to be put in that kind of scenario.” But when you’re put in it, you do what you do. I think the Medal of Military Valour is an awesome honour. It’s unreal. I don’t go around flaunting it. But when somebody says to somebody else, “He won the medal of valour,” and that person comes up and shakes my hand, it feels great. It’s probably one of the best feelings in the world. I have a lot of respect for a medal like that. It doesn’t get any better.

*Like his fellow soldiers, Private O’Rourke felt that his M.M.V. should have been shared with others who were there that day.*

I would like to dedicate that medal to all of the boys in Charles Company especially. I don’t think of it as just a medal for me. I think of it as something for everybody that was with me that day. Everybody that was on that battlefield that day deserved it. Don’t get me wrong, I’m proud to wear it, but I was just doing my job, just like every other soldier on that field was doing their job. Maybe I was in the wrong place at the wrong time, but I feel that the whole company should have been decorated for the feats that were accomplished and overcome that day.

I remember awhile after we had cleared Objective Rugby, we were driving through the Panjwai District again and I said, “Where are

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we?” They said, “Remember Objective Rugby?” I said, “Yes.” They said, “Well, we’re here.” It was crowded with people. The markets were back open. We made a difference.

But there were more than one or two guys on that battlefield. There was all of 7 Platoon, all of 8 Platoon, the Engineers, everybody in the task force, everybody did their part. Everybody did what they had to do to ensure a successful withdrawal of casualties and of everybody that was still alive. The task force, 1RCR, was good to go, bang on. So I wear the medal with great pride. I don’t look at it as if I’m sort of a “super soldier” or something, because we were all just doing our job. That’s it and that’s all.

MASTER CORPORAL NIEFER, CORPORAL FUNNELL, CORPORAL ORR AND PRIVATE O’ROURKE WERE INVESTED WITH THEIR MEDALS OF MILITARY VALOUR BY THE THEN-GOVERNOR GENERAL AND COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF OF CANADA, HER EXCELLENCY THE RIGHT HONOURABLE MICHAËLLE JEAN, AT RIDEAU HALL ON 12 OCTOBER 2007.

## NOTES

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- 1 *Canada Gazette*, Part I, Vol. 141, No. 25 (23 June 2007), 1717.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Ibid., 1717-1718. See also, “Valour,” *Canadian Military Journal*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (Summer 2007), 4-6.
- 5 For his service in Afghanistan, Master Corporal Lance Thomas Hooper received the M.S.M.; his citation appears in Appendix 2.
- 6 See Chapter 6.
- 7 Soviet forces occupied Afghanistan for a decade, from late 1979 until the late 1980s.
- 8 For his actions on 3 September 2006, Corporal Sean Teal received the S.M.V.; his citation appears in Appendix 1.



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9 The apparatus normally used to feed ammunition was damaged, thus forcing Niefer to adopt different measures.

10 Niefer explains further, “Due to the existing ammo can mounted to the machine gun being jammed on, when it was empty, I could not remove it. I had to dump the ammo out of the new box, and then refeed the ammo into the empty old box jammed on the weapon system, neatly reloading the ammo bin before I could reload the weapon and carry on firing.”

11 For his actions on 3 September 2006, Sergeant Derek John Scott Fawcett received the M.M.V.; his citation appears in Appendix 1.

12 Corporal Richard Furoy.

13 Warrant Officer Richard Nolan.

14 Both O'Rourke and Funnell found this to be a particularly difficult job as both of them regarded the warrant as a father figure, someone whom they admired and looked up to.

15 That is to say, the engineering LAV that was ambushed along with the G-Wagon immediately following the breach.

16 That is to say, Niefer's LAV, the one that ran into the ditch, a different LAV than Stachnik's.

17 For his actions on 3 September 2006, Corporal Joseph Jason Lee Ruffolo received the M.M.V.; his citation appears in Appendix 1.

18 Niefer adds, “This part is a bit hazy for me. I believe the question was arranged more around if we would attempt to bring in another vehicle to help dislodge our LAV. That's when we decided to leave it. We needed to get out of there while we could.”

19 Niefer clarifies, “The escape hatch is a mini-door inside the back ramp. The ramp could not drop all the way down, but the small door built into it could open and that's how everyone got out.”

20 Being, of course, Stachnik and Nolan.

21 For his actions on 3 September 2006, Derick Lewis received the M.S.M.; his citation appears in Appendix 2.

22 For his service in Afghanistan, Master Warrant Officer John Gerard Barnes received the M.S.M.; his citation appears in Appendix 2.

23 By way of additional information, “Frank, as 8 Platoon Warrant Officer, was setting up the casualty collection point in the rear, and when he heard Rick [WO Nolan] was in trouble, he came forward to try to retrieve Rick's body. He had to ask permission first. Frank (leading), Master Warrant Officer John Barnes (middle) and Private Will

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Cushley (rear) were behind the armoured vehicle [the ZL] making their way to Rick's body in the LAV when it got hit by an RPG, throwing all three of them a great distance." Correspondence received by Craig Leslie Mantle from the family of WO Frank Mellish, 17 May 2012.

24 Some discrepancy exists here. The family of WO Frank Mellish was later told that he died instantly from his wounds. In keeping with the decision not to investigate the details of individual stories as related to CFLI during the initial interviews, no attempt has been made to reconcile the two versions of events. Correspondence received by Craig Leslie Mantle from the family of WO Frank Mellish, 17 May 2012.

25 In the dry season, the Arghandab is pretty much a dry riverbed.

26 Being, of course, Niefer's LAV.

27 In order to prevent the enemy from capturing a trophy and any usable equipment.

28 For his actions on 3 September 2006, Master Corporal Max Robert Smith was Mentioned in Dispatches; his citation appears in Appendix 2.

29 Private Mark Anthony Graham was killed on 4 September 2006 as a result of the A-10 strike.

30 A 4.5 kilometre road construction initiative in Kandahar Province, defended by Canadians and intended to facilitate commerce.

DND, KA2005-R106-0157D, MCPL KEN FENNER



G-WAGONS ON THE MOVE.

DND, AR2006-H037-0016A, SGT CAROLE MORISSETTE



PSYCHOLOGICAL OPERATIONS.



DND, AR2005-A01-286A, SGT JERRY KEAN

CONVOY PROTECTION.



DND, IS2004-0660A, CPL ROBERT BOTTRILL

DOWNTOWN: WITH SO MANY POTENTIAL THREATS,  
KEEPING A CONVOY SAFE IN AN URBAN  
ENVIRONMENT WAS A CHALLENGE.

DND, AR2005-A01-238A, SGT JERRY KEAN



THE AFTERMATH OF A VEHICLE-BORNE  
SUICIDE ATTACK ON A CANADIAN CONVOY.

DND, AR2005-A01-344A, SGT JERRY KEAN



THE QRF ON SCENE:  
RESPONDING TO A SUICIDE ATTACK.





DND, AR2006-G071-0053, MCPL YVES GEMUS

A MEETING OF MINDS:  
AN IMPROMPTU *SHURA* IN THE FIELD.



DND, AR2006-P009-0028, SGT LOU PENNEY

THROUGH THE DOOR: CANADIAN SOLDIERS  
CLEARING A MUD-WALL COMPOUND.

DND, AR2006-A026-0010D, CPL ROBIN MUGRIDGE



ON ITS WAY TO A FOB, A CANADIAN SUPPLY CONVOY LEAVES KAF AND KANDAHAR CITY.

DND, AR2007-Z038-03, CPL SIMON DUCHESNE



CANADIAN SUCCESSES DEPENDED HEAVILY ON TEAMWORK, FROM THE LOWEST LEVELS TO THE HIGHEST.



DND, AR2010-0320-15, SGT DAREN KRAUS

CANADIAN SOLDIERS WAITING FOR EXTRACTION.



DND, AR2008-K120-17, MCPL KARL MCKAY

AT THE SHARP END: A SOLDIER USING HIS  
RIFLE SCOPE TO SCAN THE AREA.



DND, AR2006-A020-0016A, CPL ROBIN MUGRIDGE



SEARCHING A CAVE FOR WEAPONS NEAR A FOB.

DND, AR2008-K124-68, MCPL KARL MCKAY



CANADIAN AND AFGHAN SOLDIERS  
PROCESSING A CACHE OF WEAPONS AND  
MATERIAL USED TO MAKE IEDS.



DND, AR2010-0320-33, SGT DAREN KRAUS

**“HARD CHARGERS”: A CANADIAN PATROL AT REST.  
THE LOOK OF EXHAUSTION IS EVIDENT.**



DND, AR2006-A047-0004D, CPL ROBIN MUGRIDGE

**THE COST: MORE THAN 150 CANADIANS  
LOST THEIR LIVES IN AFGHANISTAN.**

# CHAPTER 9

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## *BATTLING HARD WITH THE AMERICANS*

CAPTAIN DEREK DAVID PROHAR

MEDAL OF MILITARY VALOUR ■ 5-12 SEPTEMBER 2006

*“IT WAS EITHER DO OR DIE. THERE WAS NO OTHER OPTION.”*

Assigned as liaison officer with the United States Special Forces in Afghanistan during the battle at Sperwan Ghar, from **SEPTEMBER 5-12, 2006**, Captain Prohar operated as the rear machine gunner on the battalion commander's vehicle. He was wounded by an improvised explosive device during an intense enemy ambush. Despite his injuries, he continued returning fire and assisted the commander with the control of the attack, which resulted in the successful seizing of key terrain. Captain Prohar's courage and actions earned him the respect of the allied soldiers of the United States Special Forces.<sup>1</sup>

DEREK PROHAR GREW UP IN THE FARMING COMMUNITY OF AVONLEA, SASKATCHEWAN, SOUTH OF REGINA. HE OBTAINED HIS BACHELOR'S OF ARTS DEGREE, WITH A MAJOR IN POLITICAL SCIENCE, AT MCGILL UNIVERSITY IN MONTRÉAL, QUÉBEC. DURING HIS FOUR YEARS AT MCGILL, HE PLAYED DEFENCE ON THE VARSITY HOCKEY TEAM AND WON THE RICHARD POUND TROPHY FOR PROFICIENCY AND LEADERSHIP IN ATHLETICS FOLLOWING THE 1997/98 SEASON, HIS FINAL YEAR AT UNIVERSITY. IN 1999, HE WAS ACCEPTED INTO THE CF AS AN INFANTRY OFFICER AND DID HIS BASIC TRAINING AT CFB GAGETOWN IN NEW BRUNSWICK. HE WAS POSTED IN 2001 TO 3PPCLI IN EDMONTON, ALBERTA. WITH THE RANK OF LIEUTENANT, HE DEPLOYED AS A PLATOON COMMANDER TO AFGHANISTAN DURING OP APOLLO, LANDING IN KANDAHAR IN FEBRUARY 2002. AFTER HIS TOUR, HE RETURNED TO THE BATTALION IN EDMONTON AS THE TRAINING OFFICER, A POSITION THAT HE HELD FOR TWO YEARS. IN 2004, HE ENTERED THE LAND FORCE TECHNICAL STAFF PROGRAM OF THE DEPARTMENT OF APPLIED MILITARY SCIENCE AT KINGSTON'S RMCC. WHILE THERE, HE LEARNED THAT HE WOULD BE GOING BACK TO AFGHANISTAN. HE DEPLOYED AGAIN IN FEBRUARY 2006.

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*Speaking generally about his second tour:*

In Afghanistan, I had a staff position as “Liaison Officer to Special Forces” ... basically doing the coordination between conventional forces and NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] Special Forces. If the Special Forces came up with an operation, I would bring it back to my headquarters and sort out any conflicting details with some of the other conventional units or any other units that were in the area. Competing priorities would be identified or prioritized by a higher commander at that time. The chief of staff was a guy by the name of Lieutenant-Colonel Shane Schreiber.<sup>2</sup> I had worked with him in 2002 when he was a company commander on our roto.<sup>3</sup> The liaison position was not one that had a whole bunch of details. You didn’t know what you were going to be doing at any given moment. Colonel Schreiber threw me into it and said, “This is what I want from you.” And I went from there. It wasn’t a position that we’d have done during normal peacetime. It was something we sort of made work while we were over there. There was no template for it. When you’re a platoon commander or a company commander – a position that we’ve been doing for a number of years – there’s a certain checklist that you have to go down and people you have to go through, but in this case there just wasn’t much detail as to what it entailed. The way I went about it was *ad hoc*. “Don’t blow each other up!” is basically what I got.

*Captain Prohar was pleasantly surprised at the reception that he received from the people he was assigned to work with.*

I wasn’t expecting to be accepted as well as I was. I’m not a Special Forces soldier, never have been. I’m a conventional guy through and through. When I went there, I didn’t expect to get a plethora of information ... not just from the Americans or even the Canadians, but from all the other allies there. I thought the secretive black world of Special Forces was going to have me spending the whole nine months over there cracking the code, but they welcomed me with open arms, and most of the allies were more than happy to bring me in on the planning sessions in order to keep RC South happy about what was going on. There was no blue-on-blue.<sup>4</sup>

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The lines of operation were at least coordinated somewhat so we could get the best effect. That's what surprised me the most. It didn't take me long to get into that world, although there was a steep learning curve. Special Forces are a unique breed to begin with, but everyone I dealt with was a consummate professional. And that professionalism throughout the Special Forces world was fantastic. Obviously the acronyms and certain details may have been a little different, but the speed at which they went about doing things was impressive. In the conventional army, sometimes it takes a long time to work through the checks and balances. In the Special Forces world, the checks and balances are the people and the way they train them. They can put together an operation that's bang-on and extremely well-coordinated in half the time that we sometimes take. We obviously have different constraints in the conventional army, but they do things with a professionalism and speed that was daunting at first, but once you got into it, it wasn't that bad.

*Despite the fact that he was working with people from different countries with their own way of doing business, Prohar found the levels of cooperation and understanding quite remarkable.*

There's the language difference and there are cultural differences, but they're such a small tight-knit group. A lot of the guys knew each other already ... even from different countries. Any differences were quickly overcome by their professionalism. Some details of what they do may be a little different and some of their equipment might be different as well, but nothing that's hugely insurmountable.

*A trained infantry officer, Prohar found it difficult to stay behind when his peers went outside the wire bringing the fight to the enemy.*

For the majority of my tour, I was KAF-bound. I would go out with the generals sometimes to visit the Special Forces in and about Kandahar. But for the most part, my job was in KAF itself. I'd go and liaise with the different units out on operation and bring back documents. When Op MEDUSA<sup>5</sup> was planned in August of '06, I felt that I should be out in the field and act as the relay back to headquarters, because in a big operation like that, timing is essential.

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I accepted the task with open arms because a good infantry officer never wants to be at a desk. Any infantry officer worth his salt would rather be in the field than in the office. You get fleeting moments of command time throughout your career. If you're lucky, you'll get three or four. If you're not, you'll maybe get one or two. Command time is always of the essence. If you see guys out there actually doing their job in the field, that's where you want to be ... with the soldiers, leading men. If you're back as a staff officer, although that's important and sometimes more important, it's not where you want to be. There's a saying, "The worst day in the field is better than the best day in the office."

When I was ordered out into the field, it was with a company of American Green Berets that I hadn't met yet. I didn't know any of them or their personalities. Obviously the interpersonal relationships were important out there, so I was a little bit worried about that and about how they'd feel about a Canadian staff officer jumping onto one of their Hum-Vees. For all they knew, I could have been a liability. But we very quickly became friends, or at least professional cohorts, and we worked together well. That was the biggest thing though ... not knowing the guys that I was about to go out with and eventually risk our lives together with. You always try a little harder when you're with a new group.

When I went out in the field, I was with an American major. I was with the headquarters element which consisted of one Hum-Vee with an interpreter and three other guys ... a gunner, a driver and the commander. One of my first thoughts was, "What in the hell have I got myself into?" I was sitting in the back of an American Hum-Vee in a welded-on car seat from a Toyota *Corolla* with a C6 machine gun and was assigned as the rear machine gunner on this vehicle. There was no armour on it whatsoever. I made sure I did all my specific weapons drills right. I'd help the guys out as much as I could. Then if there were ever any questions as to what the Canadians were doing on the north side of the river or what the RCR Battle Group task was for Op MEDUSA, I was the guy to answer that. There was a "feeling-out" period. My duties for the first couple of days included handing out water, cleaning my machine gun, making

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sure nobody shot at us and calling back to my headquarters to let them know what was going on. After a while, I guess either out of necessity or perhaps they thought that maybe I was at least a decent guy, our company commander made me the XO [Executive Officer] of the company. They had left their 2IC back in their FOB to take care of the camp and they were without one so I got the job by default. When the commander was gone, I was working the radios and doing that kind of stuff ... running the Command Post.

*By being given these extra responsibilities, Prohar felt that the Americans had come to trust him.*

It took about three or four days and, in *that* environment, three or four days was a lifetime. It's baptism by fire. We weren't actually under fire at that specific point, but it was a good feeling, although you didn't have time to really think about it much. You just, sort of, have been put in the job, and before you know it, you are doing the stuff required. It really didn't hit home to me until the company commander at the time said, "You're doing the things. You're my XO." I said, "Okay, I got it. I can do it. It's no problem." It was humbling to begin with, but a soldier is a soldier, whether it's in Special Forces or not and you do the job you're given. I'd like to think I did it well. I hope I did it well.

It's funny. We – Canadians in general – give Americans a bad rap a lot of the time. But my experience with those guys was that they weren't standoffish or arrogant at all. They were welcoming. Obviously, they didn't know to what degree of professionalism I operated and what my skills were, but from the second I set foot in there, they were more accommodating than I had expected. They were laughing and joking and the commanders of all the sub-units within that company were more than happy with me. They were fantastic, fantastic guys. Obviously there were probably some uncertainties, but they never made it known to me, and I never felt at any time that I was an outsider coming in on this operation. They were more than happy to operate with the Canadians, because at that time, we had the big artillery [the M777 Howitzer] out there and we had the LAVs. They were more than happy that, even if I was just dead

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weight for most of the time, if I could help call in artillery or get at least what was going on on the other side, I was worth my weight in gold. There were never harsh feelings, as far as I knew at that time. Maybe it's because these are special types of soldiers, but we would never have survived in Kandahar in 2002 – when I went to Afghanistan as part of my first tour – without the support of the Americans. I'll say this until the day I die ... I'm a die-hard American fan. They are more than willing to help us out and a lot of times you need it in terms of logistical support, air support and such. They have been nothing but good news for us any time we've been there. They treated me like one of their own every time I've worked with them.

*When Prohar was appointed the company commander's XO, he found himself in a somewhat awkward position, not having much formal authority to command in the traditional sense, yet at many times "holding all the cards" in terms of available information. He had to walk carefully – gaining respect and fostering trust – in order to ensure that he fit seamlessly into the unit with which he was now working.*

When you think in quintessential military terms, leadership is when you have men under your command and you're doing the business. When I was with the Green Berets, they knew who the leaders were and I wasn't in the chain of command in that way. I was the XO and I knew what was going on because I had the radios or I was working closely with the commander. The commanders of the sub-units would come to me and ask me questions on what the commander was thinking and what was going on. In terms of direct leadership and ordering men and that stuff, I was very seldom in that position. When I was, it was mostly by default, that I was the only guy around who knew what was going on. But you must think of leadership in more subtle tones like actually having the guys respect you enough to either ask your opinion or trust what you say is true. Again, the guys were extremely professional and they knew that once we got in the field, I was sort of in the same way as them and they trusted what I said. The trust issue in terms of leadership was the big one there. And I think they were impressed with the professionalism of the CF. Most people who don't know the military don't understand some of the intellectual conversations that go on amongst officers



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and NCOs. The Americans seemed impressed that there was analytical and strategic thinking and obviously tactical thinking going on, even at that level by a captain who just sort of got parachuted in on things.

*Battle offered another opportunity for Prohar to not only build additional trust amongst and respect between his American colleagues, but also to demonstrate his professionalism under very trying circumstances.*

I'll begin from the start of this mission. The Arghandab River runs east-west. The conventional forces – the RCR Battle Group – were on the north side. The idea was that they would wait on a departure line. We, as the American Special Forces, would roll down through the Red Desert, catching the enemy by surprise. We would be positioned far south and would come up from south to north and push the entire enemy force up across the Arghandab where the RCR Battle Group would essentially “smash” them. We went basically unopposed for about 120 to 130 kilometres which took us almost a week in harsh conditions. We didn't see the enemy. We heard sporadic reports of enemy throughout and we skirted the Pakistan border. We were really unopposed.

On the 1<sup>st</sup> of September, we came out of the Red Desert and started setting up vehicle checkpoints on the roads leading out of the town of Sperwan and the village of Regay. For two days, an outflow of people from these two communities came out. The Afghans and the Taliban aren't dumb. When they see LAVs and well-shaven soldiers, they know that it's a conventional army and they're going to do certain things differently. They're going to be doing a lot of civilian affairs and other “connecting with the populace”-type of tasks. But when they see a bunch of guys in beards drive up in these Hum-Vees, they know something bad is about to happen because they don't piss around.

The governor of Kandahar, and the leadership of RC South, had dropped leaflets using American assets throughout that week that basically said, “Listen, there's going to be an operation throughout this whole area. Civilians might want to get out because we're looking for Taliban and we don't want you to get hurt.” They really made

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a conscious effort to make sure that there were no civilian casualties. We counted between 200 and 400 people leaving Sperwan and Regay on those two days of sitting at that vehicle checkpoint. However, despite the mass exodus, not one fighting-age male came out. They were all women, children and elderly men that came out of those two settlements. It was at that point we knew we were in for a good battle.

Late on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of September, we closed down those vehicle checkpoints and did battle procedure for the move into this high feature named Sperwan Ghar. There's a town around it and then there's this high feature dominating the terrain. It overlooks the Arghandab River to the north. We were going to take that – hopefully unopposed – and have over-watch on the RCR Battle Group moving on the north side to crush all the enemy that we had pushed over the river.

*Unfortunately, the operation wasn't as easy as Prohar and his colleagues had hoped it would be.*

What happened was the Taliban had obviously left a bunch of guys behind in anticipation of a fight. So when we moved in on the morning of the 3<sup>rd</sup> of September to take this hill just south of Sperwan Ghar, we got lit up and ambushed hard ... really, really hard. We were there for about six or seven hours, running out of ammo. It wasn't a very good day for us. Eventually, we broke contact and got out. We had to resupply. As soon as we got back, away, the commander said, very matter of fact, "Tomorrow, at first light, we go back." At the time, his decision could have been construed in one of two ways: first, a suicide mission, going back into the exact same ambush, up the gut of the enemy, so to speak, when you know they're going to be there; or two, he knew that the taking of the hill was an essential task, within the larger construct of Op MEDUSA, upon which the fate of coalition success hinged, and not taking it would put even more soldiers in jeopardy.

*Prohar knew that taking this dominating feature at Sperwan Ghar was going to save lives ... Canadian lives. Once up there, he and the Americans could*

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*watch the action in front of them and call in strikes on those enemy fighters that they could see as the Canadian BG pushed through.*

On the day of the 4<sup>th</sup>, we prepared the battlefield. When we saw enemy in Sperwan Ghar, we either called in artillery or gunships or whatever we could get on them. We made sure there was no civilian population around. We made sure the area was prepared.

On the morning of the 5<sup>th</sup>, we rolled out and I'll never forget this ... one of the guys had his *iPod* and he had these two speakers on his Hum-Vee ... he blared it before we left first thing in the morning ... he played Toby Keith's *The Angry American*. One of the lines in the song goes like this, "We'll put a boot in your ass. It's the American way." Guys were pumped. It's so cliché, but guys were ready for blood. It wasn't in the context of looking to go out and kill people, but they knew they were going into the "Valley of Death" that day. We all did. We were all about to go into the same place where we were two days earlier. We knew there was going to be a fight. I won't say we were better prepared, but we knew what was going on. So we went and we fought.

It was at this time that I was hit by an RPG ... on that second assault into Sperwan Ghar. I was bleeding out of the ears. I received a bit of shrapnel in my arm. I took a 7.62 mm round right in the middle of my armour plate. I didn't know it at the time but the guys showed me later. The truck ahead of us hit an IED. We were all outside the vehicle so we had no protection when the RPG impacted. A guy by the name of Sergeant First Class Greg Stube was hit as well. He had a piece of shrapnel in his stomach. The company commander was concussed. He was dizzy and bleeding out of his ears. My gunner and Staff Sergeant Jude Voss were relatively unscathed, but they still had some concussion injuries. Sergeant Voss ran into that burning pile of twisted metal and saved two guys out of there. A lot of guys were injured and for a moment it was really chaotic.<sup>6</sup>

As the company commander was getting his injuries treated, I started trying to make sense of the chaos, and in a sense, organize the battlefield. At that time, I was the only one with communications

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to higher headquarters. It was nothing that anybody else wouldn't have done. It was just happenstance that I was in the commander's vehicle. Everybody else was busy.

All that being said, that specific firefight went on for 12 hours and eventually we took this hill. We fought hard in the same place that we had fought earlier. The enemy had set up IEDs all over the hill during the fighting because they knew they were going to lose it. As we were walking up, a number of Afghans from the ANA had their legs blown off by an IED, but we eventually took that hill! But the enemy didn't stop. They kept on coming. We were under counterattack for about six days.

So here we were crawling on our bellies, setting up defensive perimeters and the Afghans were valiant in their efforts. The town was a ghost town except for these Taliban. They were coming at the hill from all sides. I don't like to say that we climbed up the hill and stabbed them with our bayonets. It wasn't like that. They were probing us constantly, but they were trying to get up that hill too. Our guys would be all around in defence of this hill, at the top, and they were firing down at them. Initial count in that first volley was about 200 enemy killed.

Just like we had wanted to do, we pushed the rest of the enemy up into the RCR Battle Group's area of responsibility across the Arghandab River. So the RCR Battle Group was supposed to push through and destroy what enemy were there. But the battle group got hit by the friendly fire strike of an American A-10<sup>7</sup> the day before and they were encountering a little heavier resistance than anticipated. They were, for all intents and purposes, stalled, or at least behind by a couple of days. This enemy that was supposed to be crushed by the RCR north of the Arghandab were just sitting there regrouping. At that point, they knew there was a battle group – the RCR – on their east side and this Special Forces group on their south side. The battle group was eventually going to be moving. So they came back down and started fighting us again!

These guys came back down at us. All the enemy we had pushed up the day before started coming back down over the Arghandab to

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attack Sperwan Ghar. They knew we didn't have air, aviation or indirect fire support assets at that time. We couldn't hit them coming across the river. We could see them but our machine guns obviously didn't have the range. They'd get on the other side of the river, get into the trees and the villages, and we couldn't do anything about it. They'd send a probe across the Arghandab and they knew that if we had air cover, the helicopters or fast movers would kill them. But when a probe went across the river and nothing happened, they would send a whole bunch at us. We saw guys in Toyota *Tundras* coming across with machine guns and we knew this was bad. They were coming across and we couldn't do anything about it. So we just sat there and prepared. They all came across and then from the next day up to the 12<sup>th</sup>, we were under constant fire. It was absolutely brutal.

*Prohar gives some of the credit for his quick reaction to the situation to his days of playing hockey.*

Everybody says – you always hear the guys say – training took over. And it did. You remember your skills and drills. People talk about muscle memory. Like when you're playing hockey, you've done something a million times and you do it when you need it the most without thinking. That's sort of what happened there. In the CF, you always train for two levels up. That way you know what the company commander hopefully would do in that situation. Maybe you wouldn't do it as well, but at least you know the bigger picture. That's what happened there. The company commander wasn't hurt enough to be taken out of battle. He was a fantastic and tough guy. At the time, he couldn't hear. He was bleeding out of his ears so he couldn't work the radios. Guys were dead. And he had to go check the other men. I knew where the guys were and I had the situational awareness. If nobody had taken over monitoring the radios and trying to sort out the chaos, we were all going to die. Not that I took over in a leadership, or chain of command sense, but if nobody sat on those radios and worked them, we would have been in trouble. In an organization like that, everybody has one or two or three jobs. If one of those guys goes down, somebody damned well better step up. If that cog in the machinery breaks down, then the whole thing

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breaks down. I don't think what I did was overly valorous, but I like to think some of my actions may have helped to accomplish our mission.

*Prohar did a bit more than man the radios. He continued to return fire during the Taliban attack.*

I was on the back of this Hum-Vee. The IED hit. The RPG hit. And then I got shot. Maybe in a lesser circumstance I would have gone out and sought medical treatment right away. I had had worse injuries playing contact sports, so I knew that it wasn't a debilitating injury by any stretch. I was bleeding out the ears and I had some shrapnel in my shoulder. Between the adrenaline and the situation, there wasn't a choice. You could not not return fire because we were all watching our arcs and we only had so many guys. If one of the arcs wasn't looked after, there was an opening for these guys in the marijuana fields to jump in at us. Even the most cowardly person, I'd like to think, would have done most of what we all did in the interest of self-preservation. It was either do or die. There was no other option.

These guys were so professional. They have peripheral vision in terms of what's going on in battle. They know what's going on at all times. That was a constant reminder to me that you have a singular task at hand but you have to know what's going on all around you. We do that all the time in the CF as well, but in a small group like these guys work in, you have to be on top of everything all the time. Otherwise, you either die or you get someone else killed. When I was watching my arcs, I was listening to the radio as well, making sure guys on either flank were covering others. Everybody was watching each other's flank too. The Afghan soldiers were in front of us and we had to make sure we knew where they were because there was a communication barrier. They were sort of the first line of defence in terms of our all-around defence at the time. If we saw somebody or they weren't communicating back to us, it didn't matter if you were the low man on the totem pole or on the high end, you better articulate back to the guys.

So up until about the 12<sup>th</sup> we were under constant attack, with not much sleep, not much food, not much ammo. Eventually the RCR

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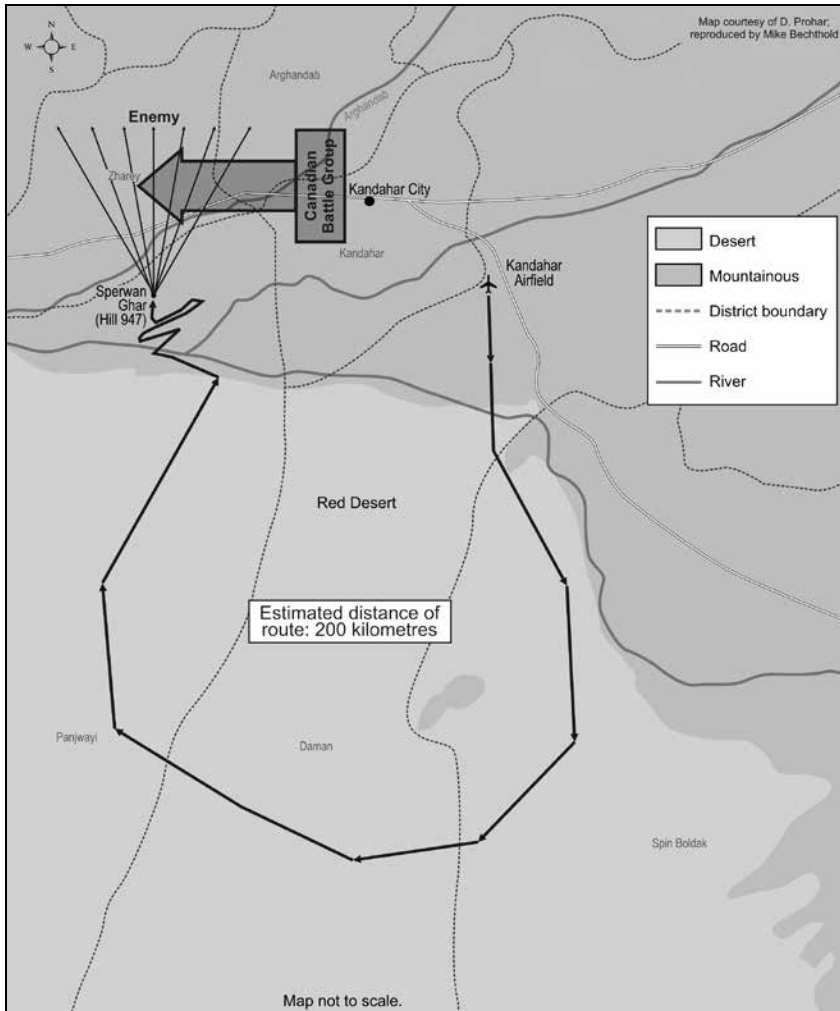
Battle Group started moving through and we got more reinforcements from another American battalion in the area. They brought more guys in as well as artillery support. We basically cleared that area out and then spread out from Sperwan Ghar to the surrounding areas.

There were surprisingly few casualties. There were a few gunshot wounds. Two Afghans died on the initial volley and then afterwards we had a couple of Americans injured in the IED explosion. When we got reinforced by that conventional company from another American battle group, we just pushed into the outlying areas. One of the Americans was killed in a firefight out there. But in terms of death, there were very few on our side. As for enemy deaths, there were hundreds. At one point they counted 200, but who knows how many bodies they dragged back after that? We were well-prepared and a lot of guys should have died that day and didn't ... myself included. I was very lucky.

*As nerve-racking as the extended battle turned out to be, Prohar was proud of the way he and his fellow soldiers had handled the situation.*

Guys adapt. If you threw me into that situation right now through a time portal, it would be frightening as hell and I won't say it wasn't frightening there. But you had some build-up to it and you knew what was coming. You went in with eyes wide open. In terms of actual conditions we were living in, it was very austere. We hadn't showered in three weeks. We were on IMPs [Individual Meal Packs] – the Americans call them MREs [Meals Ready to Eat] – so we weren't physically in the best condition. But in that moment, it's not blood lust, but you are in battle. It's what you're trained to do. It's what you want to do. So you don't think about all the other stuff. Some guys do it well, some guys don't. But it takes an effort to put all that other noise out of your mind. At that point in time, you're singularly focused on the task at hand. You have a number of tasks, but the task at hand there was to take that hill. We weren't thinking about when the next meal was. We were thinking about if we were going to get resupplied for ammo. Sure you think about your wife and kid back home, but, at that moment, it was about your life and the life of the guy next to you.

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MAP 5 – OVERVIEW OF THE ACTION AT SPERWAN GHAR

Even during a lull in the fighting, there was always stuff to do, especially in that situation. I don't know who said it first, but war is periods of horror punctuating large periods of boredom. But there wasn't much boredom at Sperwan Ghar. It wasn't like we were sitting around and had all our admin taken care of. When there were lulls, we had to get the choppers in and make sure they had a landing zone to get the ammunition and medical resupply. We had to



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make sure our arcs were covered. We had to make sure we had the coordination down with the battle group on the north side and the artillery in RC South. Even when we weren't getting fired at, which was a short period of time, I was on the radio back to my headquarters giving them a situation report on what was going on. There wasn't really a lull in that respect, that you've got time to be introspective about your life and your cosmic place in the world. Afterwards, there is lots of time to do that ... like when I got back to Canada later on. But at that time, it was all business, all the time.

Again, it might sound like a cliché, but there's something about the "do or die" mentality. I don't doubt that training plays a large part, but if a person was put in a situation to either do or die, they're going to do the stuff that they need to do to survive. In that case, you know that your job is to do this, and this, and this ... that's what is going to help you survive and complete the mission. So I'm not confident that I was – or even the other guys were – the only ones who could have done it. A lot of people, military or otherwise, do amazing things when put into situations that they don't necessarily think they can handle.

But you knew that you were ready for it. I find a lot of things we do in the army is analogous to sports. It's like taking a hit during a game. You know it's coming. You know what you have to do to prepare for it and you just do it. Sometimes you think "Oh shit, this is coming at me!" and you cannot do anything about it except prepare yourself for it and hope a teammate is there to pick up the slack if need be. Likewise, the RCR Battle Group was there and we knew that we weren't left with our ass in the wind. There was always that underlying doubt, that if these guys did come back *en masse* again, it just might not work out for the best. Or you might need more assets that you just might not get. That was always a constant in the back of your mind, but it was never something that came to the forefront. You did your job and you muddled around with the ramifications later.

*Prohar had a great deal of admiration for the members of the Afghan National Army who fought along side his unit.*

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We had an ANA battalion that this company had worked with before. I believe it was the third roto for this Special Forces unit. It was their third roto in Afghanistan and a lot of these guys had been to Iraq as well in the meantime. So the Special Forces unit and these ANA knew each other pretty well. Obviously, there are the language barriers and there are the equipment differences and deficiencies, but the commander of these guys, the Afghans, was a consummate professional. He was a battalion commander and he was fantastic. The troops on the ground hadn't had all the training that the American Special Forces had, but they knew what was at stake. They weren't naïve enough to think that this was just a tactical mission. They knew this was a battle for Afghanistan. A lot of these guys don't come from that region ... sometimes they do that purposely so that they are not fighting against their friends or relatives, whatever the case may be. They knew that this was their fight.

For however much people call them arrogant, the Americans were very cognizant of the fact that they were doing this in support of the Afghans. They were doing this for the Afghan people and the Afghan Army. We talk about collateral damage all the time, but I had never seen a group of people in the American Special Forces and the ANA at the time more concerned with collateral damage and the long-term repercussions of what a tactical level decision would make at the strategic level. They were concerned, for instance, if a house was heavily IEDed: if we blew that house up because it wasn't safe to check, what ramifications would that have on the people moving back in? Would it breed more Taliban? The guys were very aware, and not just the Americans. When we eventually decided to move out of Sperwan Ghar, there were long, very frank discussions amongst the commanders at all levels about what would be the best way. A lot of the time, what made tactical sense is what we didn't do because it didn't make strategic sense. We put ourselves and the Americans and everybody – the soldiers – at more risk in order to keep that collateral damage to a minimum. The Afghans, in short, were fantastic. They were brave and very gung-ho. Obviously, the skills and drills weren't there at that time to the extent that we in the Western world would have liked, but they were brave. They were very, very brave.

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*He was also impressed with the Afghan interpreter that worked with the unit.*

I won't give his details because it might give him away, but this guy had been working with the American Special Forces since 2002 or 2003. He had been the same interpreter for these guys who had come over three or four times as well. These guys knew him. He was fantastic. He was fluent in English and Pashto, and Urdu too I believe. He not only liaised with the locals, he would act as a human contact as well, which a lot of interpreters wouldn't do. The others stick by the side of the commander and just basically repeat verbatim what is being said. But this guy was a warrior. He would not hide. When a battle was going on, he would pick up his rifle and he would fight.

There was a situation early in our tour that I wasn't involved in, but there were a number of American Special Forces killed in it. There were two wounded Americans in a building and the Taliban were outside. They knew these Americans were out-battled. They weren't fighting. They couldn't. Our interpreter was in the building – a one-room house – and he had a weapon. So the Taliban were yelling at him in Pashto to come out. "We'll spare you. We just want the Americans." And he fought back for hours until support arrived. It's a concrete example of two very lucky Americans who owe their lives directly to him. But like I said, he was a warrior. He knew what was at risk. He knew what his role was in the bigger picture. It wasn't just letting the commander know what that warlord said on that day. It was to *interpret* that information. He was amazing.

*Prohar came to realize how important it was to liaise with the locals, and that an interpreter who went the extra mile was vital to an operation.*

We're always outsiders. It doesn't matter if we do one tour or 15, or even live there, you need to understand their culture and not offend them. You have to let them know what you're trying to do and explain, "We're here for you guys. We're helping you. People may get hurt, but we're doing everything in our power not to do that and if you tell us where the bad guys are, or let us know where they've been, then we can get our job done and help you more effectively."

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We can only construe that idea so far in hand signals and stuff. But if you have a good interpreter who can articulate what you're trying to say instead of just translating verbatim, that's key. The "terps" – as we call them in the military – are enablers because they enable a bigger thing. They're war-winners. Having a good translator is having a war-winner.

*The Taliban also impressed Prohar with their willingness to fight – and die if necessary – for their own particular cause.*

The enemy was brave and organized. In 2002, when I was over there, we had sporadic encounters that were rarely reported or just too minor to mention. They were disjointed. The attacks might be a rocket here or a gunshot there, but there were only three or four guys involved perhaps. In 2006, from our vantage point, they were acting like a conventional army. They were moving to flanking positions in groups of 30 or 40. They probed to find out what assets we had, and then they'd move in. They were smart. And it was all by cell phones or by timings. They were moving in big groups, coordinated, and doing their attacks using contemporary Western doctrine on how to fight an army and crush them eventually. They knew where to shoot and they were good. They were a formidable army at the time.

This was very much unexpected. We had heard earlier in the campaign – earlier in my tour anyway – reports of large massings and stuff, but you didn't always believe it. Things could get overinflated. You hear a report from two different sources of two guys here and two guys there and it turns out to be the same two guys, so that doubles the number. So you always take that stuff with a grain of salt. It never hits home until you're on the ground that there are a lot of guys who are coordinating the attacks and you realize they aren't a bunch of backwoods yokels taking pot shots at you. These guys were fighting for something and they were determined to win. I'll never disregard accounts of large massings of Taliban again.

*As happens often in the relative quiet following a fierce battle, Prohar looked back on an incident that occurred during the fighting and was able to find some humour in it.*

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At one point, we had a bit of a surreal situation. We had gone down to clear the town of Sperwan Ghar and to have a look. We finally pushed the entire enemy out of there, which was great. But the bastards had booby-trapped every single mosque, every house of interest. The Afghan guys who were with us said they had never seen anything like it. Everything was booby-trapped. They'd had time to prepare. Normally, it didn't affect us, but obviously the civilians who came back had to deal with this. Our guys did a monumental job of trying to get all the stuff out, but it was impossible. We eventually had to leave that place because we didn't have enough guys. We came back up and structured our strong point. The Afghans live off the land a lot of the time and we were running short on food, ammunition and water. Helicopters couldn't land because they were getting shot at every time. The people in Sperwan had left stuff behind and the Afghans went down to find some food, staying away from the booby-traps. They found a goat and brought the thing back up, but as they were coming up the hill, we came under attack again. So they let go of this goat inside the school that we were using. It was a UN [United Nations]-built school, but the Taliban had taken it over before we got there. It had been their headquarters. There had been torture and all that stuff in there. So they let the goat go loose in the school. Like I said, it was surreal. There's this stupid goat running around our command post and guys falling everywhere trying to catch it. We finally managed to kick it out.

*The battle in which Prohar was involved occurred towards the end of his tour and he eventually went back to his headquarters at KAF to prepare to return to Canada. Even in the relative calm of routine, there was only a limited amount of time to think about what he'd been through.*

Back in KAF we were still busy. Even as a staff officer, you're still working 18 hours a day, so you didn't have a lot of time to sit back. Obviously, though, you do talk to your buddies about what you just experienced. All my other staff buddies were jealous that I got out there. It's a sorry state of affairs when guys are jealous that you got shot and got hit with shrapnel ... blown up and stuff. That's the mentality we have. So you had a bit of time to reflect when you got back and you actually talked to the guys about it, but more in a storytelling way. Sometimes it's better to just talk it out with guys who

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either know the situation or have been in your position before. That way you realize that maybe other guys have gone through the same stuff and the demons you're battling are the same demons that they had ... and they're fine. When you lay your head down at night and try to go to sleep, you think about stuff. I had much more time when I got back to Canada. I had a new baby to get to know though, so I didn't have *that* much time, but you always find the time to think.

The military, as part of your pre-deployment training, makes sure that in every sub-unit there are peer counsellors. These guys are, first off, infantrymen, but they go and do a special course. That way, if something bad happens – or somebody dies within that small, very tight-knit group of people – there is someone there who has some of the psychological stuff to at least identify if there are any symptoms or anything that he can either pass up or at least help the guy work through. We've entrenched that. It is important. It's not necessarily important to talk to those specific guys, but it's very important to get it out. You're a product of your experiences. If you had a very traumatic experience, it's going to affect you later on. But if you don't view that as a traumatic experience and you take it as a positive – something you can build on – then you're a better person for it. Unlike some of the guys who may be suffering from PTSD [Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder] or working through some stuff that they have gone through, I've been lucky. I have a pretty good home front and a pretty good group of friends so that this whole experience has been absolutely positive for me. There have been some bad things happen, but overall it was a good experience. And we accomplished the mission ... so that was the main thing.

*One of the conclusions Prohar has drawn from his military career to date is that in order to be a good leader, it's very important to be aware of who you are and what you are capable of accomplishing.*

Leadership is usually described in such terms as "Truth, Duty, Valour."<sup>8</sup> One thing that I very rarely see mentioned is self-awareness. I think that's a big part that the guys don't mention a lot. I think it plays into all the other adjectives that people lay down. I think the most important thing that I realized from this experience

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and my whole military experience is that if you want to be a good leader and do something good – or great – you have to have that self-awareness about you. There's a fine line between knowing what you can do and that "err against" factor. If you want to be a good leader, you have to be introspective and you have to know your limitations. You have to understand that maybe you don't have all the answers, but you know who to talk to.

If you understand where you're coming from, you're much more readily able to understand where other people are coming from and you can then ask them to do the hard jobs ... getting put in harm's way and potentially dying. Reevaluating and self-assessing are big things in my mind. When you realize your weaknesses, you can go about addressing them in two ways: first, you try and do it all yourself, attempting to self-improve to the point where you don't recognize yourself any longer; or second, you realize that you can't be an expert in everything, so you surround yourself with good people – and the CF, in particular, has hundreds of them – in order to balance off some of your shortcomings. In my opinion, that self-development piece will come just by being around these guys. It's not so much a conscious thought a lot of the time; it's more about looking for the answer. You know you don't have the answer, but this person will help you and guide you through it.

Something that a lot of the young officers and NCOs don't understand is when you're put in a situation where either you don't think you're ready for it or you don't have the answers, they're going to come to you by human nature and through your training. You're very rarely going to be put in a situation you're not prepared for. You may think you aren't ready for it, but you really are. You will get through. The big thing is our preparation ... our training and our mental agility in the army is well-entrenched into us. We may not realize it, but when we're put in a situation, 99 per cent of the time we'll do the right thing. That comes not just with battles, but with ethical and moral decisions on a day-to-day basis. You've had the training to deal with it. You can find it as long as you're willing to put in some of the hard yards to do it. It will come.

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*Prohar's two tours in Afghanistan have convinced him that all the effort and sacrifice on the part of the allied forces there is worthwhile.*

There are always the nay-sayers who suggest that Afghanistan is not the best place to be and perhaps some "other" country may be a better place to put our efforts, but guys on the ground see the difference they're making on a day-to-day basis. For guys like me who have gone back for a second tour, and as of 2009/10 a third one,<sup>9</sup> it seems significant. It may not be portrayed as such in the media and it may be at discrete levels. For example, a little girl you saw in 2002 didn't go to school and never, ever would have had the opportunity to do so; now she's in grade five or six and doing well. It's little things like that that don't get keyed on, but those are the things that make you want to go back over and make you want to continue on. Even if the security situation has deteriorated somewhat, the standard of living for a lot of people has increased. They've got those basic rights and freedoms that they just didn't have seven or eight years ago.

*When people ask Prohar how it feels to have earned the M.M.V., he is often at a loss for words.*

I'm a little embarrassed because the Americans put me up for the award, they began the paperwork. I'm not trying to be modest, but there were a lot of guys who did a lot bigger things than I did, but not in the context of being the lone Canadian there.

At the most basic level, it's another thing to wear on your uniform ... so that's always good. To be honest, you're military and that's how you immediately judge a person. It's nice to be recognized, but you always feel like a bit of an impostor. You never think what you did merited that level of recognition ... or any level of recognition at all. We're professionals. That's what we do. Guys in everyday life don't get these awards and they could be doing things that are saving more lives. The fact that these awards started coming out now is definitely a good thing for the Canadian military. The investiture ceremony was broadcast live on national television.<sup>10</sup> People actually got a chance to see and hear about some of this stuff. There is public interest in it. So in that respect it means a lot to me because



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at least, even if professionally it's good for you, in the bigger picture it's letting people know that there is stuff going on over there and people, not necessarily just me, are doing great things. At least people are recognizing the actions in general and the fight specifically.

During the award ceremony, at that moment, the way the world has turned in terms of public support for the military sort of hit home. This was really good. Even in 2002, we had a lot of support and we knew that, but seeing it all first-hand – that people actually appreciate what we were doing as the Canadian military – was really good.

CAPTAIN PROHAR WAS INVESTED WITH HIS MEDAL OF MILITARY VALOUR BY THE THEN-GOVERNOR GENERAL AND COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF OF CANADA, HER EXCELLENCY THE RIGHT HONOURABLE MICHAËLLE JEAN, AT THE FAIRMONT CHÂTEAU LAURIER ON 19 FEBRUARY 2007.

## NOTES

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- 1 *Canada Gazette*, Part I, Vol. 141, No. 8 (24 February 2007), 325-326. See also, "Valour," *Canadian Military Journal*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (Spring 2007), 4-5.
- 2 For his service in Afghanistan, Lieutenant-Colonel Shane Bruce Schreiber received the M.S.M.; his citation appears in Appendix 2.
- 3 On Prohar's first deployment to Afghanistan.
- 4 That is to say, friendly attacking friendly, or in this context, hostility towards Prohar from the American SF because of his conventional and/or Canadian background.
- 5 A Canadian-led offensive by major elements of ISAF and the ANA that began in early September 2006, its purpose being to establish Afghan government control over an area of Kandahar Province centred primarily on the town of Panjwai. See Chapter 8.
- 6 The actions of Voss in relation to Stube are detailed online at <<http://www.militaryphotos.net/forums/showthread.php?126804-What-Makes-a-Hero>> (posts of various dates, circa 2008) and <<http://gazingattheflag.blogspot.com/2008/06/wednesday-hero-ssg-jude-voss.html>> (25 June 2008), both last accessed 25 September 2012.
- 7 An American A-10, its purpose being to assist the BG, mistakenly attacked Canadian soldiers, killing one and wounding many others. See Chapter 8.

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8 Incidentally, the motto of RMCC.

9 For his service on this particular tour, now-Major Prohar received the M.S.M.; his citation appears in Appendix 2.

10 Prohar received his M.M.V. at the first-ever investiture of Canadian military valour decorations, held on 19 February 2007 at the Fairmont Château Laurier in Ottawa.

# CHAPTER 10

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## *TROUBLE IN THE CITY*

LIEUTENANT JASON EDWARD DEMAINE

MEDAL OF BRAVERY ■ 3 OCTOBER 2006

*“I’M JUST GLAD THAT WE DID THE RIGHT THING.”*

On **OCTOBER 3, 2006**, in Kandahar, Afghanistan, Corporal Piotr Burcew, Captain Jason Demaine, then Lieutenant, Corporal Adrian Markowski and Master Corporal Stephen Thomas, then corporal, saved the lives of their fellow soldiers and local Afghan civilians by unloading ammunition from a disabled burning vehicle during a suicide bomber attack. Despite having to cross through flames, they repeatedly returned to the vehicle to retrieve mission-essential cargo and high-explosive ammunition that posed a deadly threat to those nearby. They moved away from the scene just moments before the fire raged out of control, detonating the remaining rounds.<sup>1</sup>

JASON DEMAINE WAS BORN AND RAISED IN OTTAWA, ONTARIO. AT AGE 17, HE JOINED THE CH OF O AS A RESERVE PRIVATE. UPON GRADUATING FROM HIGH SCHOOL, HE ENROLLED IN THE POLICE FOUNDATIONS PROGRAM AT ALGONQUIN COLLEGE. WHEN HE FINISHED IN 1997, HE JOINED THE REGULAR FORCE, BEING POSTED TO 1PPCLI. HE VOLUNTEERED IN 1999 FOR A TOUR IN KOSOVO (OP KINETIC, ROTO 0). IN AUGUST 2000, DEMAINE TRANSFERRED TO THE PRINCESS LOUISE FUSILIERS, ANOTHER RESERVE UNIT, SO THAT HE COULD ENROL AT ST. MARY’S UNIVERSITY IN HALIFAX, NOVA SCOTIA. AFTER A YEAR, HE TRANSFERRED TO CARLETON UNIVERSITY IN OTTAWA, GRADUATING IN JUNE 2003 WITH A BACHELOR’S OF ARTS DEGREE IN POLITICAL SCIENCE. HE SUBSEQUENTLY RETURNED TO THE CH OF O, AT WHICH TIME HE TOOK ADVANTAGE OF THE RESERVE ENTRY SCHEME FOR OFFICERS PROGRAM AND RECEIVED HIS COMMISSION IN 2002. FROM JULY 2006 TO MARCH 2007, HE WAS DEPLOYED TO KANDAHAR (OP ATHENA, ROTO 2) IN CHARGE OF THE TACTICAL PSYCHOLOGICAL OPERATIONS TEAM, A COMPONENT OF THE 1RCR BG.

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### CORPORAL STEPHEN LOUIS THOMAS

MEDAL OF BRAVERY ■ 3 OCTOBER 2006

*...LEARN TO BE A SOLDIER FIRST, BEFORE YOU LEAD SOLDIERS.*

On **OCTOBER 3, 2006**, in Kandahar, Afghanistan, Corporal Piotr Burcew, Captain Jason Demaine, then Lieutenant, Corporal Adrian Markowski and Master Corporal Stephen Thomas, then corporal, saved the lives of their fellow soldiers and local Afghan civilians by unloading ammunition from a disabled burning vehicle during a suicide bomber attack. Despite having to cross through flames, they repeatedly returned to the vehicle to retrieve mission-essential cargo and high-explosive ammunition that posed a deadly threat to those nearby. They moved away from the scene just moments before the fire raged out of control, detonating the remaining rounds.<sup>2</sup>

STEPHEN THOMAS WAS BORN IN SCARBOROUGH, ONTARIO AND ATTENDED BIRCHMOUNT COLLEGIATE. IN 2000, WHILE ATTENDING HIGH SCHOOL AND PARTICIPATING IN A MILITIA "CO-OP" COURSE, HE JOINED THE 7<sup>TH</sup> TORONTO REGIMENT, ROYAL CANADIAN ARTILLERY, A RESERVE UNIT, AND DULY ACHIEVED THE RANK OF MASTER BOMBARDIER. IN 2003/04, HE COMPLETED HIS FIRST TOUR IN AFGHANISTAN, IN KABUL (OP ATHENA, ROTO O). SUBSEQUENTLY, IN 2005, HE TRANSFERRED TO THE QUEEN'S OWN RIFLES OF CANADA, A RESERVE INFANTRY REGIMENT ALSO BASED IN TORONTO, LATER BECOMING A MEMBER OF THE REGIMENT'S PARACHUTE COMPANY. THOMAS' SECOND DEPLOYMENT TO AFGHANISTAN OCCURRED BETWEEN JULY 2006 AND MARCH 2007, AS PART OF TASK FORCE 3-06; AT THIS TIME, HE WAS BASED IN KANDAHAR AND OPERATED THROUGH THE NSE AS FORCE PROTECTION.

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*On 3 October 2006, Lieutenant Jason Demaine and the four members of his PSYOPS (Psychological Operations) team were headed for a week of rest at Kandahar Airfield after more than two months in the field, during which time they had taken part in Op MEDUSA.<sup>3</sup> The weather was extreme, with daytime temperatures frequently being in the 50 to 60 degree Celsius range. Everyone was naturally looking forward to showers, hot food and clean kit. Since this small group of soldiers was travelling in two shot up G-Wagons, the damage having been sustained in earlier engagements with the Taliban, they needed the protection of a convoy to get safely back to KAF. A patrol that was shepherding other Canadian vehicles from FOB Wilson back to KAF agreed to take on the additional two G-Wagons as part of their own convoy. At that time, Corporal Stephen Thomas was a crew commander in one of the RG-31s that was responsible for protecting all of the vehicles that made up the convoy. While travelling back to KAF, a suicide bomber attacked. Lieutenant Demaine was in the G-Wagon directly targeted by the insurgent. As he recalls:*

Op MEDUSA was just coming to an end. Our team had been out there for approximately 50 days performing standard infantry duties, examples being securing Highway One for battle group operations, conducting PSYOPS tasks from the loudspeakers that we had, participating in harassment operations on enemy positions, and undertaking foot patrols in villages. As well, we provided PSYOPS support to American Embedded Training Teams who were assisting the Afghan National Army in its development. We were in the field first with the Canadian battle group and then with the Americans, with Task Force Grizzly under Colonel R. Stephen Williams.<sup>4</sup> Finally the Americans too were leaving. When a Canadian company took over the area near the Arghandab River where we and the Americans were working, the incoming OC said, "You guys just go back to Kandahar Airfield for a couple of days to get yourselves sorted out." We had hardly any clean kit because we had limited space due to the PSYOPS equipment and only brought the bare necessities. We looked terrible. We were living out of small compounds during the operation, on one of the high features across from the white school house. All the guys by now had small bites from sand fleas. Being a small team, my job often involved trying to hitchhike everywhere because we only had two vehicles – G-Wagons – sometimes three at a time.

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The G-Wagons were badly damaged due to rollovers and combat damage from our tour and the one previous. There were bullet holes and minor frame damage, but the vehicles were still good on the whole. Fortunately, my warrant, Warrant Officer Dave Goldenberg, found out that there was a combat patrol leaving the company on the morning of 3 October at 1100, so we were like, "Let's get on board with them." A lot of my guys knew the other corporals on the outbound patrol because they were mostly reservists. The patrol said, "Yeah, we're going. No problem. We'll take you on." Plus they liked the extra firepower we could bring to the convoy, since one of our two vehicles was a gun truck, a G-Wagon with a mounted machine gun, although the truck that I was in didn't have a weapon mounted on it. So we got linked with a vehicle in the convoy that could protect us. As per the SOPs, we got together and discussed what was going to happen. We got our brief from the force protection guys and then we started off back to KAF. My driver, Corporal Piotr Burcew,<sup>5</sup> and I were joking with each other because we were going slow and we were in the vehicle with no turret and gun. We were also behind a damaged LAV on a flatbed truck, and behind us was another truck. I remember talking and saying things like, "How are we going to defend ourselves here? I can't shoot out this window. The vehicle behind us can't really cover us. So we're sitting ducks." We were laughing about it and didn't really make a big deal out of it.

We got across the bridge into the west end of the city of Kandahar and then the convoy started moving really slowly. This slow pace is hard for these guys, the guys that protect convoys. I've got a lot of respect for them because they travel a lot throughout Afghanistan. Then the truck in front of us breaks down. I guess the air brakes seized. So we received a call to dismount. Then one of the corporals started hammering on the air brakes, trying to smash them free because we had to get out of there. So we stood there at the west edge of the city for what must have been 35 to 40 minutes, waiting. I was like, "Wow, this is great. Usually they [the Taliban] know when we move through the city, but now they really know we're coming!" So we laughed and joked that we were going to get attacked or something. You know, you always joke about that stuff ... soldiers' humour.

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Finally, we got going and I remember passing what I believed was a fuel compound located in the city. We were driving by and we were starting to come to the highrises. There was one tall building and a whole bunch of really close mud walls with houses and people in them. That's when it started. We thought we saw a bomber. Looking back on that day, everybody is always confused on this point; it's a difference of perception in relation to where you were at the time of the incident. I kind of saw someone ... an old man. But Piotr saw someone different. However, as we later found out, it was a suicide bomber on a motorcycle that came out from behind a sign. The bomber got really close and exploded right beside Piotr who was right beside me. I remember the explosion. In milliseconds the flame from the blast came into the G-Wagon on Piotr's side. We were confused because we didn't know if it was a suicide bomber or if it might have been an RPG. At that point, we were covered in flames.

*Demaine was told later by bomb experts that because his vehicle's frame had been bent somewhat in earlier rollovers, the force of the blast was able to escape out the back, probably saving the two men's lives.*

We were lucky because the blast exited out the back. That probably saved us because it literally just passed in and out instead of staying inside and moving back-and-forth. I remember shouting "Holy shit!" as I instinctively went into my drills and jumped out. I started running beside the vehicle to get into a firing position. At this point the vehicle was still moving but it's all in smoke. The rest of the convoy drove by; they left us and set up a cordon.

Piotr steered the G-Wagon towards the ditch. I was yelling at him to exit the vehicle because he was still inside. "What the hell? Get out of there! Are you going to get out of the vehicle?" He couldn't stop because the brakes didn't work anymore. We were probably going about 15 kilometres per hour. I was holding onto the moving vehicle while running alongside. It finally stopped and I took up a firing position on the hood of the car. It felt like forever, and all you could see was smoke and flame. Piotr couldn't get out of the side door because of the blast, so I had to run around – this is within

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seconds – to help him as the other vehicles were going around us. He got out and we sat beside the tire of the G-Wagon, waiting. We were anticipating some type of ambush and we knew that the rest of the convoy would push through us.

*It was then that Demaine and Burcew realized what grave danger they were in as they surveyed the carnage around them, drinking in the surreal scene unfolding in front of their eyes.*

We thought there might be more enemy in the area that were going to start firing at us with small arms ... and that we were done for. Usually they do that after a bombing, but we just waited and waited, and nothing more came. Again, seconds felt like hours. We looked around and we could see people; a bunch of them were injured. There were some old people, as well as kids, and they were being dragged away by the other locals. It was pretty gruesome. Finally, it was kind of settling, but still smoky. It was a weird thing – kind of creepy – but two donkeys came out of the smoke towards us. They were all shot up and then they just fell over; one was soon dead and the other had to be put out of its misery. We realized we had to get out of there. “Okay, Piotr, let’s go!” Our vehicle was still on fire and it was getting worse. We knew. We had to get out of there.

*Despite the destruction surrounding him, and being somewhat dazed from the blast, Demaine also remembers Corporal Thomas and others from the convoy running up to the flame-engulfed G-Wagon expecting to find that he and Piotr had both been killed.*

Thomas and his guys came up to our vehicle and covered us, using their vehicle as a shield. They were yelling at us to get to safety. I remember at this point that it was almost impossible to hear what they were saying. They backed off and we ran to the safe area. They actually thought we were dead. As we were retreating to the rear, I ran into Warrant Officer Goldenberg who had been two trucks behind us in the convoy. It was extremely hard to see, but he was moving forward to the front of the convoy. He had wanted to help us, but needed to move forward to do so. He was glad that we were alive. He had seen the fireball. It went all the way back to him. It was



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huge. It was a massive explosion. I can't believe we're alive! That's the one thing I think about all the time ... the most.

We made our way back to the cordon and we're sitting there and I talked to the sergeant or the master corporal. They were in charge of the convoy. I said, "Listen, we have to go back to the truck and get some kit. We have a lot of M72s." My team carried them because we worked by ourselves most of the time. We had a lot of weapons and ammunition with us. We had that in our truck along with a whole bunch of grenades. There were a lot of explosives.

*Demaine was rightfully concerned about the remaining ammunition and explosives in the burning G-Wagon, not only for the sake of his fellow soldiers, but also the many civilians that had congregated after the attack out of plain curiosity. He realized they would have to empty the G-Wagon or else risk many more casualties in the resulting blast.*

We were fairly close to a highrise full of people. After Piotr and I had been hit and were down, we could see that an old man had been killed, and there were also people in the shops underneath. It's just like a highway accident; people stop to have a look. There were people all lined up behind me and all along the mud hut houses. I knew that if our vehicle blew up, it would kill all of them. The people there are smart, but it's just human nature; we'd do the same. They are looking out the door and they're curious. Of course, I don't think they realized how much explosive we had in the G-Wagon.

The vehicle was still on fire and was slowly going up; it was only a matter of time before it would completely explode. We had to go. I said to Piotr, "I'm going. Let's go!" Two other guys came with us. It was Corporal Thomas and Corporal Adrian Markowski.<sup>6</sup> We ran back to the burning G-Wagon. This is the funny part ... we brought fire extinguishers, you're kind of scared, but you're spraying, and the extinguishers won't work! I remember us all laughing, "Wow! This doesn't work!" I think there was only one of them that actually worked, and we managed to get the fire down a bit. Someone was using an axe, trying to smash the door open, but it didn't work either. So I said, "Okay, guys, let's get this stuff out." So one of the guys

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ran around to the other side and started throwing things out every different way and then we started to just shuttle everything back-and-forth. I remember feeling extremely uneasy due to the fact that we were in a position of limited cover; the vehicle was on fire and I could almost bet that we were being watched.

*Demaine had another reason to go back to the G-Wagon, in addition to getting the explosives a safe distance from the conflagration.*

I had been given a package to get to the ASIC [All Source Intelligence Centre]. So when we went back to the G-Wagon, we had to get that from my bag to make sure it was undamaged and out of the vehicle. I don't know what it was, but it was something important. I knew there was information in it that I had to get to someone. I made sure we got it out. Then the vehicle fire caught up again. The diesel started to catch fire so it spread all over the road and we're still ferrying stuff back-and-forth. As we were just finishing, it went up. The vehicle burned to a crisp.

*It was at this point that Demaine had a chance to assess the damage. He also had time to think again about the danger that everyone was in.*

I had hurt my foot and my ears. I could hardly hear and had terrible pain in my head. I had a flash burn, like a bad suntan. The BEW [Ballistic Eye Wear] worked well because I would have been blinded from the blast without them. It was hard to believe that we were still alive. The gunner, Corporal Kris Downie, who was in my team just two vehicles behind in the convoy, had remnants from the bomber on him.

After we cordoned off the area, we waited for the QRF to arrive. I remember seeing an RCMP team.<sup>7</sup> It was like, "Wow, there are cops over here!" They came to help us as we stood in the cordon, which was nerve-wracking because when you're getting tired, you're wondering what's going to happen next. We were thinking, "Man, we're stuck here, and the enemy is just going to come again. Something is going to happen." That's where Warrant Officer Goldenberg was good with the guys. He was telling the guys to move out and cover their arcs, because some people were beginning to shut down and

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lose their focus. People were getting tired. There were now a lot of people watching us from all over. It was beginning to get tense and the sun was starting to go down.

Eventually the QRF arrived and we got ready to leave. Thomas and his guys had jammed all our kit from the G-Wagon into one of the RG-31s, but there was no more room for us. So we were like, “What are we going to do?” So Piotr and I had to hitch a ride, again! We found a Bison to jump into that was pretty much empty, with just a few guys in the back. We jumped in with them. We finally arrived at the PRT with the convoy and then we were sent to see the doctor. I remember we both still had trouble hearing and our heads hurt. After the medics looked us over, we ate in the PRT mess and we were there until 0300 or 0400 the following day. The convoy was now ready to go back to KAF. We had made it, but we only had one G-Wagon left. The other one was toast.

*As with many catastrophic events, and even those of less significance, eyewitness reports can vary considerably due to the shock and confusion of the moment. Corporal Thomas, who was in the second RG-31 in the convoy, had a different perspective during the bombing incident. As he recalls:*

Our job was to do runs to the different FOBs and we had to do a run to FOB Wilson, which was located down this stretch of road that was first called “IED Alley.” But on our tour, it was slowly renamed “Ambush Alley” because we always got ambushed on it. It was a typical run of ammo, food and equipment that the guys needed down at the FOBs. Heading down there was no problem. It was a typical run ... busy traffic, warning shots and so on.

It was kind of funny that day. I had a crack in my windshield and I told my driver, Corporal Jason Vasquez, to go get it fixed and he said, “I did, and this is what they gave me.” I thought, “Oh, man ... you start off with just one little crack.” I made a joke, and I said, “Because of this crack, I think we’re going to get hit.” And he said, “No, we’re not going to get hit. We’re not going to get hit. How do you even think like that?” We started joking around. As we were driving down the road, the crack started spreading. Now it’s massive;

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it's like a big web across my windshield. I'm looking at it and he says, "Well, you better hope we don't get hit today because that windshield is going to blow up in your face." I said, "Oh, great. Thanks!" But we made it to FOB Wilson safely. After we unloaded everything and were preparing for the return trip, there were a couple of G-Wagons, lead by Lieutenant Demaine, which needed to get back to KAF. So that was all right. I put them in with the convoy.

*At this point as well, the flatbeds carrying the damaged LAVs, mentioned above, were also added to the convoy. Thomas continues:*

We asked the battle group for an escort, and they said, "Yeah, we're not doing anything right now. We can help you guys out." Three LAVs came out and they punched through alongside the road. It was awesome because we had two huge LAVs with one on each side of us just ploughing through the dirt, going through whatever fields they needed to go through to protect us. And then you've got the one in the front with the turret swinging left and right so that everyone has to get off the road. No one was coming near us. They made it to a bridge and they said, "Boys, this is as far as we can go, alright? Have a safe journey the rest of the way."

They had taken us through most of the threat area – down "Ambush Alley" – from the FOB to the bridge, which was a stretch of about seven or eight kilometres. It takes about 25 or 30 minutes, depending on how fast everyone gets over the speed bumps. We got across the bridge and then we got to the busy part of Kandahar City, which is the market. I felt that the stress level had kind of died down by that point. So I was like, "Sigh, alright. No problem." So we're driving along and suddenly this guy on a motorcycle points at me. He pointed at me and then he just evaporated. His motorcycle looked like an old one and, from the front at least, he looked normal. Where were the explosives packed? I have no clue. I was puzzled and when this explosion went off, it engulfed my vehicle and the vehicle in front of us in smoke.

I remember everything slowing down to almost like what you would see in *The Matrix* movies. In my mind, it felt like I was moving fast

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but everything else around me was going in slo-mo. I remember seeing a piece of shrapnel come flying through the smoke, probably about the size of a flattened-out baseball; a little larger than a hockey puck. The shrapnel came flying through the smoke and hit my windshield, followed by smaller pieces that came flying along and hit the windshield again! I remember seeing the shattered impact of the shrapnel and I thought, "My God! The windshield held up!" If it hadn't, I probably would have had one in the neck and one in the head, and probably wouldn't have lived to talk about it. I was pretty lucky. I looked over and my driver slammed on the brakes. I said to him, "Koala" – our nickname for him – "are we dead, man?" He said, "No, man, I don't think so." And I said, "You gotta drive, man!" So he says, "Oh yeah. Yeah. Yeah." I can see that he was rattled too. This was the first IED both of us had experienced. So he starts driving and I said, "Where's the G-Wagon? The G-Wagon is not in front of us anymore. Holy smokes!"

We advanced, and I could just barely make out the G-Wagon through the smoke ... the silhouette of it just off to the side of the road. It was hit so strongly that it had shifted to the right. It just kind of slid over and rolled to a dead stop. The vehicle was on fire and, when I saw the side of it, I thought, "Whoa! Those guys have to be dead." So I told Corporal Markowski, who was part of the convoy with me, "Markowski, prepare for dead people." He said, "Alright." I just wanted to keep the guy's mind focused. We were already going through shock as it was. So we both hopped out the back of the RG and I told Koala to move up a little bit and give us protection. There was a potential ambush site to the left, which was the building, so I told him, "Put up the shield for us."<sup>8</sup> So we got to the G-Wagon and we saw the two guys; they were alive and doing okay, but they had been on fire. So they're patting themselves out and I remember the driver looked at me and he just had a stunned look on his face, like, "What the hell just happened?" But he didn't say anything. It seemed to me like he just didn't recognize that I was a friendly, or even more that I was a Canadian right in front of him, and he got up and started running to the rear. It was the same with the co-driver. He started running to the rear of the convoy until they saw a vehicle that they recognized, which was another G-Wagon. It seems that

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was the only thing they recognized even though there were several other vehicles between them and the rear. It's amazing how their thinking couldn't come together. They were just looking for one thing and they ran to that.

I was like, "Man, those guys were just on fire. Let's get the hell out of here!" So I hopped in the back of my vehicle and radioed up to the lead vehicle and said we needed a medic because these guys were just on fire. "Let's make sure they are okay!" Eventually we made our way up to the medic and the convoy commander's position. The medic hopped into our RG and, while I was still talking to the convoy commander, my vehicle started heading back with the medic to the position of the casualties from the G-Wagon. I followed alongside on foot and we got to the rear and got the medic out. The two guys ... overall they were good. They were like, "Wow! I can't believe that just happened to us." They were in shock but they had a really good attitude about it, in a sense. Most people would be flipping out, but these guys were doing okay.

*It was at this point that Lieutenant Demaine informed Corporal Thomas that he and Corporal Burcew had to go back to the flaming vehicle. Thomas remembers:*

That G-Wagon was not initially part of our convoy's manifest, so I didn't know what kind of stuff they had in the back. Lieutenant Demaine came to me and said, "Corporal, there's some material we really need to get out of there." I said, "What are you talking about? Just let it burn!" and he said, "No, we need to get it." When he told me that it was something on its way to ASIC, I said, "Oh, whoa, whoa, whoa. Let's go get it!" Usually we find out what's in every vehicle, especially if it's something important and that, no matter what, we need to bring back. I usually try to keep it on me instead of in the vehicle so that wherever I go it's going to be with me. And if I go down, everyone knows it's going to be in my right pocket or whatever, and they just have to get it. But this time they never told us anything. So it was a bit of a surprise when he told me that we had to go back to the vehicle and recover this material. I was under the impression that everyone was safe so we should just get behind our vehicles and wait things out.

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So I said, "Before we go, the vehicle is on fire, so let me get as many fire extinguishers as I possibly can from the rear half of the convoy." So I went around and got five fire extinguishers and there were four of us. I said, "Guys, we're going to fight the fire. Hopefully those back doors are open. If not, we have some axes. We're going to knock out the windows, get the materials and get the hell out of there." So we went up to the vehicle and of the five fire extinguishers we had, only one or two worked. The guys didn't even check the doors. They just started smashing windows. Then they realized that the windows were too thick and they couldn't really get through them. So I spat on my hand a few times and I grabbed the door handle and ripped it open.

At this point, the flames had made their way inside the vehicle, and they were now eating up the top of the G-Wagon. The roof on the inside was catching fire and it was getting pretty hot. I went in and right away I saw the material that Lieutenant Demaine was talking about. I grabbed it, turned around, and handed it off to the guys. I said, "Okay, let's get out of here." Then I realized, "I'm in here already. I might as well just stay and get all this ammunition out. We could use it and, if it blows up, it's going to do some damage to the rest of our convoy and all the people nearby." I saw a C6. So I said, "Let's grab this." I grabbed all the ammunition and I handed it out and then I grabbed all the M72s and all the high explosive rounds they had and I ran out. But I still went back in and got a few more things. I was actually able to save some personal belongings, but by this point, every time I went back inside the flames were so hot along the roof that they were rolling. I spoke later with a firefighter about it and he said, "You're lucky because those are the hottest flames you can actually get. When they're rolling, they're not even eating away at the material anymore. The smoke is so hot that it's reigniting."

At that point, I realized my helmet was a little charred and crispy and I knew I couldn't get any more stuff out. The heat was getting to be too much for me. I said, "Alright, guys, we're getting out of here." So we grabbed whatever we possibly could. The only things I left behind were a few grenades and a couple of smoke grenades that I couldn't reach.

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A few moments later, the rest of the vehicle cooked off ... the diesel caught on fire and the grenades exploded. I probably had the most time inside the vehicle, but for the most part, we all, us four, took turns going into it to get everything out because if we hadn't, there would have been much bigger fireworks. It's all part of the training you have, responding like that to that kind of a situation. Doing what we did makes you more confident. I was very confident with the guys I had in my section. If I go down, these guys will come get me. It takes a lot of stress off your mind. Because we were able to get all of that stuff out, the blast was nothing compared to the suicide bomber. I couldn't tell exactly how many grenades were left behind because everything was rattling around, but I think there were a few that detonated. But in such a small space like that, they still made a pretty good boom!

Unfortunately, civilians got hurt. There was an older man who was riding his donkey. He was thrown off the donkey and he had shrapnel in his chest. His donkey was injured and we had to put it down. But the one injured person that really got to the guys who saw it, including myself, was a child. There was a kid who must have been seven or eight years old and I remember he came up after we went through the whole vehicle. I had my translator with me, thank God, and the kid said, "My head hurts. My head hurts." I asked why. From the side I was looking at, he looked fine, but when I went around to the other side, what had happened was a piece of shrapnel had actually taken a small part of his skull away. I was like, "I know my first aid. I know my combat aid. But how do I treat this? I don't know how to treat this!" So I called the medic over and he looked at me and said, "We can't do anything about this here. Let's look for the missing piece of his skull. Let's go look for that." So we looked around and fortunately found it. The Afghan police came by and we put it in a bag and said, "Take him to the nearest hospital. This needs to go with him." What I found out later was that the kid survived. I don't know how he's doing today, but I heard at the time that he was doing alright.

*Because of the way people reacted to the bombing, Thomas found it impossible to calculate how many people had been injured in the blast.*



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A lot of times people get hurt, but the adrenaline's rushing, so their reaction is to actually get up and run away. They're expecting more fighting to occur, so they want to get out of the area. Who can blame them? Because of that, we couldn't really tell how many were injured with minor or serious wounds. The people who are stuck behind are usually kids and the elderly who have been hit so hard that they can't do anything.

So, basically, once we had checked everything out, I led the convoy – or what was left of our convoy – back home to KAF via the PRT. Even though my vehicle suffered a little bit of a blast, it was still able to be driven. It was still good, so we drove home and did our AAR.

*Reflecting back on the incident, and the others that followed, Thomas reasoned it was, in a sense, both formative and positive.*

Within our first month, we had a lot of IEDs ... not only us but the whole battle group saw a lot of contact. It was a tour with a lot of action. With all that hardship, it brings your guys closer no matter what. You kind of look at each other like, "Man, we just went through that together." It made the platoon really tight ... especially the sections that had had a hard time getting it together beforehand.

*As for Lieutenant Demaine, once back at KAF and after having been cleared by the medical staff, he had to attend a briefing at 0700. He and Warrant Goldenberg then decided to take their team out into the field ... again ... immediately.*

I didn't even get a chance to go to bed. I went to my room, got cleaned up, and went to the update brief for PSYOPS. While I was at the briefing, the guys just started getting their kit ready. The warrant was good with that, I mean, he realized that they needed to stay focused and not just sit around. They got their kit ready because we were going out again. Dave and I realized, "You know, we have to get back in the game because if we don't – if we shut it down for four or five days – we'll be screwed." Fortunately the American task force that we often worked with was leaving for a small village meeting – a one-day mission down south – so the next day we got on board with them. We needed to go back out. Everybody gets scared. It's

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just so intimate, that IED experience, because you are actually being blown up – and should be dead – but for some reason survive. I find it differs from when you are in a TIC [Troops in Contact]<sup>9</sup> because at least there is some chance of making it out alive from that. If we didn't go back out that day, we would have had to stay for a couple of weeks waiting for the next Canadian convoy and we would just power down. The guys would lose their focus, their edge.

I wanted to get them back out so they could regain their confidence. You can compare it to playing sports ... your team didn't really lose, but if something bad happened at the end of the game, it would be the last thing the players would think about. By making them go back out, the last thing they would now remember before shutting it down for several days was going on a mission with U.S. troops. I didn't want their last memory to be the incident we just went through and then powering down back at KAF for a week or so. We would have ended up dwelling on it, saying to ourselves, "Oh, my God, we just got IEDed." What I didn't want to have happen was for that fear to take hold while they're sitting in KAF and thinking, "Last time we were out, we were blown to crap. We all should be dead." Those extra nerves might affect you more the next time you go out. Getting back out right away is important in getting that initial reaction behind you.

*A couple of members of the team weren't happy about going back out so soon after the incident, as is understandable, but the friendly relationship that Demaine had purposely built-up amongst the team members made it happen in the end.*

Some of the guys were upset. I'm sure they got pissed off at me when I told them, "Listen, guys, we're doing this." But I also had a good team, and Dave and I got them ready. Another one of my guys, Corporal Downie, was also pretty good in these instances. He just does what you tell him and is an outstanding soldier. He was like, "Okay, guys, you have got to do this." I could hear them bitching, but I would ignore it. We had just done our big thing with Op MEDUSA and we were coming back for several days to take it easy. So they were shocked that we were leaving right away again. I said, "It's only for a day." Then when we came back off this one-day

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mission, we actually had six full days or so off. We just got ourselves sorted out then.

I was lucky because the guys I worked with were really good. Very motivated and keen. I was very fortunate to have guys who cared. And the warrant was really good at keeping the guys together. He was a reservist and a career police officer. The guys were respectful and we were respectful of them. We had done things together back in Canada before the deployment. We hung out a few times in Petawawa for beers and stuff like that. Our team was very friendly and everybody got along. We went to Montréal for three days for our final brief and we went out for beers and had a good time. We didn't hang out together all the time, though, and I think that might have been a good thing; if you're around each other all the time you can get on each other's nerves. I would just go back to the officers' quarters, Dave went back to the senior NCOs' quarters, and the troops went back to their own places. There was a huge age difference between the guys and Dave and I. They liked to hang out with us once in a while, but they were young. They weren't going to hang around with a 34-year-old or a guy who was in his 40s.

*A sense of humour also helped get the team over some of the rough spots in their relationship. Demaine continues:*

I would joke around and the warrant would joke around too. I'm very serious on the job, but joking helps us deal with things. I think it psychologically gets you over the edge. That's one thing about my guys ... they were all tough and all really smart, and so was Dave. We're all pretty normal. So they'd joke about things like, "I can't believe you're alive or I can't believe this happened." I remember being at an Op MEDUSA checkpoint one time and we had to set it up by ourselves – the five of us with some ANP – but the ANP left us at night, basically saying, "This place is too dangerous. We're taking off." So we were like, "Holy shit, we're out of luck here!" And everybody started laughing. But the humour relieved the tension big time. I remember another time when humour helped with a huge outburst between two guys. They were both from the same town, same unit. The dynamic was weird; it was a yelling match, but when

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we all joked about it, it calmed them right down. It was during a very intense moment, but we were able to laugh it off.<sup>10</sup>

*Lieutenant Demaine felt that having been in the ranks in both the Cameron Highlanders of Ottawa and 1PPCLI gave him an advantage in terms of gaining the respect of his men.*

I spent quite a long time as an NCM due to choice, age and the situation. Over the years as a reserve and later regular force NCM, I was instructed and led by regular and reserve force NCOs who were very competent and disciplined. In training, my instructors passed on a lot of skills. Being young, I thought the delivery of such knowledge at times was extremely harsh. However, this type of training and mentorship I personally believe helped to instil soldier skills that have stayed with me throughout my career. In the long run these NCOs prepared me and helped to make me a better officer. I had the soldier skills. I did the reconnaissance course. I had all these infantry courses. I worked for good leaders and bad leaders, so I knew what a good sergeant was and what his expectations were. It's valuable experience. It helped that I could use all my gear. I had used it before on my machine gun course, so I could use our gun and I was confident enough about what I was doing. So with the guys, it gave me credibility because I did the same job as them at one time and they respected that.

But I had to be strict at times. One time we had to go out on patrol and the men were like, "What? We're leaving here?" And I said, "Shut up! Shut up! We're leaving." So sometimes there's a need to know when to be a jerk, and if you have good guys like I did, they realize that the lieutenant is basically a nice guy and the reason he is getting mad now is because he is following his orders and we have to do it. But I'd usually try to be democratic whenever I could. I'd say, "Hey, guys, we have this mission to do. This is how I see us doing it. What do you think?" You have to choose the time to do this; it also depends on the amount of people you are working with, which in my case was only a small team. I had a good relationship with them and they trusted my instincts and trusted my thinking, but sometimes I had to make decisions and they would not always like it. By

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including them in the plan – they’re smart guys – there were things that I didn’t see that they knew and they pointed things out for me. But there is a time and place for that.

That’s also where Dave was good, because he was an armoured warrant in the reserves and had a lot of knowledge that I didn’t have as a light infantry reservist. So we used his skills. If we wanted to pick a position to put up a checkpoint, he knew how to manoeuvre the vehicles properly and what to do and how to move everything around for maximum effect. The most important qualities of leadership in a senior NCO, I believe, are experience, dedication, compassion for the soldiers and understanding. If you have a warrant that can understand the troops and he can deal with their concerns, that’s key. Dave was good like that. He could relate to people. But he could also be a jerk when that’s what was needed. He was well-rounded ... professional, confident, a disciplinarian but inclusive, compassionate and understanding. He’d been to university. He had life experience. We worked well together, him and I.

*Like Lieutenant Demaine, Corporal Thomas found that being self-assured but ready to listen to the opinions of others was an important part of leadership.*

The perfect leader is confident in what he has to say even though he may be wrong. If it is wrong, be open to advice. Treat the soldiers equally. Also, don’t be afraid to stand up for them. That’s a big one. I find a lot of leaders don’t go to bat for their guys. If you’re a lieutenant and you go to a captain and say, “Hey, this is wrong!” you may get a little blasting later on, but at least you stood up for your guys and you could possibly have stood up for the right thing. Don’t be afraid. By the book doesn’t mean it’s necessarily going to work. You have to be able to be a fast thinker, on the ball, open-minded to sometimes weird tactics. You may think, “What the hell is he making me do? You’ve got to be kidding me! Alright. Alright. I’ll try it out.” But then there are other times when you say, “I’m not going to try it out because I know what’s on the other side here.” Or, “I know there’s a swamp here. We’re not going to make it through there in 15 minutes.” You’ve got to be, in a sense, one step ahead of your leader.

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I find the best officers are those that used to be within the ranks. They used to be corporals and now they are lieutenants, or they used to be a sergeant and now they are a captain, or whatever way it works out. So officers shouldn't be afraid to spend a year as a private. You may be digging a hole or filling a shit bucket or whatever else, but learn to be a soldier first, before you lead soldiers. If you want to be a good officer that has the respect of his guys, maybe you should just open your ears a little bit to some advice instead of being like "What I say is right." You can't take that kind of attitude when you're getting advice and corrections from senior NCOs, senior master corporals or even a corporal who has been around for eight or nine years, who's seen it and done it over and over again. There's no problem with being wrong. Just don't let it happen again. That's one of the first things I found in the army when I joined.

On top of all that, you're not only responsible for your own life. So you have to kind of put your life aside, because if you start thinking only about yourself, you're not going to be able to do things that are incredible, in a sense, when it comes to saving other people's lives. You've got to put yourself aside. You have to have a certain mentality, like, "Okay, I may die today, but I'm going to get this guy home to his girlfriend or to his wife."

*When Corporal Thomas learned, to his surprise, that he had been recognized for his actions in Afghanistan, he first thought that he was in hot water or that there was something wrong at home.*

When I found out, I was on my leadership course out on the east coast near Halifax and I got called into the platoon commander's office. It was on a Monday and I thought, "Man, I did something stupid on the weekend!" My warrant was a quiet guy, so when he called me out I thought I was in trouble. He said, "We're going to see the platoon commander." And I said, "Warrant, am I doing the hatless dance by any chance?" And he said, "No. No. I just want you to talk to the platoon commander." As we're making our way to the platoon commander's office, I was thinking about my father, who had suffered a heart attack just before I had gone out east. So I

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thought maybe it was bad news. I thought, “Oh, my dad, my dad!” My morale and everything dropped big time. When we got to the platoon commander’s office they told me, “Call your unit chief clerk.” So I had to call back home to the regiment and I’m thinking it’s definitely about my father. I called the chief clerk up and the sergeant says, “Did you get nominated for anything overseas?” I said, “What? I don’t know. Maybe. No one tells me these things.” I’m having a joke with her and I said, “Why are you asking me?” She said, “A piece of mail came for you.” I said, “Well, open it.” She opened it and started reading and she wouldn’t tell me what she was reading but she’s yelling, “Oh, my God! Oh, my God!” Eventually she did tell me and, I don’t know, at the time I was more shocked and thought, “Why am I getting this?” I felt like I was doing my job. Honestly, we’re trained to do this. So when I hung up the phone, my warrant asked, “So what happened?” I said, “Warrant, I just got the Medal of Bravery.” He got really excited and he was giving me the big, warm, big-brother-punch-kind-of-thing to the shoulder. He was just excited and didn’t know where to go with his energy.

I didn’t know what it meant. I had never heard of anyone getting this. Eventually, word got around the regiment. Actually, I even got a letter from Buckingham Palace saying congratulations.<sup>11</sup> I was like, “Wow, I guess this means a lot more than I thought. I’ve just become a part of history.”

*Lieutenant Demaine was equally pleased to receive his decoration, but he too felt that he had done what anyone else would have done in his place.*

I would have done it no matter what. I didn’t need any incentive. I just wanted to do the right thing. I don’t think I could have lived with myself if I hadn’t done what I did because some of those people would have died. The explosion would have killed all those kids that were standing around and maybe most of the people in the shops. Another thing, if nothing had occurred – if we hadn’t done anything and all those people had died – it would have been the worst thing. People would be saying, “The Canadian Forces did not do anything.” I’m just glad we did the right thing. It’s good for the army.

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*Corporal Thomas shared Lieutenant Demaine's opinion that his medal reflected well on the CF, adding that it has given him an opportunity to tell others about life in the military and the many advantages of life in Canada more broadly.*

I went to Maple Leaf Gardens in Toronto and they brought me up on the Jumbotron and read my citation. I was like, "How did these guys get my citation? Is it on a postcard?" I got a standing ovation. Everyone in the crowd all stood. The Leafs were playing against Ottawa that night, so it was a good game to be at. The stadium was packed and everyone was on their feet. It was amazing. Random people would just come out of nowhere, thanking me. That, to me, meant a lot. Before, on my first tour, I didn't feel like I came home to anything. But with this, I don't feel unrecognized. I felt like I'm appreciated for the hard work.

I've actually gone to schools and done speeches here and there – one on Remembrance Day – just to educate people on a soldier's life, not necessarily the war in Afghanistan. A soldier's life is not easy, especially if you're being deployed. I talked to an elementary school and tried to get them to picture themselves going away for a week where they would have to leave behind all the stuff they like ... all the cookies and the video games. They said, "No, no, I don't want to go." And I said, "We do that for a lot longer." I say it just to get into these kids' minds that the soldiers are doing really hard stuff. I also went to high schools and spoke to students. I really bring it home to the high school kids. That's the generation that's going to take over from my generation, just like we're the generation that have taken over for the veterans ... the World War Two or the Korean vets. We have to introduce the young people to that, and I find the school system doesn't emphasize these issues that much.

And I blame the media for the fact that civilians don't understand how difficult our job is. They only show us fighting or coming home in boxes and stuff like that. They only show the negative. They don't show the good work, for example, that CIMIC [Civil-Military Cooperation] is doing ... digging wells and making connections



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with the people.<sup>12</sup> They don't show the "Thumbs Up" we get from children on the street. They don't show the first aid we give to all these people or us going to their hospital to train their hospital personnel or training their police officers and army. They don't show these things, and when I explain that to "Joe Blow" on the street, it's like, "What? You do that? Are you kidding me?" Americans are also the same. They're there fighting but they're also trying to rebuild the country so the people can be stable. I wish the public got to understand and have all this knowledge of the things we're doing. So we're teaching, in a sense.

If people only understood how good we have it here in Canada ... and that's one thing I told my brother and sisters. Take for example that tree on our front lawn. I didn't see a tree in six months! And the fresh air ... I went overboard on air when I got back. The smell over there was something I couldn't take. It was really bad for me. We may have smog in Toronto every so often, but we don't have to deal with fecal particles and the smell of rotting meat. These are things here that we take for granted.

*Like others, Lieutenant Demaine's attitude towards wearing his medal is a mixture of pride and a bit of uneasiness.*

I don't mind it when people ask me about the medal, but I always think to myself, "I've got to tell the story." It's good to tell them what happened and the type of things I and the army did to help in Afghanistan. It's good for us. I also explain about the other guys that I worked with and the good things they did too. I'm proud, yet I don't want to seem like I'm glorifying myself when I talk to them. I worry about that and it makes you feel, not exactly guilty, but you just feel like you're not any more deserving than anyone else. For instance, my warrant, Dave, is an awesome guy but he wasn't right there on the scene because he did what he was supposed to do: he pushed up a little farther ahead because his vehicle was blocking the convoy. He didn't get any kind of recognition for his actions. So you feel for all the other guys that are just as deserving, but go unrecognized.

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LIEUTENANT DEMAINE AND CORPORAL THOMAS WERE INVESTED WITH THEIR MEDALS OF BRAVERY FROM THE THEN-GOVERNOR GENERAL AND COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF OF CANADA, HER EXCELLENCY THE RIGHT HONOURABLE MICHAËLLE JEAN, AT RIDEAU HALL ON 19 SEPTEMBER 2008.<sup>13</sup>

## NOTES

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1 Announcement of the receipt of the M.B. by Demaine and Thomas, in addition to Burcew and Markowski, was made in the *Canada Gazette*, Part I, Vol. 142, No. 40 (4 October 2008), 2728-2729. Citation from Canada, Governor General, <<http://gg.ca/honour.aspx?id=27848&t=3&ln=Demaine>>, last accessed 25 September 2012.

2 Ibid.

3 A Canadian-led offensive by major elements of ISAF and the ANA that began in early September 2006, its purpose being to establish Afghan government control over an area of Kandahar Province centred primarily on the town of Panjwai. See Chapter 8.

4 For his service in Afghanistan, Richard Stephen Williams, from the U.S. Army, received the M.S.M. from Canada; his citation appears in Appendix 2.

5 For his actions on 3 October 2006, Corporal Piotr Burcew received the M.B.; his citation appears in Appendix 1.

6 For his actions on 3 October 2006, Corporal Adrian Markowski received the M.B.; his citation appears in Appendix 1.

7 Who were mentoring the ANP.

8 That is to say, to interpose the vehicle between the destroyed G-Wagon and the soldiers on the ground, and the potential ambush site.

9 Meaning that Canadian forces have encountered and engaged the enemy, or vice-versa, at close distance.

10 Demaine noted further, "What I mean by humour is that historical army-style humour of making light of or bitching about the situation you are in amongst your peers. I have always found it present, since I first joined the army until now. If people, troops, officers, NCOs, whatever, stop bitching amongst themselves, or within the small unit in which they work, something has gone wrong. If people are really quiet and do not say anything, something bad is going to happen."

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11 Thomas received a congratulatory letter from the Colonel-in-Chief of the Queen's Own Regiment of Canada, Her Royal Highness Princess Alexandra, The Hon. Lady Ogilvy, L.G., G.C.V.O., C.D.

12 Under this concept (with respect to Afghanistan in particular), the local population first identifies those reconstruction projects that are an immediate priority and that would be of most value to the community over the long-term. Using government money, provided by either DND or the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), CIMIC personnel then hire local contractors to complete the identified work. Small-scale efforts, such as the construction of a village well or school or the improvement of other local infrastructure, are intended to spur the local economy and to build capacity amongst the population so that in the future similar work can be completed unassisted. All efforts are community driven in that the population identifies what projects are important (rather than having projects imposed on them according to what is thought is needed) and completed by the local population. Such projects are also helpful in winning "hearts and minds." For the broad theory behind CIMIC, how it operates in practice, and some relevant Canadian examples drawn from deployments over the last two decades, see Graham M. Longhurst, "Evolution of Civil-Military Cooperation (CIMIC)," *Canadian Army Journal*, Vol. 8.4 (Winter 2005), 33-49, and, *Ibid.*, "Civil-Military Cooperation – The Inukshuk," *The Bulletin*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (January 2004), 1-8.

13 An additional account of this incident appears in Lieutenant Frank Monozlai, "Bravery in the Aftermath of an IED," *Steadfast – Newsletter of 32 Canadian Brigade Group* (Fall 2008), 2-3.



# CHAPTER 11

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## *THE RULES OF THE ROAD*

CORPORAL JOHN DAVID MAKELA

MEDAL OF MILITARY VALOUR ■ 16 OCTOBER 2006

*...I GOT TO HELP PEOPLE AND KEEP FRIENDS OF MINE ALIVE...*

On OCTOBER 16, 2006 Corporal Makela prevented a fatal attack on his combat logistics patrol by a suicide bomber in Afghanistan. As the turret gunner providing overwatch for the convoy, he accurately identified the approaching suspicious vehicle as a suicide bomber car. Despite the likely potential of an explosion, he maintained his exposed position and applied fire, resulting in the premature detonation of the bomber car. The explosion engulfed Corporal Makela's vehicle and seriously burned him. His valiant and courageous actions inevitably prevented the bomber from reaching his intended target and saved the lives of the other soldiers in the convoy.<sup>1</sup>

JOHN DAVID MAKELA GREW UP MOSTLY IN OTTAWA, ONTARIO. NEVER HAVING BEEN INVOLVED WITH THE MILITARY, HE ENDED UP AT CARLETON UNIVERSITY IN A COMBINED HONOURS PROGRAM IN LAW AND CANADIAN STUDIES. THOUGH HE WAS HAPPY WITH CARLETON AND THE OPPORTUNITIES THAT IT AFFORDED, HE STILL WISHED TO SEE IF THE MILITARY WAS A "RIGHT FIT" FOR HIM. IN 2002, WHEN TWO OF HIS UNIVERSITY ROOMMATES STARTED TALKING ABOUT JOINING THE RESERVES, HE FIGURED THAT THAT MOMENT WOULD BE AS GOOD AS ANY OTHER. IN MAY, HE JOINED THE GOVERNOR GENERAL'S FOOT GUARDS AS A PRIVATE SOLDIER. OVER THE NEXT THREE YEARS, HE CONTINUED ON AS A PART-TIME RESERVIST WHILE COMPLETING HIS UNIVERSITY EDUCATION. WHEN HIS DEGREE WAS FINISHED IN 2005, HE BELIEVED THAT THE MOMENT WAS OPPORTUNE TO UNDERTAKE A ROTATION IN AFGHANISTAN. AT THE END OF THE YEAR, HE SECURED A SPOT, WITH THE FORCE PROTECTION PLATOON, ON TASK FORCE 3-06. HE DEPLOYED TO KANDAHAR, AFGHANISTAN (OP ATHENA, ROTO 2) FROM SEPTEMBER 2006 TO MARCH 2007.

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*On 16 October 2006, a handful of soldiers from Corporal Makela's Force Protection Platoon<sup>2</sup> were given the responsibility of escorting a NSE combat resupply convoy from KAF, first to Kandahar City, and then along the northern lip of the Arghandab River to FOB Wilson. It was expected that the entire trip, if all went well, would take around one hour and twenty minutes. Instead of the usual task of carrying oil, fuel, ammunition and any other supplies that Canadian forces in the field required to prosecute their actions against the Taliban, the convoy was moving three new combat logistics vehicles – specifically the Armoured Heavy Support Vehicle System (AHSVS) made by Mercedes-Benz – that had just arrived in Afghanistan to the FOB where they would later be used to ferry supplies. In setting the scene, Makela recalls:*

By mid-October, things from the Canadian perspective were quieting down in the aftermath of the push of Op MEDUSA the month prior.<sup>3</sup> Canada had begun the process of “hardening” the ground gained from that campaign into the Panjwai. The positions that had been taken by the Canadian battle group as it entered the area were becoming forward operating bases and things were settling in for the winter. The enemy, while still reeling from a complete strategic defeat in the Panjwai, had now moved its focus to more lateral tactics such as IEDs and ambushes.

*Prior to mid-October, Makela and his fellow crew members had been attacked on numerous occasions while escorting other convoys to their respective destinations. They had experienced the enemy's tactics and, as a result, generally knew what to expect in the future.*

Members of my crew had begun referring to themselves by the dubious nickname “the TIC crew.”<sup>4</sup> The platoon was split into an “A” crew and a “B” crew.<sup>5</sup> At that point in the tour, my crew had had ten TICs and our opposite number only two. So we were becoming well-versed with the threats just because of what we were doing, always in the wrong place at the wrong time. The TICs that we were seeing were mostly IEDs and suicide bombers. There were a few ambushes. We had not, by that point, seen road IEDs. It was mostly SVBIEDs [Suicide Vehicle-Borne Improvised Explosive Devices] with the occasional ambush using small arms. We had seen some RPGs. I like to think that the crew that I was working with was

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definitely the best for this kind of work. We had gained a lot of experience the hard way and, most importantly, we had become quite proficient at working as a team.

We had experience in all of the terrain of Kandahar ... mountain to desert to some greenery. Because we were protecting the large resupply vehicles, our routes tended to be hard-pack and roads. We took the highways most of the time, which offered a certain amount of security, but that also opened us up for other things as we were a big, slow moving target. IEDs buried in the road were not a significant threat for us. It would not be entirely accurate to say that the roads were well secured however. They were generally hard-pack, or even normal concrete, so getting IEDs under would have been a significant challenge, especially considering how well-travelled the roads were. IEDs could be placed beside the road, but with our armour, they weren't a real concern. By this point, which was about three months into our tour, we had become keenly aware that our principal threat was suicide bombers.

*When escorting convoys throughout their tour, soldiers in Makela's platoon routinely rotated positions, and thus jobs, so that all shared the danger equally and to avoid the boredom of repeatedly performing the same task day in and day out.*

You're doing the same job for six months. Our entire job in Kandahar was convoys. That's what we did. That's what our speciality was. That was our bread and butter. But it also tended to become quite repetitive driving through Kandahar about 100 times in six months. So, to keep people's interest up, and just to get a broader experience, we tended to shift jobs around. We had back-ups, so sometimes guys could be gunners, sometimes guys could be dismounts,<sup>6</sup> or crew commanders, things like that.

My responsibility on 16 October was to provide rear security to the convoy, as a turret gunner in the G-Wagon. My principal task for most of the tour had been as a gunner in the RG-31. However, the rear security role at that time was performed by a G-Wagon, not an RG-31. Due to the level of risk associated with this particular job,

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we tended to rotate our personnel through the rear vehicle more frequently. So, it was just kind of my turn that day to provide rear security.

I had been in the G-Wagon several times, but that was my first time as the actual turret gunner, although during build-up training I had trained for that task. I felt comfortable in the G-Wagon. We knew it was certainly a much larger, much more tempting target, but it was a more enjoyable vehicle to work with. It's more comfortable. If you're a turret gunner, you get to have your head up top, outside of the vehicle, so you have the wind rushing by ... scents, smells – actually not a good thing! – things like that. So it's more of a “human” vehicle to work in than being crammed into an armoured monstrosity. If anything, that was the refreshing part of that day.

The job of the turret gunner is to keep traffic back. A sign on the vehicle warning locals to keep their distance only goes so far. You really do need a person to gesture – “no,” “gun,” “you,” “back” – and if that doesn't work, warning shots, or at night, lights. It's that guy at the back whose job it is to keep the traffic away. Signs, they really don't do anything. Afghans for the most part don't have modern eyewear and they don't have access to optometrists, and so most people probably shouldn't be driving anyway. Expecting that they will be able to read and obey a sign at a couple hundred metres is hoping for a bit much.

*The weather on that day in mid-October was pleasant.*

It was sunny, relatively no clouds. It was moving towards more winter conditions, so it was no longer 30 or 40 degrees. It was only about 20 degrees. It was a good day to be on a turret gun. The day started pretty much as normal. It was actually a somewhat relaxed day since the day's mission was to be a mid-day convoy.

*Although ready to begin their work “outside the wire,” their departure from KAF would unfortunately have to wait.*

This convoy<sup>7</sup> happened to be scheduled for earlier in the day, but then there were some vehicle troubles – a vehicle had mechanical



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issues and needed repairs before we could leave – so we got pushed back. Everyone was generally of high morale as a result of the change. It meant that we actually got to stay for lunch at KAF. We got to have a hot meal before we left, just because of mechanical troubles. So that was good.

As it turned out, it was in the middle of the day when we left KAF, so vehicle traffic was a little bit more difficult to deal with. The ride to Kandahar City is about 20 minutes or so. We were entering urban traffic, so we were passing a vehicle pulled over to the side of the road every couple hundred metres. We collected traffic on our rear because we were travelling slowly. We were dealing with between ten and 20 vehicles behind us. We had begun to approach the Golden Arches, which is a very large turning circle where Highway One and Highway Four meet. It's the principal eastern entry into Kandahar City. It's a major chokepoint, incredibly crowded. It's a major truck stop for all cross-country truckers, and pretty much anyone that is coming into the city from the east, by vehicle or on two feet, enters through this point. It was always a headache to get through.

Then, suddenly, over the radio, we heard our forward vehicle identify something suspicious. In this case, it was a double concern. Two vehicles that were approaching from ahead of our convoy did a U-turn about 200 metres in front of us and parked on the right side of the road. We chose to drive by them and began to shift towards the left-hand side of the road while keeping all available weapons trained on the suspect vehicles. So that's what the order was ... for the first bit.

As the middle point of the convoy passed, one of the suspicious vehicles, a blue SUV [Sport Utility Vehicle] began to move. The middle security vehicle in the convoy would normally have fired a warning shot at that point, but the gunner wasn't able to engage because of angles. What it was able to do was to physically force the SUV off the road. While risky, it was effective to completely stop the SUV and allow the middle of the convoy to pass. At this point, I changed my arcs. I had been pointing to the six o'clock position covering the rear, but as I heard the situation developing on the radio, I began to

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shift the turret to the two o'clock position. Unfortunately, the vehicle was coming up too fast, so I had to just shift inside of my turret with my personal weapon, my C7 rifle.

I was getting fed information about what was going on over the radio at this point from my vehicle commander, Master Corporal Jamieson Murray, and the middle vehicle commanded by Corporal Jacek Pyrek. Because of the length of the convoy, I wasn't actually going to be able to see the SUV until he was less than 100 metres in front of me and no longer obstructed by the AHSVS, the second last vehicle in the convoy. When I saw the SUV, my first thought was, "Wow, this is incredibly suspicious." But you can't just move to lethal force, so I had to find some place in this incredibly crowded environment to start firing warning shots. Because I deemed that anywhere else would likely hit a civilian, I just started firing at the rear of the suspect vehicle. I began putting warning shots into the SUV, slowly working my way from the rear towards the front.

Then time really got compressed from my perspective. There was a lot of stuff that started to happen. I'm firing the warning shots. I hear Pyrek over the radio saying, "Yes, he's got a blanket and there is a lot of stuff in the back of his vehicle." It looked like the driver of the SUV was going to ram the AHSVS in front of us, but then you could see him through the window of the SUV kind of look around and change his plan for the G-Wagon. The AHSVS was heavily armoured and from his position he would have only hit the back of it. When he made eye contact with us, he saw a much more tempting soft target. So, at that point, he began to slow down even more, no longer keeping pace with the AHSVS. He was now closing distance with us ... and we were closing with him. I'm just continuing to fire into his vehicle. He's getting really close. I'm starting to think to myself, "I've seen this situation before. When might my commander tell me to collapse into the vehicle and seek cover?"

At this point I'm thinking, "I'm kind of in this situation now." I'm thinking to myself, "He's still moving. If my commander tells me to collapse in, what am I going to do?" At that point, though, I decided I'm committed until something happens. I was just firing rounds

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and would continue to do so until either he stopped or blew up. I could hear my commander, Murray, saying, "Hit him. Hit him again. Keep hitting him!"

I will always remember the last round clearly. I saw it go right through the front door on the left side of the SUV, and then as soon as I saw the hole in the SUV, it exploded. Why it blew up, we'll never really know ... whether it was detonated by the bomber himself, whether it was a timed explosive, whether my rounds themselves actually ignited something inside. What I do know is that he blew up. I kept firing until he did.

And then time slowed down even more for me. The explosion itself was such an incredibly surreal experience. Sound didn't really register, but all of the other sensations did. I had this memory come to me, flashing back to the videos of nuclear explosions where you see a house, you see the light going bright, and then you see the house smoking, and then you see a blast wave hit the house. I felt, on a miniature level, that this was what was happening to me. I saw this bright light. I started feeling the heat of the actual flash, the flash of the explosion. And then the wind of the concussion wave hit me. I was thinking, "I'm getting hit by this." I felt like I was in a really warm, hot wind, which kicked me back.

I was trying to collapse back into the vehicle as all of this was happening, and, as I was trying, I actually became caught on my tactical vest. In fact, the thing that I became caught on was my first aid kit. In Kandahar, the standard was that every Canadian soldier carried his first aid kit in the farthest right side pocket. As I was trying to turn around, I got caught on the turret by the very piece of kit that was supposed to save my life.

At this point it's starting to get very dark. As the vehicle is being engulfed in the actual fireball itself, I'm seeing flames, but mostly smoke. The smoke and flames are starting to close in. I'm inside the walls of the turret, but I'm not actually inside the vehicle itself, and I'm caught. It was kind of like trying to hide from the flames, pushing myself as low as my first aid kit would allow. I remember

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thinking, “Wow, how incredibly ironic is this? I’m going to burn to death caught on my first aid kit!” Fortunately, at that point, the pressure from a secondary explosion, or something like that, finally managed to pop me inside the vehicle. I immediately realized that I was on fire, so I patted myself out. First my gloves, then my arms, finally my helmet. I start to wonder where my dismount is, but he’s actually underneath me as I basically sat on him when I got back into the G-Wagon. I can’t hear him. Now that I’m inside, it’s completely dark. I could see some flames, but mostly what I remember was the darkness.

The gloves that I had been wearing did an incredible job of protecting my hands, but they were mechanics gloves, so they had a lot of padding on the outside with all the Kevlar on the inside layer. So, when the actual explosion happened and the initial flash hit me, the outside nylon part of the gloves essentially exploded. I just watched out of my peripheral vision as my gloves burst. I could see the white fluffing of the glove just kind of float through the air, gently. The gloves worked and I could feel my hands fine. Unfortunately, the actual cuffs of the gloves were elasticized and that had melted to my skin. So, I was like, “That kind of hurts.”

The vehicle had travelled through the explosion by this point owing to its own momentum. I wasn’t sure what the status of everyone else was. Since we were moving, I knew that we hadn’t lost the axel or anything like that, but there definitely wasn’t any power to the vehicle by this point. We were a mobility kill. At this point, I’m like, “Okay, I’m good.” I looked up and saw sunlight, so I knew that we were out of the explosion’s flames now. So now I’m thinking, “Ambush! Get ready for the ambush! It’s not over yet!” So I got back up into the turret and I cocked the C6 machine gun to make sure that it was still working because it just went through an explosion and fire. A round was ejected, so it looked like it was still good to go. I then started covering my arcs and then everything else just started falling into place.

The rest of the convoy started to set up a security cordon around the actual turning circle at this point. We, in the G-Wagon, were

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surrounded mostly with high explosive ordnance, fire and a flipped civilian SUV – different from the one that attacked us – that had been right next to us and was now on fire also.<sup>8</sup> At this point now, as I was looking from my position on the C6, and squinting, I thought that something was wrong with my eyes. I then realized that my ballistic eye wear had become completely glazed by the flash. I debated with myself, “I guess I should take these off, but I’m not allowed to as they are for my own protection, but I can’t really see anything right now, and I’m not really good to do my job covering security because I can’t see anyone coming in.” So I just dropped them down below my eyes and said to myself, “Well, I guess this will have to do.”

Once my crew commander, Murray, got to me and saw that I had been burned, he wanted me to get down from the turret. But I wasn’t getting down and he let me stay up there for the moment. Within a few minutes, we started to become concerned that there was another suspicious vehicle with stuff in the back five metres from where we had rolled to a stop. Given its location and what had just happened, it was suspected to be a secondary IED. At this point, the security cordon was pushed back a safe distance, away from this new suspicious vehicle. However, this meant that we would have to abandon the G-Wagon and leave it outside the cordon. The new cordon, though, placed the G-Wagon within view, but also kept everyone at a safe distance. “It’s *still* not over yet,” I thought to myself.

Murray finally ordered me to give up my C6 and take a C7. He wanted me to go for first aid, but not wanting to leave the line, I managed to negotiate with him that I would go back for first aid once the QRF from Camp Nathan Smith had arrived. I stayed on cordon until that point, and then when the QRF arrived with a Bison ambulance, I went in for medical attention. I didn’t have a perception of time at that point. The pain from the burns was beginning to register.

The good part of all of this was how the others acted. I had kept my personal radio on for the whole time, even when I was receiving medical treatment, and it was really reassuring to be able to listen to all of my crew and hear everything just completely falling into place for the team. Everyone doing exactly what they needed to do, being

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exactly where they needed to be. There was no confusion. Everyone was communicating. It was really fulfilling to be able to hear what was going on. It was also very reassuring at the same time because it dawned on me, “Wow, these guys are really good at their job, and okay, maybe it’s okay for me to be off the line.” I was starting to feel some pain at that point – the adrenaline was starting to dim down – and I was now starting to feel like I had a really, really bad sunburn.

I guess I took the brunt for the team on that one. Had the vehicle come any closer, it would have been a lot worse. The G-Wagon door was actually blown open by the force of the blast. We had all been banged around, but I was the only serious injury. I was the only one that received an airlift to KAF.

*Corporal Makela spent a bit of time recovering from his injuries in hospital and then returned to his platoon to carry on as before.*

I was “off the road” for two and a half weeks. My injuries were pretty much external only ... burns, pretty severe burns. I didn’t receive any muscle or tissue damage, didn’t break anything, no sprains, this or that. The principal concern for me was not getting an infection in the actual burns themselves. So, most of the time, I was pretty much restricted to my room in KAF, which is so dirty anyway. For the most part, the medical staff wanted me indoors, in my enclosed area, which is about the most sterile environment that you could get without sending me off to Germany to the hospital at Ramstein. I didn’t need to be removed from Afghanistan. After two and a half weeks, I was still clearly burned, but everything had kind of sealed up enough that the doctors weren’t worried about infection.

I was then allowed back to my job. I was very happy because the worst feeling for me was watching my crew leave to protect other convoys. I always looked at my wristwatch for the time when they were supposed to get back. I would worry whenever they’d get delayed, and they’d always get delayed, because there are always vehicle breakdowns.

*His fellow soldiers were extremely happy to see him return to duty. A good friend was now serving with them once again and his presence allowed*

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*others to rest more frequently than had been the case when Makela was restricted to KAF.*

We were a platoon doing a fairly intense job. You were always going to protect a convoy, and if you were not going, you were on call. Once I was able to get back into the rotation, at least we could have one guy from our section stay behind each time we went outside the wire. While I was off for that two and a half weeks, my crew didn't have that extra guy. Everyone else had to pick up the slack so to speak. So when I was finally back, the other guys could actually start to have proper downtime again. No one was really upset with me that I had been away because I looked terrible. In fact, my section mates were the friends that I needed. I remember getting great support from some really great guys ... Corporal William "Billy" Kerr, Corporal Allan "Al" Roberts and Corporal Grant Wagar were always there for me.

*The attack of mid-October happened relatively early in Makela's tour and his platoon still had a number of months to serve before their return to Canada. The remaining time presented its own unique challenges that had to be faced.*

It was like a rollercoaster, in terms of contact with the enemy. I was back on the road for about two weeks before I went on my mid-deployment leave and the number of serious encounters with the enemy just kind of petered out. There were fewer and fewer things that were happening as we were going along. Maybe it was because we were making the environment more secure. From my platoon's specific standpoint of how much we were seeing, it wasn't at the same level as earlier. What I noticed was that it became a constant battle with ourselves ... some had to deal with boredom, while others, paranoia. What I mean by that is as the actual incidents became less, it became a struggle to keep on our game and to battle complacency. At the same time, though, other people reacted differently as the space between contacts grew. The longer you go without something happening, the more it eats at you because your imagination is working as to what could happen. As much as you try not to, people get very anxious. Logic, I guess, doesn't play as much a role in it

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because you're thinking that it has been a really long time and that you're due, even though it realistically doesn't work like that.

*This particular incident affected morale within the platoon, yet Makela's attitude towards the entire situation prevented the development of serious complications.*

I think I had a large role to play from the time that I was injured, in that if I had let it get to me, it would have gotten to everyone else. I generally kept my morale quite high, and I definitely didn't want to let anyone see me feeling down. I was always cracking jokes like, "Well, my girlfriend always said she wanted me to trim my eyebrows, so I guess this kind of took care of that." I definitely tried to keep out the bad stuff, and so, as a whole, everyone just generally kind of kept a positive spin. I was fine, so everyone else was fine. I didn't look that fine, but....

*In the long run, Makela's quick actions had other effects.*

One thing that is commonly asked is, "Do I have mental trauma? Do I have PTSD?"<sup>9</sup> And I tell people, "I honestly do not think so." And I do genuinely mean it. I think people have a hard time understanding why people like me don't have something like that. The best I can explain, and I'm not a doctor, but for me, I would have to say the reason that I have remained somewhat immune is that although I have seen some terrible things, I had a chance to positively contribute to all of the situations that I've dealt with. As a result of being able to positively affect things, even if bad things did happen, it's easy for me to mentally move on. From my view of it, the people that I know that have not done as well were in situations where they weren't able to affect the outcome.

One guy from my vehicle that day had a hard, hard time dealing with the incident, mostly because he was trapped, so really right up until the vehicle was stopped and he could get out, he had no influence on what was happening. When I collapsed into the vehicle and was on fire, I pretty much sat on him and he couldn't do anything to help me. So there he is, trapped in a fireball, can't see anything, he



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hears the guy next to him say he's on fire, and he can't do anything, and that's hard ... that's really hard.

*As in so many other cases, the outcome on 16 October was largely due to the action of the larger group with whom Makela was serving, despite the awarding of but a single decoration.*

The thing that I keep saying to everyone is that it really was a team effort. I mean, I got put in the situation where I was able to do my job because everyone else was doing their job. I was guided onto the vehicle. I was aware of it 40 seconds before I saw it since the front vehicle had alerted the convoy. Pyrek in the middle vehicle was able to push the suicide bomber over and keep the middle of the convoy safe. Those guys also pointed out the covered stuff in the back, so that increased my ability to deal with the threat. My commander, Murray, talked me onto the vehicle. The driver of the G-Wagon, Corporal Scott Rhoads, was able to swerve to the side, increasing our standoff distance. Once everything happened, everyone did their job without the convoy commander needing to tell anyone what was required. Everyone just did it. It really was a team effort and this singling out aspect, in terms of the decoration, I think is unfair to everyone else that had an important role to play.

*Corporal Makela was certainly taken aback and a little shocked when he eventually learned (while he was still in theatre!) that he had been recognized for his actions.*

So I was nominated for, received and was granted an M.M.V., all in under four months I think. And this doesn't happen, or at least it was kind of unprecedented really. So the honours and awards people followed their typical process, which was to send all the necessary documents to my official address. Because I'm not back in Canada at this point, everything went to my parents. Well, my mom opens this package from the Governor General's office and has no idea what it is. I tended to be in touch with my parents on a weekly basis roughly. So one day, I phoned home and they're like, "We have to talk to you," and my mom kind of asked, "What have you not been telling us?" half in a good way and half in a "something-

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weird-is-happening-and-we-want-to-know-what-it-is” way. She told me that I got a package from the Governor General saying that I’ve been awarded the Medal of Military Valour. I was just kind of like, “That sounds important.” I didn’t even know what this medal was. I had to go look it up on the internet. She read the nomination to me and I was like, “Okay, I guess, alright, I think I know what it’s for now.”

At this point, I was completely floored because I thought I had just been doing my job that day. I think that pretty much any guy in my crew would have acted in exactly the same way had they been in that exact same situation. It just happened that on that day it was my turn to do the job of providing rear security. It feels great to have been in that situation. My actions, without metaphor, directly contributed to people that I know being alive. And for me, that’s the good feeling. That’s why I feel great to have had a chance to be able to directly say that my actions contributed to saving lives. But it’s my job. That’s what I do. It wasn’t like I had done anything beyond my job description. I wouldn’t work with anyone that I thought wouldn’t have done exactly the same thing. So, from a personal standpoint, I had trouble understanding why I got singled out when I was working with ten other people that would have done exactly the same thing.

I’m still trying to work my way out of the awkwardness of explaining my actions to people. For the longest time, I just didn’t want to tell people, and I was like, “I did my job. I don’t want to talk about it.” Now, I’m trying to move towards, “Well, I got the opportunity to make a difference,” and just lay out the basics of the circumstances. I say, “It was a suicide bomber. My actions helped to stop the suicide bomber.” Whether they did or they didn’t, I guess no one will ever really know, but I feel that I got to help people and keep friends of mine alive, so that’s what I got the medal for. From a broader sociological standpoint I can understand the importance of the award. In a world of constant negative media attention, stories about soldiers overcoming adversity are golden.

For me, I’ve always built-up in my mind what valour is, and really the only things that I had to inform myself as to what it is are those

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“moments in Canadian history” commercials,<sup>10</sup> like people winning Victoria Crosses and doing unfathomable acts. For me, I had a very high opinion of what a valour medal is for ... it’s for leading a section attack against a fortified stronghold, somehow overcoming it all, and defeating the enemy. And then to actually see a medal come through for being a turret gunner that shoots at a suicide bomber who blows up, that was never part of my personal definition of what a valour medal is awarded for. So that part takes a bit of getting used to, redefining what valour is. I guess I had an over-exuberant view of what people get awarded for. I can think of other situations in Afghanistan where people did similar things and they didn’t get anything. Is it because of how the nomination is written? Is it because the right people didn’t see it?

*Other soldiers in Corporal Makela’s platoon shared many of his sentiments.*

Everyone was really happy that I had physically recovered and all that. Everyone wondered why the third highest honour<sup>11</sup> was being granted in light of our job description. Everyone was congratulatory, but really, for the most part, everyone kind of shared my position. Everyone is doing the same thing. It’s a normal part of your life to expect these threats and to be seeing this kind of stuff on, if not a daily, then a weekly basis. And so, it’s really hard to understand, when this is your normal life, why people from the outside are trying to raise your hand and congratulate you for it, and it seemed that it was in an inappropriately large way.

*As elsewhere, leadership, in all of its various dimensions, played a pivotal role that day in Kandahar.*

My actions that day were of a corporal doing a corporal’s job. I did my job and everyone in my crew did their job without needing to be told what to do. It was an immediate reaction. We all knew what we had to do and were able to trust that everyone around us was doing their job. There was no duplication of effort, no second-guessing, no micro-managing. But that wasn’t because we were lucky. We had gotten to the point through training and experience, which was the responsibility of our leadership.

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While there is often much talk about command and control under fire, I feel that often we forget the importance of a private doing a private's job. There is just too much happening in a fight to control every element of it. A leader needs to stay on top, controlling the direction of the battle, and not "stay in the trench" dictating to the private every little "this" and "that." For a leader to be effective, he needs to get his men to that point.

A leader's responsibility is to train his men to a point where they will do their job so that the leader can focus on all the bigger issues at hand. On that day, we acted like a team of one mind. While our leadership still controlled the scene, we, the team, anticipated and carried out their aim without being told. I think that is a sign of good leadership.<sup>12</sup>

CORPORAL MAKELA WAS INVESTED WITH HIS MEDAL OF MILITARY VALOUR BY THE THEN-GOVERNOR GENERAL AND COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF OF CANADA, HER EXCELLENCY THE RIGHT HONOURABLE MICHAËLE JEAN, AT RIDEAU HALL ON 12 OCTOBER 2007.

## NOTES

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1 *Canada Gazette*, Part I, Vol. 141, No. 8 (24 February 2007), 325. See also, "Valour," *Canadian Military Journal*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (Spring 2007), 4-5.

2 Makela explains further, "The Force Protection Platoon was part of the Combat Service Support Company that fell under the NSE. It was a platoon that had been created *ad hoc* only for the tour and made up completely of infantry reservists. The purpose of this platoon was to give the NSE its own personnel to provide security for convoys without the need to borrow assets from the 1RCR Battle Group."

3 Numerous Canadian soldiers were decorated for their actions during, or in relation to, Op MEDUSA; their stories are recounted in Chapters 7, 8 and 9.

4 Meaning that Canadian forces have encountered and engaged the enemy, or vice-versa, at close distance.

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5 Makela recalled, “We split the platoon essentially in two. We took the three sections of a normal infantry platoon, divided one section in half and created two crews, “A” crew and “B” crew. When “A” crew was up, “B” crew was typically reserved in KAF, on call, on notice, should a breakdown or something happen out there.” Each crew was, therefore, one and one half sections strong.

6 A “dismount” was responsible for securing the ground should a convoy become stationary for whatever reason.

7 In relation to the convoy specifically, Makela explains further, “They were big trucks. They were the new super-armoured trucks that Canada had just brought into Afghanistan. This particular convoy, on this occasion, consisted of six vehicles – the three empty trucks accompanied by three security vehicles – with an RG-31 at the front of the column, an RG-31 in the middle, and a G-Wagon at the back, where I was.”

8 Makela recalls that this particular SUV was parked on the left side of the road at the time of the explosion.

9 Other soldiers included in this book, such as Master Corporal Christopher Lorne Harding in Chapter 5, were subjected to a similar line of questioning upon their return to Canada.

10 Referring specifically to the “Historica Minutes” produced by The Historica-Dominion Institute. From an earlier version of its website, “The acclaimed Historica Minutes are one-minute movies that portray exciting and important stories from Canada’s past. These brief but inspiring history highlights are useful as teaching aids – the Historica Minutes are screened in many classrooms across Canada. The Minutes have been a familiar part of Canada’s cultural landscape for more than ten years. So familiar, in fact, they have been imitated and parodied by comedians.”

11 In terms of Military Valour Decorations.

12 Additional information concerning Makela’s service in Afghanistan can be found in Blair Edwards, “Kanata Soldier Stops Suicide Bomber,” *Kanata Courier-Standard*, 16 March 2007. He also described the incident for which he was eventually decorated in an interview on *CBC Ottawa Morning*.



# CHAPTER 12

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## *THE BATTLE WITHIN*

### MAJOR DAVID NELSON QUICK

STAR OF MILITARY VALOUR ■ JANUARY TO AUGUST 2007

*“THE THREE PARTS OF LEADERSHIP, IN MY OPINION, ARE THE LEADER, THE FOLLOWER, AND THE SITUATION.”*

Major Quick displayed exceptional courage while commanding India Company, 2nd Battalion, The Royal Canadian Regiment Battle Group, Joint Task Force Afghanistan, from JANUARY to AUGUST 2007. He led his troops from the front during numerous intense combat operations throughout the Zharey District. On April 22, 2007, despite injuries incurred by the explosion of a bomb, Major Quick kept on going, using his tactical skills. His prowess and selfless dedication, fundamental in defeating a determined enemy, inspired the Battle Group to victory.<sup>1</sup>

DAVID NELSON QUICK WAS BORN AND RAISED IN TRENTON, ONTARIO. HE ATTENDED TRENTON HIGH SCHOOL AND SUBSEQUENTLY STUDIED AT THE UNIVERSITY OF GUELPH. HE JOINED THE MILITARY WHILE AT UNIVERSITY UNDER THE OFFICER CANDIDATE TRAINING PLAN, BEGINNING HIS MILITARY TRAINING PRIOR TO GRADUATING. AFTER COMPLETING HIS INFANTRY OFFICER TRAINING IN 1995, HE JOINED THE RCR AND WAS POSTED TO THE 1ST BATTALION IN PETAWAWA, ONTARIO. IN 1RCR, HE WAS EMPLOYED AS A RIFLE PLATOON COMMANDER, OFFICER COMMANDING RECONNAISSANCE PLATOON, AND FINALLY AS 2IC COMBAT SUPPORT COMPANY. HE DEPLOYED TWICE WITH 1RCR, FIRST TO BOSNIA IN 1998 (OP PALLADIUM, ROTO 2) AND THEN TO KOSOVO IN 1999 (OP KINETIC, ROTO 1). FOLLOWING HIS RETURN FROM OVERSEAS, HE WAS IMMEDIATELY POSTED TO LAND FORCES CENTRAL AREA HEADQUARTERS IN TORONTO, ONTARIO WHERE HE WAS EMPLOYED AS THE PERSONAL ASSISTANT, AND THEN THE EXECUTIVE ASSISTANT, TO THE COMMANDER UNTIL HE WAS

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SELECTED FOR THE ARMY OFFICER DEGREE PROGRAM. HE COMPLETED HIS BACHELOR'S OF MILITARY ARTS AND SCIENCE FROM RMCC WHILE AT YORK UNIVERSITY IN 2003. DEGREE IN HAND, HE WAS SUBSEQUENTLY POSTED TO 2RCR IN GAGETOWN, NEW BRUNSWICK WHERE HE WAS EMPLOYED AS THE OPERATIONS OFFICER, OFFICER COMMANDING COMBAT SUPPORT COMPANY, AND FINALLY OFFICER COMMANDING INDIA COMPANY. HE DEPLOYED TWICE WHILE WITH 2RCR, TO HAITI IN 2004 (OP HALO, ROTO 0) AND THEN TO AFGHANISTAN IN 2007 (OP ATHENA, ROTO 3). FOLLOWING HIS LAST DEPLOYMENT, HE WAS SENT TO THE CANADIAN FORCES COLLEGE IN TORONTO WHERE HE FINISHED HIS MASTER'S IN DEFENCE STUDIES.

*Major Dave Quick commanded a rifle company in combat in Afghanistan, in the much-contested Zharey District. By every account, he and his soldiers were successful and effective. Continually achieving the objectives that had been set before him was never easy, facing as he did a determined and intelligent enemy. Yet he constantly relied on a number of sound principles – good preparation, good tactics, good leadership – to gain the upper hand. As events proved, success in Afghanistan was very much predicated on extensive pre-deployment training in Canada, to which he had a substantial amount of input.*

I actually had a lot to do with my company training plan. There were certain milestones we had to achieve, but in essence, my CO, Lieutenant-Colonel Rob Walker,<sup>2</sup> left it to the company commanders to develop and execute the training. I had the flexibility to do force-on-force training, which means I had my platoons patrolling against each other rather than engaging a standard enemy that just sits in one location; this leads to better fieldcraft. The platoons used weapons effect simulators, like a paintball-type system, against each other, which has a better effect on them, especially when they get hit; you actually feel the hit and they hurt. I also allowed my platoon commanders a few days on their own where they could just practice whatever they needed to practice ... kind of shake it up with their guys.

During one training scenario I killed myself and the company sergeant-major, Master Warrant Officer Steve Jeans,<sup>3</sup> at the same time, just to make sure that everybody was paying attention to



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the operational plan. I found that to be very beneficial later on in Afghanistan, because when my vehicle hit an IED, one of my platoon commanders, who was my acting LAV captain at the time, took control of the situation and for a few uncertain moments he was the company commander! In fact, everyone had to “shift” in their responsibilities because I was injured and they had to know exactly what to do. The whole process had to be seamless. That one instance, even though it was the only time in theatre that it was needed, had an impact. It showed everyone that they needed to be ready to take control of the next level at any given time ... just as we had trained.

My CO's training philosophy was great. Lieutenant-Colonel Walker allowed me time to work out how I needed to function and then he implemented some of my company's SOPs into his battle group. This showed that we were all a team and he was adamant that we function as such. It was very challenging. He really put the pressure on me, and the company did very well overall. We did everything that we were expected to do in theatre. The confidence level of the company was very high because the soldiers were starting to see all the parts working together. That was most important because we didn't know what we were going to get into, if we were going to get into combat. To be honest, I don't think we wanted to get into combat, but we knew that if we had to, we had the skill sets to do what we needed to do.

The CO was proactive. The year before we deployed, he started having professional development sessions where we would engage in academic development. For example, some of the officers went to the University of New Brunswick and listened to global security-type presentations about insurgency at a macro-level. This was then followed by a recommended reading list, things like *Ghost Wars* and Grossman's books *On Killing* and *On Combat*, to get us in a different mindset.<sup>4</sup> As well, some did mirror image training<sup>5</sup> with the guys down in the United States; they also came up and gave us an insurgent's education where everything taught was based on a different set of discourse. For me, it struck a chord because in social science or political science in university we talked about discourse and writing from a feminist perspective or post-modern perspective

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or whatever, and it's all about which lenses you use. As soon as I put it in that context, it made perfect sense. How do you convince a soldier to think like an insurgent? We need to get the soldier to think as if he *is* the insurgent and then figure out what he would do next. As soon as you could put it in that light, all of the soldiers were thinking the right way.

So in that mindset, I took volunteers to do training in Pashto. Knowing the language really helped us on the ground; we found that that really did fuel our credibility in Zharey. You can never get enough language training. If I would have known the positive effect of having these language skills within our company, I could have, in hindsight, earmarked them earlier and given the company specific training because the guys had a bit of an affinity for it and that would have been much more beneficial. It is a difficult language. You also have to balance your own language skills with trusting the interpreter because it's important to have the Afghan look after the Afghan versus going in and doing everything ourselves. We really have to show the olive branch.

*India Company was fortunate to have arrived in theatre during a fairly quiet period and Quick took advantage of that situation to familiarize himself and his troops with the terrain. Even though contact was initially fleeting, the company used the time to gather intelligence on the enemy, information that would help them later on.*

We flew out on 24 January from Gagetown and landed in the AOR on the 28<sup>th</sup> at Patrol Base Wilson, which is on Highway One in Zharey District. In essence, from the end of January in through June, we did stability operations and it was very benign. It was generally just routine patrolling and nothing out of the ordinary. On February 14<sup>th</sup>, I submitted a map overlay to my boss and that stayed current right up until the day we left. Within three weeks of our arrival, we had mapped the insurgency through low-level patrolling, talking to people and getting out of our vehicles, which is in keeping with traditional COIN doctrine. We also used ANSF information, our own observations, as well as higher-level intelligence. Because we had that relatively benign environment, we had the freedom of

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movement to get out and exploit all sorts of resources for intelligence. Once the gauntlet was dropped and we went kinetic, we had the upper hand because we had already walked almost everywhere in Zahrey unopposed. We knew the ground.

To help capture intelligence continuously, we did an AAR after every single operation regardless of what time we got back. It was part of my orders and that allowed the other sub-units to gain knowledge from our operations. For example, we talked about ways to distinguish yourself from the enemy when you're in extreme danger close contact,<sup>6</sup> that's critical. So these are things that need to get out for the safety of the whole mission and it gives you intelligence at all levels.

*If intelligence proved an asset to Major Quick, so too did strong relations with his subordinates upon whom he depended. He found that the rapport he had with his sergeant-major helped make things run very smoothly in the company. He worked hard to establish trust amongst all of his soldiers and did not allow the formal chain of command to become an impediment when someone was having a difficulty of one sort or another.*

Master Warrant Officer Jeans and I were a great team. We really hit it off because we had a very similar philosophy. He's an older guy. He has more experience than I do. I think we were the best pairing because he's aggressive, but he also understands that you can only do so much. We set the tone as a team. He talked to his NCOs the same way I talked to my officers. I think, well I know, that the platoon commanders talked to me about everything. They talked to me about their girlfriends, about their families, when they were going to get married, if they were scared, how the troops were doing. The troops would say the same to me. I'd ask, "How are you doing?" "I'm not doing well, Sir." "Okay, well, what's up?" And they would talk to me openly. I think that's the greatest compliment when soldiers can come up and talk to you about anything and know that it's done in confidence. In some cases, when it was appropriate, I would ask one of the NCOs to follow up and they would do so accordingly. The NCO is not going to jack the guy up because he went to the company commander with his problems. It just meant that he needed to

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talk to me at that given time. I think that was the first step in gaining their respect.

And also, we did what the troops did. There were none of those days where troops were down doing weapons training and the officers were doing personnel evaluation reports. I think that we set the right tone. I was very blessed with the crew I had. It could have been a lot worse. I think the regimental sergeant-major, Chief Warrant Officer Mark Baisley,<sup>7</sup> and the CO did the right thing by pairing the sergeant-major and I up, as well as the pairings of the officers and the platoon warrants. Those pieces are very important. It's a command team. The rank structure in an infantry battalion is based on years and years of hard-learned lessons. The rank structure is necessary because someone needs to make decisions, but in the heat of battle there is no rank because a bullet will kill me just as quick as it will kill you. The soldiers know that you will not make a mistake because your life depends on it and having that trust was important.

I think that we get focused a lot on what it is that we do versus what we don't do. In my past, what we didn't do very well overall in the CF was lead by example. I am not being critical of all leaders in the CF when I mention this lack of leadership. Rather, I am commenting on the shift that many of us saw in the '90s and that still resonates today through legacy personnel. At times I am overdramatic to raise a key point! The trends that I had witnessed during that time generally saw the officer not doing what the soldier did in spite of the "lead by example" mantra that was professed. As a younger officer I was always frustrated with this. Obviously the officer cannot be as skilled as the professional soldier in many things "field" and "operational" due to the critical administration and institutional burden that consumes so much of his or her time. I also know that the more senior in rank an officer becomes, the further too he or she moves away from the basic skill sets. That natural evolution of an officer does not have to be an excuse however. Soldiers need and want leaders, not managers. There is a requirement for management, and it is also an important tool, but in combat, specifically as a sub-unit in a COIN environment, the soldiers expect leadership. They deserve it.

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Today, where I am most impressed though, is with what our senior leaders have been instituting in the CF. The CDS and all of his subordinate commanders are really pushing this leadership stuff and I am so very happy to see the top-cover. We were focused in the '90s on education, language profiles and protocol that would facilitate quicker promotion of our officers, and naturally many officers used this to their own benefit. What it failed to recognize though were those officers that would have been equally as good or even stronger leaders that could not free up the time, or were not provided the resources, to advance their education and so on. When I joined the military, my grandfather told me that "you do your job by looking down, not up. The soldiers will look after you and promote you if you do the same." I am thankful for this advice.

The lack of leading by example is a result of environment. Officers are rarely given the same operational opportunities as the soldiers, and their professional requirements often preclude them from advancement if they do not focus on more personal development factors. The good news is that the new command climate is completely different than when I joined the military in the mid-'90s. I have never been more loyal to my chain of command and indeed the higher leadership levels. They are not perfect, but they are honest about that too. I trust them and I think that speaks to the leadership they provide to me.

I tried while in training and in theatre to soldier at least on par with the members of my company. I carried more kit than most of them, carried my own radio as opposed to using a soldier to do this for me, and when absolutely necessary, fought next to them. I was primarily responsible for the company and the operational successes as ordered by my boss. I led by supporting my boss and his battle group first, my company second, and lastly myself. I would hope my soldiers respected me for this. At the end of the day I was not their friend, I was their boss, and if need be, I would use my soldiers in a manner to support my boss's objectives. It is the cruel part of the infantry, but ultimately you must be prepared to use as many resources – soldiers – as required whilst achieving the

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objectives. I am thankful I did not have to “expend” any of these precious “resources” to effect my mission.

*From another leadership perspective, Major Quick felt that he had to maintain a high level of discipline in India Company, if only to keep his troops focused on the task at hand. He prided himself on being a tough taskmaster, during both pre-deployment training and the company’s actual tour overseas. He believed that this was the best way, indeed the only way, to ensure that his soldiers survived. He seems to have been proven correct in that there were no company fatalities during the tour, which consisted of at least 24 separate combat operations.<sup>8</sup>*

The battle group we were replacing was involved in very kinetic operations at the front end of their tour, but as things became quieter, it was perceived that things within that organization were a little too relaxed because those guys had “seen it” and “done it.” To help counter this, I did not allow my soldiers to go anywhere without helmets and flak vests at any time, unless they were in the confines of their trenches or strong points. For one thing, it served as a bit of an acclimatization period. It was still January and February. It was cooler, not as hot as it was going to be in August. So I said to the guys, “If you can’t deal with it now, you’re going to die come July and August with the heat.” So we just kept it on. It was part of our kit. There was a bit of a handover period where we were living with the troops that were ready to leave and that caused my soldiers some grief. Some of the guys of the other organization laughed at us out loud. They thought we were a little too intense and it wasn’t needed. But I didn’t really care. We needed to set the tone and do our business. They had nothing to prove to us, they were all very much respected, but we had everything to prove, and rightly so.

I was pretty harsh on the leadership too. I did not accept failure in anything that had to get done. Especially while they were on work time, they had to be absolutely committed. When we were in the mess, we had a good time. It was relaxed and we would mix it up. But when we were at work, it was focused. I expected the platoon commanders to solicit the support of their NCOs and to listen initially when they were in the planning phase. Once they listened to

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their feedback, they made their plan and they stood by that plan. But this was a new thing for all of us ... the COIN environment and even combat. The benefit was that the NCOs and the young officers were learning together. They were very team-focused.

The three parts of leadership, in my opinion, are the leader, the follower, and the situation. That triad really shapes the way your personality will be. If you're the leader and the follower is an "A" type guy, then he doesn't need a lot of direction, so you don't need to be an "A" type aggressive leader. You just need to plant the seed and they are going to sort it out. The situation would shape how the individual is going to react. I think at any given time, my leadership would go from being really strong to really subtle because the follower might not have needed any leadership. They were just following a direction or a drill or following the situation. And the situation would dictate whether I needed to kick people in the rear end or if I just needed to follow like everybody else and be a soldier.

We also talked about leadership. It has everything to do with your ability to influence ... yes ... the art of influencing. The soldiers want to do what you ask them to do, not because you're telling them, but because there is something about you. You're selling a plan. You're making that plan theirs. I was very adamant from the outset on what I demanded of the platoon commanders. They needed to sell my plan. Not as the company commander's plan, but as their own plan. When I gave orders, my orders became their orders. It was the same thing with the section commanders. Sometimes, I would give orders to the section commanders *en masse* because of timings or whatever. I would give the initial order and then give the command teams time to work through the details. I'd have the platoon commanders come back an hour or so later and talk me through it so I could tweak anything that I needed to. At the same time, they would show me how they took ownership ... and they would. They would take their piece of the battlefield and make it their own and, as a result, I never saw a guy refer to his notes. It was all up in their heads. They all mentally absorbed it and I thought that was really important.

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*Once the pace of operations increased, one of the steps Major Quick took to win over the local populace was to attend (and participate in) their community councils. He gained their respect during these meetings by taking a tough stance, employing as he did a very distinct approach.*

The good Afghans loved us because we were initially involved in the Shura.<sup>9</sup> After every operation, I would go back to the Shura and sit in with the leadership from these communities and say something like, “Last week I asked you guys if you could help me.” Then I would point out one of the district representatives and tell him, “You said there was no Taliban here. You’re a liar!” I was affecting his credibility amongst his peers. I was not a diplomat in there, because from February to March, I had been giving them an opportunity to tell me and help me and show some interest. It was clear who within the Shura wanted to support us and who did not. Certain guys from certain areas were in cahoots and they wanted to cause me problems. And I could earmark them from the first couple of weeks in the Shura. They just didn’t rub me the right way and, sure enough, they were the guys that caused me the most problems. So when I was going back to them and calling their bluff, it caused all kinds of grief within their communities. What I started doing was causing a rift between the local nationals, and the tainted leadership and the insurgents. It’s sort of from that point forward that we started to see a shift in the balance where the insurgents were not welcomed in some communities and that was very clear.

Every time I got into kinetic operations and then went to the Shura and was able to call bluffs on whomever that district chief was, I was gaining credibility. Initially, my position in the Shura was in the back of the room next to the door and the tea boys. Then it got to where I sat next to the district chief, which is a position of great authority. I’m a young fellow and in their culture elders are to be respected. Even as a cultural philosophy, I should not have been at the same level as these gentlemen because they’re older and wiser. That’s just the way they do business. So just to have that position, I knew that I was gaining credibility.



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*Being attuned to Afghan culture, Quick also took advantage of the presence and professionalism of his female soldiers to help build relationships with the local female population, again in the interest of making his company's operations that much more effective.*

In the company, I always had about a half a dozen women. Either they were medics, a few were infantry soldiers, or signallers. I think the respect level and maturity given the environment was such that it removed any problems with gender right from the beginning. We didn't treat anybody any differently. It seemed to work its way out. We found that our female soldiers could go places the men couldn't because of the Afghan culture. They could interview the Afghan women; they could interface with them; they could feel their vibe which the men couldn't because the women in that culture, certainly where we were in rural Afghanistan, are really hardline Muslim and because of that, they will run if men approach. I mean they feel terrified because they can't be seen with a man. So the female soldiers could go off and do the business needed with the locals, which made it essential to have women integrated in the team. You need all the skill sets you can get.

*Leading from the front, as he always did, put Major Quick in a situation about two months into the tour in which he sustained a mild concussion and both neck and back injuries when his armoured vehicle hit an IED. Some of his crew also sustained minor, superficial injuries.*

There was one incident where we hit an IED. I was out of combat for probably five minutes. I couldn't walk and my inner ear was messed up. I remember crawling in the dust at two in the morning to my sergeant-major's vehicle and having to use my upper body to pull myself along. By the time I talked to him, everything else had handled itself. The soldiers had taken care of the situation and it was amazing. I sat up in the vehicle and looked around and saw all this stuff that occurred to them to do despite me not telling them. I realized then that I'm expendable ... and it couldn't have been any more clear than that!

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Living through an IED strike leaves you with a lot of emotion associated with it ... the sounds and the smells and the concern for the people in the vehicle. The day after we hit the IED, I drove the lead vehicle down the same route to do a foot patrol in the same vicinity. That was a terrifying day and I did it because I needed the guys to realize that we're rolling the chicken bones every time, taking our chances. We don't really know what's going to happen. But I needed them to know that I wasn't afraid to go back and, if this occurred again, they needed to know that they had to just keep doing it.

*The Taliban soon realized that India Company was a force to be reckoned with and they actually tried to avoid engaging Quick and his troops. "Operating outside the box" started having a psychological effect on the enemy. Innovative tactics, solid leadership and current intelligence were a potent mix.*

About midway through our tour, there was a huge shift in the Taliban's approach. By Op DRAGON, they started running. Up until that point, they wanted to spar with the company as demonstrated in Op FOXHOLE for instance. During the latter, it was back-and-forth, back-and-forth. It was like a big western shootout and they would not move until the A-10s came up and then we basically whacked them. By three or four operations later, you could see them doing the fighting withdrawal. And that was with our company.

As far as dealing with the insurgency, I think we were able to keep them off balance, which is all you can really do. You can't kill them all. It's keeping them uncertain of your actions and maintaining that secure environment. I think that's what allows you to continue with the development piece and the construction of peace, because you can't do that when you're being hindered by the insurgency.

*At the same time, the improving ANA also aided Quick and his soldiers in carrying out their tasks.*

The other benefit then was that this was where the ANA really started to get confident. We had them with us out on the other TICs, but to be honest, the Canadian troops were involved more in the fire-fights than they were. They would just shoot at anything. But after

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a while, they started being able to do some low-level manoeuvres. I could use them as a manoeuvre force and put them on a flank. I could move them onto the objective.

*After a time, it wasn't just the Taliban that was feeling the pressure of constant battle. Major Quick began to be more aware of the stress that such activities engendered, as did others in India Company.*

During one operation, we engaged right after their prayers. That operation for me was the most difficult, as far as it being sort of a "spiritual" battle. I think at the time I didn't think about it. It wasn't until I got back that I realized what sort of values boundary I had challenged. I thought that – and I preach to the soldiers about discourse and philosophy – in any society, the only thing we really have is a faith that makes us a little better. We want to be a little better in some sort of moral sense. To be fair to these people – whether they were the insurgent or the local nationals – if you're brought up in a certain environment where you feel that your religion is the most important thing and that's your framework of who you are, and we take that from them, then we have become the insurgent. That was my opinion because what I had done is basically become them. I had undermined everything I had done up to that point, from a philosophical perspective. Being a spiritual fellow – whether or not the faiths are correct or organized religion is correct – if I can't respect the one place in that country that someone should go and maybe make peace, then I've lost my morality. And that's what affected me, haunted me, for months. It really did.

We talk about discourse and which lenses you wear and whether you're doing the right thing or not. I think this was a double-edged sword because, as you were fighting, you were the killer. And the second you got on the objective, you were the first aider, providing lifesaving first aid and your medical kit to someone who was just trying to kill you. These things would come to mind. You could see soldiers starting first aid have a few seconds delay in what they were doing as they were processing the emotion. And it was really profound to watch, but at the same time, you could always see them go back to the default of being principally Canadian; the understanding

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person. It was another quite emotional moment to watch them do that too.

When is enough, enough? Attrition versus COIN? I experienced this and I've been through this one from my perspective. I had the ability to bring in such earth-shattering destruction that it almost became an addiction when we were winning. In one particular incident, I dropped several bombs on a group of insurgents because I had them. I think secretly I wanted to empty the airplane's payload. The crew kept asking, "Are you sure you want to do that Sir?" "Yes. I want another one. I want another one. What else have you got?" Thinking about my use of CAS [Close Air Support] was quite a moment for me personally because I realized how savage I could be. And I like to think I'm better and sane and compassionate and I wanted to be that way but I wasn't. In that moment, I became exactly what the insurgent was and I had become the enemy. It's something that is certainly very emotional. It's a hot button for me now and it disappointed me. And it still disappoints me to talk about it for sure.

Despite all these emotions, we had to keep the tempo up and we had to keep them off balance until we had the handover completed. So the onus, in Zharey, was on me to keep them off balance until the entire battle group was back inside the wire and I felt the stress immensely. I was almost done. I'm not sure where it was – Op DRAGON or Op PLUTO, probably the former – where I started suffering from combat stress and I had insomnia and a number of other things. Anxiety caused me to have some sort of heartburn and I was losing feeling in my arms. So they thought that I was maybe having heart issues. The medics were doing all these tests and giving me antacid-type things to try to control it, which was actually causing more pain. They had all kinds of meds that they were giving me, which caused me issues. I couldn't sleep because of the pain. So I wanted to put my flak vest on and get out on operations because when I was out, I didn't think about the pain anymore. When I took my kit off, I was hurting. I had torn some cartilage in my chest as a result of being ambushed and the bizarre positions I had placed my body in to avoid being shot. And complicating things was that I had an upper back and neck injury from the IED blast that did not have

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a chance to heal because I was still wearing my kit and still stressed. So it just added to the discomfort. I was a mess.

Operations became more mechanical. We became very good at engaging and defeating the enemy. I remember listening to the troops. I could hear the young privates and corporals making jokes about being too good at their jobs. I could see it in their eyes ... that they did not want to do it anymore. They'd had their fill. They didn't want to be in firefight anymore. One of them actually had a panic attack and had to be carried to the doctor. People would come in visiting the camp and want to pump up the troops. The troops would be looking at full colonels and RSMs and saying, "I don't want any part of it, Sir."

When guys were doing actual operations, it was the time up to the first contact that was the most stressful. Once we were into a firefight, the stress totally came down and it became more relaxed because it was methodical ... it was mechanical. But up until first rounds, you could cut the tension in everything: battle procedure; getting into vehicles; going through the routine. You could see it, they were just on edge. Sometimes I felt like I wanted to fire rounds first thing in the morning just to get everybody to relax. In some regards, it was therapeutic. A master corporal had said that as well. He said, "I don't like this until rounds are fired. Then, I feel in control." You just didn't know when you were going to be hit. We had been ambushed several times, but when we were in control, we never lost it, and the soldiers had that confidence. We had it all under control, which was really great.

There was a period during our tour when we were doing operations at a very rapid pace. You could see it just kept going. You basically just had enough time to come back, organize yourself, and go back out again, and that's what we were doing. We kept doing it and things were going very well and then all of a sudden, I had to put the brakes on and say, "We're going to lose people. It's too much."

Whenever I got into camp, it was a high, but it was also emotionally draining. I was completely exhausted and quite emotional. You

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could feel it. You just wanted to weep. Even when you're successful on the battlefield, your compassion for the dead can't be discounted. You're just overwhelmed at how much you can inflict on another person and how good you are at it and the harsh reality that, "I am very good at being a company commander in combat." And it terrifies me to think that I have that skill set because where else am I ever going to use that? And knowing that it's a primal thing. Living my life and going about my business and how great my life is, my beautiful home and my wife and all the things I like to do ... I rid the world of a bunch of guys and gals that maybe had a similar level of happiness in their own environment, in their own discourse, right? It's tough to take.

It was only because of my relationship with my wife and my father, well my family for that matter, that I could have a time-out and talk to them. Near the start of Op SEQUEL and onwards, I was talking to my wife every day on the phone ... every single day while I was on operations. She would talk me down. I would call her any time. It would be three o'clock in the morning back here, and I needed to talk to her because I was coming unravelled and if I didn't have her there, I don't know if I would have unravelled. I did not want the soldiers to see me coming unravelled, and although I shared a great deal with my sergeant-major, he also was having a tough time because he was the guy handling the enemy dead and putting them in bags. But when you get back and it's all over, it is a high point because you see how an organization that believes in a common goal can achieve so much if they really believe in it. It becomes who they are.

*Major Quick felt that he was accepting his S.M.V. not just for himself, but on behalf of everyone in India Company.*

I was kind of caught off guard by the whole thing. I guess what it means is that it really is a physical representation of something that occurred in my life; a period of my life. That period of my life involves all kinds of stuff, you know, some really great moments from a professional perspective and terrible moments from a personal perspective ... and the balance of everything in between. A

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chapter in my life. I wear an eight-pointed star as my regimental affiliation.<sup>10</sup> And in essence, there are eight points on this medal, so it represents something to me in a regimental sense as well. The regiment prepared me for that as a young guy, joining the regiment, learning what I needed to learn from the soldiers and up the chain. It allowed me to do that. I'm the man that I am because of my experiences and I'm very happy that I've gone through the ups and downs to get here. I'm very proud of myself now as a man ... not as an officer or a soldier but just as who I am right now as a person. But the soldiers behind that company are what allowed me to do what I did ... because there's the leader, the follower, and the situation. If I didn't have the follower, I wouldn't have been the leader. If I didn't have the situation, I wouldn't have that Star. So, all three of those things had to be right. The conditions were set for all three of them to be met, which allowed me to receive that decoration.

That's probably why it's a rare decoration, because all of those things have to be there. I'm very honoured to have it and I'm comfortable enough talking to people and expressing my emotion and feelings on this. So I think that the decoration will not be lost on me because I can tell people the truth. I'm not uncomfortable saying, "Yeah, I was scared." I'm thankful because I can say, "Look, this is what my company did. This is what the guys did. This is why we were successful." I didn't walk into Afghanistan by myself. I didn't walk out of there by myself. So the receipt of that reward was not done by myself. Soldiers follow you. They make you look good ... and they have done so throughout my entire career. The Star is wonderful. It's the best looking thing on my uniform. But it represents a great deal of things.

MAJOR QUICK WAS INVESTED WITH HIS STAR OF MILITARY VALOUR BY THE THEN-GOVERNOR GENERAL AND COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF OF CANADA, HER EXCELLENCY THE RIGHT HONOURABLE MICHAËLLE JEAN, AT RIDEAU HALL ON 26 MARCH 2008.<sup>11</sup>

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### NOTES

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- 1 *Canada Gazette*, Part I, Vol. 142, No. 16 (19 April 2008), 1088. See also, “Valour,” *Canadian Military Journal*, Vol. 9, No. 1, 5-9.
- 2 For his service in Afghanistan, Lieutenant-Colonel Robert Daren Keith Walker received the M.S.C.; his citation appears in Appendix 2.
- 3 For his service in Afghanistan, Master Warrant Officer Stephen Goward Jeans received the M.S.M.; his citation appears in Appendix 2.
- 4 Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001*; Lieutenant-Colonel Dave Grossman, *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1995); Lieutenant-Colonel Dave Grossman with Loren Christensen, *On Combat: The Psychology and Physiology of Deadly Combat in War and in Peace* (PPCT Research Publications, 2004).
- 5 That is, training allowing some key individuals to delve deeper into insurgent methodologies and functions, thus providing the trainee with a well-developed understanding of the adversary. Such an approach then shapes the discourse, and, naturally, the lenses worn by those individuals when engaging the enemy.
- 6 Basically, where one’s own forces are within the “killing” radius of one’s own weapon systems.
- 7 For his service in Afghanistan, Chief Warrant Officer Mark Leslie Baisley received the M.S.C.; his citation appears in Appendix 2.
- 8 Four of which are mentioned only in passing below: DRAGON, SEQUEL, PLUTO and FOXHOLE.
- 9 An Arabic word for “consultation.” At such meetings involving community elders, major decisions are made.
- 10 The cap badge of The Royal Canadian Regiment is an eight-pointed star, with Queen Victoria’s imperial cypher, VRI (Victoria Regina et Imperatrix; Victoria Queen and Empress), topped by a crown, being imposed thereon.
- 11 Additional information concerning Quick’s service in Afghanistan can be found in Sean M. Maloney, “Incursion at Howz-e Madad: An Afghanistan Vignette,” *Canadian Military History*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (Winter 2008), 63-78.



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## LOST FRIENDS

### PRIVATE SHANE AARON BRADLEY DOLMOVIC

MEDAL OF MILITARY VALOUR ■ 11 APRIL 2007

*“ I KEPT ON THINKING HE WAS GOING TO WAKE UP, BUT HE DIDN'T. ”*

On **APRIL 11, 2007**, Private Dolmovic and Corporal Gionet saved the life of a fellow crewmember after his vehicle struck an improvised explosive device in Nalgham, Afghanistan. After freeing the trapped driver, Private Dolmovic and Corporal Gionet performed life-saving first aid, despite imminent risks of fire, explosions and enemy attack.<sup>1</sup>

SHANE DOLMOVIC GREW UP IN AND AROUND COTTLESVILLE, NEW-FOUNDLAND. HE JOINED THE REGULAR FORCE IN MARCH 2005, LATER QUALIFYING IN HIS TRADE AS AN ARMoured CREWMAN. HIS FIRST OVERSEAS DEPLOYMENT, TO AFGHANISTAN, WAS WITH TASK FORCE 1-07 (OP ATHENA, ROTO 3) AS A MEMBER OF 1 TROOP, B SQUADRON, ROYAL CANADIAN DRAGOONS (RCD). HE DEPLOYED AGAIN TO AFGHANISTAN IN 2009.

### CORPORAL DAVE GIONET

MEDAL OF MILITARY VALOUR ■ 11 APRIL 2007

*“ THE WAY WE WERE TRAINED WAS NOT TO GO AROUND THE VEHICLE RIGHT AWAY. BUT FOR US, IT WAS JUST INSTINCT. ”*

On **APRIL 11, 2007**, Private Dolmovic and Corporal Gionet saved the life of a fellow crewmember after his vehicle struck an improvised explosive device in Nalgham, Afghanistan. After freeing the trapped driver, Private Dolmovic and

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Corporal Gionet performed life-saving first aid, despite imminent risks of fire, explosions and enemy attack.<sup>2</sup>

DAVE GIONET HAILS FROM PIGEON HILL, NEW BRUNSWICK. AFTER COMPLETING HIGH SCHOOL AND ATTENDING COLLEGE FOR A TIME, HE MOVED TO KITCHENER, ONTARIO. ALTHOUGH SOMEWHAT OLDER, HE DECIDED TO JOIN THE ARMY AND BEGAN HIS BASIC TRAINING IN JANUARY 2002. HE UNDERTOOK SUBSEQUENT TRAINING AT CFB VALCARTIER IN QUÉBEC AND WAS EVENTUALLY POSTED TO THE RCD AT CFB PETAWAWA IN ONTARIO. HE FIRST DEPLOYED TO AFGHANISTAN IN 2005 AND THEN AGAIN IN 2007 WITH TASK FORCE 1-07 (OP ATHENA, ROTO 3).

### PRIVATE JAY JAMES RENAUD

MEDAL OF MILITARY VALOUR ■ 11 APRIL 2007

*“WE DID WHAT WE COULD AND WE ALL DID A GOOD JOB.”*

On **APRIL 11, 2007**, despite his injuries, Private Renaud provided life-saving first aid to a seriously injured crewmate after his Coyote reconnaissance vehicle was destroyed by an improvised explosive device. At the time of the incident, Private Renaud was deployed as a surveillance operator with Reconnaissance Squadron, 2nd Battalion, The Royal Canadian Regiment Battle Group, Joint Task Force Afghanistan.<sup>3</sup>

JAY RENAUD WAS BORN IN LEAMINGTON, ONTARIO. HE GREW UP AROUND THE NEARBY TOWN OF TILBURY AND ATTENDED TILBURY DISTRICT HIGH SCHOOL. AT THE END OF 2004, HE JOINED THE REGULAR FORCE AT WINDSOR, ONTARIO AND WAS OFFICIALLY SWORN IN A FEW WEEKS LATER. HE DEPLOYED TO AFGHANISTAN, HIS FIRST OVERSEAS DEPLOYMENT, WITH TASK FORCE 1-07 (OP ATHENA, ROTO 3) AS A MEMBER OF 1 TROOP, B SQUADRON, RCD.

*EDITORS' NOTE: All three recipients profiled in this chapter were interviewed together, at the same time, in the same location. Where pertinent, comments are individually ascribed. Some of the dialogue, however, is not attributed to anyone in particular as the sentiment expressed is shared equally by all.*

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*On 11 April 2007, Corporal Gionet, Private Dolmovic and Private Renaud were each in one of three Coyotes from 1 Troop, B Squadron, RCD, their tasking being to conduct a three-day observation patrol in the Nalgham District of Kandahar Province. For security reasons, and to keep the soldiers fresh, members of the patrol relieved one another regularly. On this particular day, 1 Troop was waiting to be replaced by 2 Troop at the site from where the observation was being conducted. It had been raining for several days prior and the Canadian vehicles had frequently become stuck in the mud while making their rounds. Thankfully, the sun finally appeared on 11 April and shone brightly throughout the day. Corporal Gionet vividly remembers what happened at dusk, as the Afghan sun set and day slowly turned into night.*

A couple of weeks before, we had had contact with some Taliban in the area. That's why we set up an OP to get more information. We had been observing for a few hours and one of the vehicles from 2 Troop that was coming out to replace us hit an IED about two kilometres away from where we were. Through the chain of command, we got the order after about an hour to go and secure the incident area. None of the crews from 2 Troop were injured and I think the damage to the vehicle was limited ... a tire had been blown off. It was pretty minor, but we were still going to help secure the area while they waited for people to get there and tow the vehicle away.

So we left the OP. Renaud was on Bravo, the lead vehicle. Dolmovic was on Alpha, the next vehicle. And I was on the third one, Charlie. We had gone into a wadi, on the same route that we had taken on our way in to the OP, and then Bravo hit an IED. The vehicle was destroyed. Renaud was on the back and he had no major injuries ... he just flew from the vehicle. The rest of the crew got trapped inside the wreckage. When it happened, Alpha stopped and made radio contact with another vehicle, a different call sign, to report the contact. Our troops dismounted and ran back to the vehicle, to Bravo. The way we were trained was not to go around the vehicle right away. But for us, it was just instinct. Our friends were struck down and we just went. We never thought about more IEDs around us. We never thought about an ambush. Nothing. We just jumped down and went because those were our best friends.

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*Over the next little while, the three soldiers helped their mates as best they could, moving from one spot to the next. Gionet continues:*

The Coyote was on its side and the turret was about ten feet away, upside down. Master Corporal Allan Stewart was killed outright from the blast. Corporal Matthew Dicks was also in the turret, but he was conscious. He had a bad leg injury. He was still good though because he was yelling when we got there. I knew Master Corporal Stewart was already gone so I left to go to Trooper Patrick Pentland, the driver, who was trapped in the vehicle, which was now on fire. When I got there, Dolmovic was trying to pull some stuff out of the vehicle to try to get him out. Pentland was still sitting inside the vehicle, trapped, but we didn't know if he was still alive.

I saw how bad Dicks was and I heard him yell, "Dolvy! Here, Dolmovic." At this point, Dolmovic went to help Renaud try to get Dicks out of the turret. I took over from Dolmovic and got inside the vehicle to try to extract Pentland from the wreckage. We didn't know at that moment if the vehicle would blow or if the fire would flare up. But I knew one of my best friends, Trooper Scott Waddell, was behind me. In case I caught on fire he could pull me out fast. He's a big, strong guy. So I was inside with Pentland for maybe half an hour. We couldn't extract him right away because he was trapped. All this stuff was on his legs. Finally, we got him out and I did CPR [Cardio-Pulmonary Resuscitation] but it was too late. The medics said he was already gone inside the vehicle.

*As Private Dolmovic remembers:*

What had happened was the engine had blown out over the driver's hatch, so we couldn't get Pentland out that way. We had to go in through the turret opening, where the turret once was. An ARV [Armoured Recovery Vehicle] came up and pulled the engine out of the vehicle so we could extract him. But the seat was stuck and adrenaline can only get you so far. I couldn't pull the seat. I just couldn't do it. So Corporal Gionet took over and I went back out and started helping Dicks.

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Later, when other people showed up, I started moving around again, helping Gio<sup>4</sup> and trying to get Pat<sup>5</sup> out. I was running around trying to get fire extinguishers to put out the fire. Then we extracted Al,<sup>6</sup> Pat and Matt<sup>7</sup> from the wreckage. Gio had been doing CPR on Pentland for a long time and then I took over. I knew he was gone but I kept trying. The medic was sitting beside me giving him air. He already knew Pat was gone but he let me do CPR anyway. I just couldn't believe it. I kept on thinking he was going to wake up, but he didn't.

*And from Private Renaud's perspective:*

I was thrown out 30 feet by the blast and landed in a wadi. I had sustained minor injuries ... whiplash and a few cuts. I regained consciousness very quickly when a piece of the vehicle landed on my leg. That is when all I could hear was Matt screaming in pain. I tore off my helmet and most of my gear to hurry and help out. I assisted with extracting Matt and Al from the turret. I ran around grabbing fire extinguishers and bringing them to people to put out the engine fire. After that, I went into the driver's hole to help Dave who was trying to break the driver's seat so we could get Pat out. It wasn't until an ARV pulled the engine off the driver's hatch that we could get Pentland out.

We weren't being fired at while all of this was happening. I saw that the other two vehicles had gone on either side of the destroyed Coyote to give protective cover. The gunners were still inside, but they came out at one point and just made sure that there was nothing going on in terms of an enemy attack.

*The QRF, which included an ambulance, soon arrived on the scene. Emergency lighting was immediately set up that made it easier to work on the wounded in the dark. In the meantime, Gionet and Dolmovic were able to make use of their advanced training to render assistance. As Dolmovic explains:*

Me and Gionet were both T-Trip-C [TCCC; Tactical Combat Casualty Care] which is advanced first aid for a combat situation. We know how to fix wounds fast, address severe bleeding, and stuff like

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that, just to hold it off long enough so we can get them out. Another T-Trip-C came in the ambulance and he helped out too. Within an hour there were about 15 guys on the scene to help. Dicks was conscious; he was talking to me. I was talking back to him to try to keep him calm. I said things to him like, "So you play poker a bit. Well, you know, you have got to stay with me. I have got to kick your ass in poker again." Just this and that to get him into it, like they tell you on the T-Trip-C course. I'd say, "What's your dog's name?" and he'd say, "I don't have a dog." So I'd say, "Okay, what's your parents' dog's name?" "Oh, they don't have one any more. They had one a little while back, but he died." It took about five minutes for him to really start talking to me and it took his mind off stuff and kept him awake. Just random stuff.

*When a helicopter arrived to take the wounded Corporal Dicks back to KAF, Gionet went with him. He remembers the flight back:*

There had been an electrical fire in the vehicle and I had been inhaling the fumes for about half an hour as I was working inside. When we extracted Pentland, I tried CPR on him. I tried, tried and tried. Then Dolmovic pulled me off and he tried. By this time, with having breathed in a lot of fumes, I was just "not there." When the helicopter arrived after about an hour, I got on board and flew back to the base. It was while I was on the helicopter that I finally realized Pentland was gone.

*Dolmovic and Renaud were amongst those soldiers that stayed at the site of the IED strike all night. They shared their thoughts with one another once the casualties had been removed. As Renaud remembers:*

We waited there all night ... stayed there with all the parts of the vehicle and the kits and everything. They had to send someone from KAF to take pictures of the scene. A lot of people saw the pictures of the vehicle afterwards and the way it looked. They just couldn't believe it. We weren't on night watch afterwards. We just sat in the back of a vehicle because we were so exhausted. We were going flat out for two hours. You don't notice it at the time because you're so pumped and the adrenaline is rushing through you. You're just go,

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go, go, go, go. And then as soon as it's all over, you just crash. So we just stayed back in the vehicle and kind of talked about it all and couldn't believe it. Our buddies just died. We smoked about three packs of cigarettes. We started thinking about how we might have done things differently, but you can't let that stuff get to you. We did what we could and we all did a good job. You second guess yourself, sure. There are so many "what ifs." But what we did in that vehicle mainly was just comfort each other after it was all over. It didn't really set in until the day after, when we got back to where we were staying and seeing our buddies' empty cots and all that. That really made it sink in.<sup>8</sup>

*All three men, upon reflection, realized that their training had helped them immensely when dealing with the situation that had resulted in the deaths of both Pentland and Stewart.*

We really didn't think about what we did after Bravo hit the IED. You just go on autopilot. Your brain just shuts off and it's robot-mode from then on. The adrenaline is just pumping. You're not thinking about nothing. You just try to help them, the ones you can, pull them out of there. You're not thinking about the danger. Not that you're not scared, but you just don't think about an ambush or whether there might be more IEDs around. There was nothing else we could have done. You can't control how big an IED is. If it happens, it happens. We did what we could and we saved lives. With all that happening, you save the most people you can. We lost two good friends, but one more is alive. That's both a source of comfort and a source of discomfort.

*An event like the one they had just witnessed affected morale and left them wondering what would happen next ... and when.*

Before it happened, we had gone on HLTA for a month and we heard about a couple of guys hitting IEDs. Nobody was really hurt, so we came back thinking, "Okay, it's all right. We don't really have much to worry about because their [the Taliban's] small arms aren't going to penetrate the vehicle and their IEDs won't either." And then, all of a sudden, bang, this happened. We got back from HLTA

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on the 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> of April. It happened only a week later. We lost two good friends and obviously it affected us for the rest of the tour. Now every time you go out, you're scared shitless because you don't know what's going to happen. Every time you're driving, you're thinking about that vehicle, and the way it looked and everything.

*In spite of what they'd been through, the men had to get back to their regular duties, and as before, came up against perilous situations in the field.*

Once a day, there was a patrol that would go out. Almost every couple of days or so, something would happen. IEDs kept blowing up somewhere. Almost every week we'd have a lot of contact. A month or so after we lost Pat and Al, we lost another friend, Darryl Caswell, who hit an IED.<sup>9</sup> It was brutal. We didn't brush anything aside; we made the best out of everything. You have got to. Otherwise, you would go insane. We played a lot of games to take our minds off things ... *Risk*, poker, *Scrabble*.

The tour was really rough for everybody. We got the most training we could have before we went and we all worked together like a big family. We still had a job to do and we did it, even through all the bad times and all that. In the squadron that we had were all excellent, excellent guys. Especially 1 Troop. We couldn't have had a better troop for support in everything that we went through. Everyone was into the teamwork, always together. There was never really any serious bickering between anybody. Everybody got along in our troop. Well, when you go overseas for six months and you get stuck in situations, it can get stressful. You're bound to have a few arguments and bicker a bit. But for the most part, we got along really well. Six months is a long time to be overseas, so we were glad we had a good troop and squadron.

*While the three soldiers were proud to receive the M.M.V., they also had mixed feelings about it. As Corporal Gionet put it:*

Because of what happened, I was confused about that medal and I didn't know if I wanted it or not. We lost people over there. We did something good, but we still couldn't save everybody. Then I realized I would get it for those that we lost and for my family. One



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day my little girl will understand why I went there. So that's why I accepted it. I got it for my family and the guys we lost.

*Private Dolmovic had a bit of difficulty accepting praise from his friends and family, but he eventually realized that the medal made people more aware of what he and his fellow Canadian soldiers were accomplishing against great odds in Afghanistan.*

Their thoughts are obviously different than all of ours. We lost good friends because of it and they see it as you being a big hero, saying things like, "You're the kind of soldiers this country needs." We say, "No, not really. I did my job." They don't see it like that. I know my family was very proud. My mother especially was proud. Obviously she would be. I had a huge homecoming parade in my hometown, in Cottlesville, when I went back to Newfoundland. It's a small town – only about 250 people – and they were all there. That makes you feel good. You say to yourself, "Hey, I did something." Not only in my family, but in my hometown and elsewhere, there's a lot of support. It makes a difference whether people think it does or not. Every time I'm out in uniform and people shake my hand and say, "Thanks for what you're doing," it makes me feel good about it and makes it worth it.

*And finally, in Private Renaud's opinion:*

I was shocked to hear that I would be receiving the medal. It's an honour. Every time I look at it, I think of Pat, Al and Darryl, that horrible night, all the friends I was with overseas, and everything we did during our time over there. Not only that, but I also think of all the men and women that have lost their lives overseas trying to make other people's lives better. My family and friends were extremely proud when they heard about the ceremony at Rideau Hall, where we all received our decorations. They were intrigued about my time in Afghanistan and often requested that I share some of my experiences with them.

*All in all, the three recipients hold the same overriding belief that the medal ultimately symbolizes the sacrifice made by those who died overseas in the service of their country.*

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You wish that you had gotten it under different circumstances, but it was an honour to get it. A big honour. You look at it as a remembrance of everything that happened ... especially to Caswell, and Pentland, and Stewart, who were lost overseas. When we wear the medal, we're remembering them.

CORPORAL GIONET, PRIVATE DOLMOVIC AND PRIVATE RENAUD WERE INVESTED WITH THEIR MEDALS OF MILITARY VALOUR BY THE THEN-GOVERNOR GENERAL AND COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF OF CANADA, HER EXCELLENCY THE RIGHT HONOURABLE MICHAËLLE JEAN, AT RIDEAU HALL ON 26 MARCH 2008.

## NOTES

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- 1 *Canada Gazette*, Part I, Vol. 142, No. 16 (19 April 2008), 1088.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Ibid., 1089. See also, "Valour," *Canadian Military Journal*, Vol. 9, No. 1, 5-9.
- 4 Corporal Gionet.
- 5 Trooper Pentland.
- 6 Master Corporal Stewart.
- 7 Corporal Dicks.
- 8 Renaud and Dolmovic first went back to FOB Ghundy Ghar and then returned to KAF to prepare for the upcoming ramp ceremonies.
- 9 Trooper Darryl Caswell was killed on 11 June 2007 about 40 kilometres north of Kandahar City in a roadside bombing that also injured two other Royal Canadian Dragoons when their Coyote hit an IED.

# CHAPTER 14

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## *GET YOUR HEADS UP!*

MASTER CORPORAL GERALD ALEXANDER KILLAM

MEDAL OF MILITARY VALOUR ■ 16 MAY 2007

*“WELL, IF THIS IS HOW IT ENDS, THIS IS HOW IT ENDS. I HAVE TO DO SOMETHING. I CAN’T JUST COWER IN A DITCH.”*

On **MAY 16, 2007**, Master Corporal Killam repeatedly exposed himself to lethal enemy fire during an ambush launched by insurgents in Sangsar, Afghanistan. Although separated from his platoon, he identified enemy positions and issued clear orders that enabled his section to engage the enemy. Inspired by his leadership, Master Corporal Killam’s troops fought back a numerically superior enemy with no casualties to his section.<sup>1</sup>

GERALD ALEXANDER KILLAM WAS BORN IN HALIFAX, NOVA SCOTIA AND GREW UP ACROSS THE HARBOUR IN DARTMOUTH, WHERE HE WAS INVOLVED IN SEA CADETS DURING JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL. WHILE RECEIVING FURTHER EDUCATION AT COLE HARBOUR HIGH SCHOOL, HE SERVED IN THE RESERVES WITH THE PRINCESS LOUISE FUSILIERS OF HALIFAX. AFTER GRADUATING IN 1994, HE WAS INITIALLY UNSURE WHAT TO DO, BUT IN 1996, HE JOINED THE REGULAR FORCE, BEING POSTED TO 1RCR IN PETAWAWA, ONTARIO. AFTER SEVEN YEARS WITH 1RCR, HE WAS POSTED TO THE INFANTRY SCHOOL FOR THREE YEARS, FOLLOWED BY A POSTING TO 2RCR, BOTH IN GAGETOWN, NEW BRUNSWICK. HE SUBSEQUENTLY DEPLOYED TO AFGHANISTAN IN JANUARY 2007 WITH TASK FORCE 1-07, SERVING AS A LAV CREW COMMANDER, SECTION 2IC, AND FOR FOUR MONTHS, SECTION COMMANDER.

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*On 16 May 2007, Master Corporal Killam was leading his section on a routine foot patrol in the Kolk / Sangsar region of the Panjwai District in Kandahar. After a while, they came across a couple of young Afghan men on a trail that led to the village of Sangsar. The patrol carried on after they quizzed the men about the possible presence of Taliban fighters in the area, being reassured that the vicinity was clear of insurgents. As Killam and his men rounded a corner on the same trail, he noticed a number of villagers evacuating the settlement with apparent haste, something that aroused a good deal of suspicion amongst the soldiers of his patrol.*

On that particular day, which was like every other day there weather-wise – sunny and hot with temperatures in the high 40s or low 50s – we were supposed to link up with a group of snipers in the area. As we started going down to where they were supposed to be, we just did our usual thing. We'd stop some of the locals and ask if we could speak with them for a minute. There were a couple of young men from the village on the trail. Master Corporal Scott Dickin, who was normally second-in-command of Alpha Section, but who was leading it that day, asked for the interpreter to be sent up. The interpreter talked to them and asked the usual questions about how things were in the area. "When was the last time they saw the Taliban?" "Are they active in the area?" And so on. The person that was talking to him said, "Oh no, we haven't seen the Taliban around here. They're not in this area." So we just carried on with our patrol. Some of the people, not all, just outright lie when questioned however. In retrospect, they certainly did!

As we took a corner on the trail, the terrain became quite open, flat and sandy, with a little gravel. There was one tree and an ant hill with low dirt walls around it and some irrigation ditches. We walked down and then saw a large group of women and elderly people moving away from the village. I was thinking, "Wow, that's weird." That hadn't happened on any of our other patrols before. One of our guys said, "I don't like what I'm seeing here." So we radioed it in, and at the other end, they were like, "Yeah, you guys should get out of there because it doesn't sound like it's a good situation developing."

Warrant Officer Eric Green,<sup>2</sup> who was the acting platoon commander, Master Corporal Dickin, Sergeant Sheldon Roberts,

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who was the master sniper whom we linked up with – his sniper detachment was in place doing observation – and myself, gathered together. We were like, “Okay, we don’t want to be here. This looks like a bad situation that’s starting to form. We have permission to get out of here, so let’s leave.”

*After deciding to vacate the area, Green mixed up the patrol a bit, having a different section than before take the lead. As Killam recalls:*

We often mixed up our order of march. We were always prepared to take over the lead of any patrol at any given time. We had even done this during all of our work-up training. Everyone formed up near the ant hill and were preparing to head back to our patrol base. Basically, you have a second or two where you go back and tell your section what’s going on. I said, “Okay, we’re going to head back. We don’t like what’s going on here. Charlie Section will lead.” A corporal, who was one of the reserve augmentee riflemen, was my point man, then I was right behind him, and then the rest of the section followed. The other sections were ready to step off behind us. Nothing happened, however, until the last man of Charlie Section, my section, stepped into the open.

All through the patrol, I’d been kind of nitpicking at things just to make sure everything was being done. So as I’m looking back at the patrol I was like, “Watch your spacing.” Those were the last words out of my mouth. I turned back to my front and then rounds started landing at my feet. It was a burst of machine gun fire. It was silent for a second, and then I could hear more firing. I had my weapon up. I saw the corporal in front of me and I wanted to make sure that he was out of the way before I started firing. I don’t remember if I shot first, but I remember yelling at everyone, “Contact! Take cover!” I was yelling for everyone to move, to get what protection they could find. I remember him running for cover and then I was firing and I was looking back to make sure that no one else was still in the open. There was dirt kicking up around my feet from the rounds.

*At that point, Killam realized that he was in an exposed and dangerous position and that he’d better find some form of protection. It was simply too dangerous to remain where he was.*

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I was in the open. I had to get out of there. There was a ditch running close to the trail that we were on. I remember saying to myself, "Okay, take cover." But when you're going through the whole thing during training – contact drills – you just drop down. When you're in the flat, open desert, there's nowhere to take cover. I remember thinking I had to get to that ditch. I just wanted to run as fast as I could. As the section commander, I was carrying the radio, which was dead weight. I was thinking, "I hate this radio on my back." All I could do was to put my head down and run. So I did. As I ran, I was thinking, "Man, I'm going to get shot here." I jumped into the ditch. It was up to my waist in mud and water. I was like, "Wow! I made it!" I couldn't believe that I had reached the ditch. I looked down the length of the gully towards the enemy and I saw the corporal. By this time he'd made his way to a little bridge over the ditch, but wasn't firing. No one was firing! Everyone had their heads down and you could hear the cracking sounds of rounds coming in. I could see them landing around where I was. I was thinking, "I gotta stick my head up and start firing because nobody else is. Well, here goes." I just put my head up and started firing. It actually made me feel better too, that I was doing something instead of just sitting there getting shot at. Then everyone else started firing in the background.

*Killam was later puzzled when he read the citation for his M.M.V., for it stated that his section had been inspired by his leadership. In the heat of battle, however, "inspiration" and "leadership" can mean many things.*

The troops, when they read the citation, would laugh and tell me, "The only thing we remember is you yelling, swearing, and telling us to shoot at the enemy." That's pretty much what it was like. The corporal wasn't firing and I was swearing at him. I'm like, "Get your fucking head up and start returning fire!" And he said, "Well, where's the fire coming from?" And I'm like, "Well, stick your head up and take a look. You're not going to be able to miss where the fire is coming from. It's quite obvious." You could see our rounds hitting the ground and you could see the dirt that was being kicked up by the muzzle flashes of the enemy's rifles.

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And then I yelled back to make sure the rest of the guys were firing. Then I realized I couldn't hear the C9 light machine guns. So I yelled, "Where are the C9s? Get the C9s firing!" One of my C9 gunners, Private Steve Deeble, made his way up beside me in the ditch. I yelled, "Put some fire down range on the enemy" and he started firing. Warrant Green and Sergeant John Delorey started organizing guys in the back. Sergeant Delorey, the platoon LAV sergeant, was the acting platoon second-in-command. He yelled to the C6 machine gunners to move into a better position to put down suppressing fire. They moved under some covering fire onto the right flank of the platoon. He then made his way under fire to help direct their fire. Then the snipers started engaging, and Private Mike MacWhirter<sup>3</sup> and Corporal Jon Williams<sup>4</sup> put down some suppressing fire.

*The tide of battle finally turned because of the increased Canadian participation; the Taliban became less aggressive.*

We started putting maximum fire down and we actually made them put their heads down. That's what you do in a firefight. You try for firepower superiority and overwhelm them so that they put their heads down. So we accomplished that. I don't know how long it took. It probably was only seconds, but at the time it felt like it was in slow motion. Everything feels like it's drawn out over a long period of time.

Up until this point, we hadn't been able to move because there was so much fire coming down on us. The enemy's fire was concentrated on the corporal and I because we were the two lead guys. So once we started winning the firefight, we actually started moving our guys back into an all-around defensive position. We – the section – just made our way back through the ditch to the ant hill position where we stepped off from, which offered some protection with low mud walls and the wadi. We started pulling back.

One of the guys had made it to cover, but when I looked back, I didn't see him. That was Private Nathan Hamilton, or "Hammy" as every person with the name Hamilton is called. (Hammy was

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attached to Charlie Section from Bravo Section as they were on leave. Every platoon tried to get all their sections on leave together, but sometimes one or two people would end up on different blocks of leave for some reason.) Part of the wadi had a small dirt wall on the right-hand side, but it was only at the end close to the ant hill. Hamilton had made it to the small dirt wall but did not want to jump over it and expose himself to fire. On the side that he was on there was a small depression which offered limited protection. Private Rob Hovey, the acting section 2IC, and I, laid down some covering fire so he could get over the wall and down into the wadi, basically so he could make his way back to the ant hill under some cover.

Then it was just Private Hovey and myself left. The two of us made our way back. Warrant Green called up the vehicles that were parked nearby at our patrol base to provide cover so that we would be able to mount up. It took a few minutes for them to reach us from the patrol base, but when they did, there was pretty much no fire coming from the enemy. By then, they had decided that they didn't want to play anymore. The vehicles came up with their chain guns ... and they don't mess around. The enemy doesn't stay long for those.

Once things had quieted down, I patted each man on the back and told him that he had done a good job. But I warned them that it wasn't over yet. I told them, "Watch your arcs. Get your weapon up. This isn't finished. We're still here. We don't talk about anything until we are out of here." The best thing was that nobody got hurt in that incident. I was worried at first. I was like, "Have we got everybody?" I looked at Hovey and he's like, "Yeah, everyone's here. Everybody made it." I was shocked that with the amount of fire the enemy had been putting down on us no one had been wounded or worse.

When we were in the ditch and we were fighting, I was thinking, "I can't let anything happen to the troops because Steve's going to kill me." Sergeant Steve Estey was our section commander, but he was the acting LAV sergeant at the time; I had moved up to take his place as the section commander. I always felt that it was still



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Steve's section. I was just manning the ship until he got back. So I was thinking that if I let anything happen to any of his guys, he would be mad as hell. What if something happened to one of the guys and he wasn't there? He'd always wonder what it would have been like if he had been there and that maybe he could have made a difference. I didn't want him ever having *that* hanging over his head. I was thinking of that consciously while I was in there. It's kind of weird ... all the stuff that goes through your mind in a fraction of a second.

*Once the firefight was over, it was difficult to tell how many Taliban had been involved or, in fact, how many had been killed or injured.*

It's hard to say how many there were because you couldn't really see them at first. I remember looking out when we first got there, in the general area, and there were guys working in the field. I think they were kind of feeling us out and I don't think that they really knew what we were doing, so just in case, they decided that they were going to start initiating contact, I guess. There were guys to the left and guys to the right and guys off to the centre. They basically opened up from all three positions at the same time. I'm not exactly sure how many there were, but I'd say a minimum of six to ten and probably more. I remember the next day, in the morning, you could see the cemetery from where we were at the patrol base. They were burying a couple of individuals there, so perhaps we got a few.

*Killam was later amazed at how calm he had been throughout the entire ordeal and how both his mind and body had initially reacted to the sudden onset of battle.*

I wasn't scared about what was going on because I was thinking, "Okay, I have to get the guys doing their jobs. I have to get the guys fighting and sticking their heads up." At one point, I admit, I was a bit worried, but then I just kind of threw it all aside and I was like, "Well, if this is how it ends, this is how it ends. I have to do something. I can't just cower in a ditch." I remember when I first got into the ditch, though, the adrenaline was pumping so much that I almost felt like I was going to puke. I felt sick to my stomach because

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the adrenaline was unreal. It's hard to describe ... no one will ever know until it happens to him or her. I kept thinking I was going to be sick, but I told myself I couldn't because everyone would ask why I puked. But I didn't get sick.

And there are little things you remember after it's all over. At one point, I was running for the ditch and the radio and headset fell into the water. I was thinking, "I hope this thing still works." Then there was the guy who said, "I lost my mag." I'm like, "Fuck it. Who cares? It's just a magazine. Don't worry about it." I also thought it weird that after the firefight started my ears didn't hurt and they weren't ringing. When you're on a range, you always have your hearing protection in and by rights, the sounds should have been really loud and my ears should have been ringing. But we were told at one of the leadership seminars I took that when your adrenaline is up and you're firing, the sound going out is contained. It's not as loud as it is when you're firing on a range. That's true. Pretty much all I heard was just incoming and outgoing fire ... and me yelling.

*Once they were back at KAF, the men started comparing stories and filling in all the blanks about what had actually happened earlier.*

Corporal Don Estabrooks, who was acting second-in-command for Alpha Section, had been at the back of the patrol after Warrant Green switched things around. When the first rounds came down, he was still at the ant hill, which was so far back that the first thing that popped into his head was "Who had the ND [Negligent Discharge]?" because at this point we hadn't really had any contact with the enemy. It didn't even occur to him that the enemy was firing at us. And we were kind of joking about stuff like that because we were all so glad that everybody made it out okay. Master Corporal Dickin said he couldn't help but laugh. He said that when he saw me running through the machine gun fire trying to get to the ditch, he thought it was the funniest thing that he'd ever seen. He said, "I realized that you could have been killed ... but I thought it was funny." I was like, "Thanks, Scott!" But it was funny because it's a soldier's mentality.

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*In retrospect, Killam figured that everyone was better off having finally made contact with the Taliban and having come through it intact. The nagging and burdensome question of how one would react upon meeting the enemy in battle had finally been answered. Any doubts or worries could now firmly be put to rest.*

Until it actually happens, you never know how you're going to react. I guess that bothered me for a while, because we were there in January and nothing had happened. There was nothing until May for us. After a while, it was kind of like, "Okay, when is something going to happen? And when it does, how am I going to react? How am I going to perform?" So it started to bother me because it still hadn't happened yet. Then you kind of wonder, "Okay, is today the day? Okay, well nothing happened on that patrol. What about the next one?" And then you kind of have to mentally prepare yourself again for the next one. "Okay, nothing has happened up until now, but I can't let anything slacken. I have to stay sharp and keep my edge and make sure that I understand what I'm doing, where we're going, what to do if this happens or that happens." After the incident, I was like, "Oh good, I'm okay now. If something else happens, I understand and know what I'm going to be like." I was confident that if something did happen, I'd react and I wouldn't just freeze or wonder what to do, and all that kind of stuff that I was thinking of before. It was gone and it wasn't even an issue anymore. I felt really good. It was like a huge weight had been lifted. All my questions were pretty much answered about myself and for the guys. Now I knew how they were going to react too.

When we went out on the next patrol, you could tell the difference. Everyone was quiet and everyone was serious. Up until that point, they hadn't seen the enemy. People had been going on patrol and they were getting lax. My section wasn't too bad, but I was still getting after some guys for letting things slip. With the other sections, guys wouldn't be holding their weapons properly and they would be talking and wouldn't be looking. Not all the guys were like that, but you could see a few guys looking around and not really paying attention to what they were doing. After that, it was business.

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Everyone was more switched on. It was like, “Okay the enemy is firing at us.” It was like everything was heightened from then on.

*In Killam’s opinion, the reasons for the low rate of fire at the outset of the engagement were varied and numerous.*

I think it was human nature that the guys had to be told to fire back that first time. They didn’t know what was happening and it’s a slow wait, that is, processing what is going on. For most of us, I think it was our first time firing our weapon at a person. There was confusion, so it’s pretty much the job of the NCO to make sure that they’re doing what they’re supposed to be doing. There might have been a couple of guys who didn’t fire because they just weren’t in a position to return fire. In fact, a couple of them went, “Oh, I didn’t get to fire.” I was like, “No biggie. Who cares? I’m sure you’ll get more chances later on.”

Thinking back on it, I figure we were pretty well-organized. There is always confusion in any kind of battle. There were a few guys that weren’t sure what was going on, but I think, for the most part, it was clear to everyone. I know for me, I was shocked because I was giving out orders and instructions right away. At the start, I was yelling, “Contact!” and making sure everyone took cover. That was done, so there was half the work completed. Everybody was moved into a safe position and encouraged to return fire. It was pretty basic really. Just making sure everybody was doing their job. When I was yelling and doing stuff, it was instantaneous. It wasn’t like, “What do I do next?” or anything like that. I don’t think the troops were too confused, all in all. When we were first fired upon, we were moving from a defensive position to a patrolling position. It was a bad situation to get caught in, in the middle of changing formations. Our level of training, and all the time and effort that we had put into it, saved us. If anything, now I’d stick to the fundamentals and the basics even more.

*The members of Killam’s section had learned much about themselves and each other through this first act of battle, knowledge that would prove invaluable in the coming weeks. Whereas the early portion of their tour had been marked*

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*by few encounters with the enemy, the remainder of their time overseas was exactly the opposite. Killam's earlier prediction that his soldiers would have more opportunities to fire their weapons was exceedingly accurate and proved all too true. As it happened, the activity was so intense that days and weeks quickly blended into one another and the men of Killam's section lost track of much of the time.*

I think afterwards, people started getting a bit nervous because there was a lot of contact after that first time. Any time from then on that we went on a patrol, we ended up getting into contact. For some people, I think reality kind of set in for them. "This isn't just a joke over here. I could potentially die here. And it could happen in a second." Some people would perform better. One of the guys that we got, Private Deeble, we got him right out of Battle School. We picked him to come to our section. He was young and keen and he performed extremely well. We had him lead lots of patrols. He was often the point man, and on that particular day, he was the C9 gunner. We used him as the LAV gunner in the vehicle. He was kind of our "go to" guy after a while. We were lucky for that. We had a few guys that could serve in multiple roles at the drop of a hat. Corporal Jason Simmons was another one that could do multiple roles. He had training with different weapons systems which made having him an asset when the chain of command had to be shuffled around. With soldiers like that, you can say, "Okay, now we need to do this..." and it was done. It's good to see them do that under the stressful situation of being over there.

I didn't look at my watch much when we were on patrol that day. Everyday was kind of the same. There were no weekends or Mondays. Over there you don't live Monday to Sunday, 9 to 5, or anything like that. It's kind of like, you go from, "Okay, we're here at KAF until the next time we go in," and you don't even know when that will be. So pretty much the only thing you look at is months. Those are the only things we calculated. "Okay, we're not on leave until June, soooo..." That was the only date we worried about, our leave date in June.

*Engaging the enemy on multiple occasions allowed Killam to "prove himself" to his subordinates, to show that he deserved to be their leader. Demonstrating*

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*his competence encouraged their respect (and their willingness to follow him) in turn.*

If the troops have confidence in you and in your abilities, I think some of that shows. And it shows in the performance and the discipline of the soldiers. The troops can't feel like they can just do whatever they want. There have to be rules and boundaries. And there has to be that discipline. Potentially, you're telling guys to do stuff that could harm them – not intentionally, of course – but you're yelling at them to stick their heads up and start returning fire. They have to do what they're told, unquestioningly, in order to do their job. The better you are at your job, the more they will trust you, and the easier it will be to get them to do something that they normally wouldn't.

*The constant contact with the enemy brought the section together even more. Killam had done much in Canada to build cohesion amongst his handful of soldiers, but nothing was as formative or influential as battle.*

We did little things to build morale and cohesion within the section before we deployed. I was the 2IC at the time, so my job was basically to take care of all the administration and all the discipline. So I would be hard on the guys. But I'd joke around with them too. They knew when to be serious and when to joke around. We'd go out together and we'd buy each other coffees. We'd just do little things to separate ourselves from the platoon from time to time, to get to really know one another on a different level outside of work. We were going into a war-torn country together and we had to depend on one another over there. We had pretty good section cohesion. Everyone got along really well. As a soldier you form a different bond with the people you fight alongside of over other people you just serve with.

*Like many other recipients, Killam too was surprised when he first learned that he had been awarded the M.M.V.*

We got back to the main camp and we were writing up our AAR. I didn't think anything of what we had done at the time. A couple

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of days later, Steve Estey, my section commander, kind of hinted at something, saying, "We're writing you up for doing a good job." I was thinking, "Okay. Whatever. It doesn't mean anything." Later on, once we got back to Canada, there was kind of a little whisper about it, but I didn't really know what it was all about. I was thinking, "Maybe I'll get a Mention in Dispatches or a commendation from the CO or something." I didn't think it was going to be anything like the M.M.V. I remember when the unit started hearing about them coming in the mail – the official notifications – they didn't understand what they were and they were just tossed into the mail slots. Then I got a phone call to go and see the 2IC of the company, Captain Dave Nixon, and I wondered what that was all about. I went upstairs and he said, "Do you know what this is all about?" When I said "No," he said, "Well, you come with me. We have to go see the CO."<sup>5</sup> At the time, they were looking for guys to get posted to Wainwright in Alberta and I was thinking, "Well, I'm a single sergeant. I had been promoted by this point. Maybe they want to send me to Wainwright."

So I got marched into the CO's office and the CO has got me standing there and he's like, "I intercepted a piece of mail for you. I was wondering if you could open it in front of me. It's from the Governor General." I opened it up and read it and it said I was getting the Medal of Military Valour. I was like, "What? This is crazy." I didn't think what had happened that day merited a valour decoration.

*Again, like other recipients, one of the things Killam had to get used to was a lot of good-natured ribbing from his fellow soldiers.*

Mainly, it was life as usual once the decoration was announced. There was no big fuss or anything, so that was kind of good. I can go and just be myself. But every once in a while they'd make fun of me at work because I got VIP [Very Important Person] mail. The Premier of New Brunswick<sup>6</sup> sent me a certificate and a letter of congratulation, and so did the Lieutenant-Governor of New Brunswick.<sup>7</sup> Then I got one from the Leader of the Opposition,<sup>8</sup> and when I got one from the Prime Minister,<sup>9</sup> the kidding really started. They'd say,

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“Look who’s getting mail from the Prime Minister’s Office.” Stuff like that.

I also received a handwritten letter of recognition from Major-General Peter Devlin,<sup>10</sup> who at the time was the senior serving member of The Royal Canadian Regiment. It was sent from the U.S.A. while he was serving as deputy commanding general of III (U.S.) Corps at Fort Hood, Texas. He is also one of my former commanding officers. As well, I was a VIP guest at the 2008 Army Ball on an invite from the army sergeant-major, Chief Warrant Officer Wayne Ford,<sup>11</sup> and a guest on several occasions with retired general and former CDS Rick Hillier.<sup>12</sup>

*As with others in his situation, Killam felt that anyone else in his place would have done exactly the same thing.*

I read a lot of military history and stuff like that. I always read the citations of the V.C. winners from WWI and WWII and the things that they did. The average soldier then probably did stuff like this on a daily basis. So I knew about the Canadian valour awards. In fact, I actually saw one because I had met one of the other recipients from the Patricias, Master Corporal Collin Fitzgerald.<sup>13</sup> He was one of my roommates on a course. I remember meeting him and he had it on. I was thinking, “Wow! That’s quite a high honour you got there.” So it’s nice to have been given the decoration. It appeals to the vanity side a bit. Everyone likes to have their ego stroked, but at the same time, when it was presented to me, I felt kind of weird getting it. I was nervous as hell. You can look at the official photograph that was taken then and I’ve got a sheer look of terror on my face. I was just nervous.

I don’t think I did anything special. I just did my job. I was the section commander. It’s my job to make sure that everybody’s safe and that everyone is doing *their* job. I didn’t think it was stellar. I mean, I’m appreciative. It’s an unbelievable award. It’s only two awards away from the Victoria Cross. It’s nothing to shy away from. It’s huge. But you have to take it with a grain of salt and try to keep yourself level. I’m still a section commander doing my job in an



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infantry battalion. If anything, it kind of makes me feel weird because I have to try and shy away from stuff sometimes. In the Senior NCOs Mess, for instance, I kind of go into the corner and try to be quiet. I try to avoid people asking, “What did you do to get that?” I mean, I got the award and there are other guys that get nothing. There are guys that die overseas doing their job and I think they are more important than somebody like me.

MASTER CORPORAL KILLAM WAS INVESTED WITH HIS MEDAL OF MILITARY VALOUR BY THE THEN-GOVERNOR GENERAL AND COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF OF CANADA, HER EXCELLENCY THE RIGHT HONOURABLE MICHAËLLE JEAN, AT RIDEAU HALL ON 26 MARCH 2008.

## NOTES

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- 1 *Canada Gazette*, Part I, Vol. 142, No. 16 (19 April 2008), 1088. See also, “Valour,” *Canadian Military Journal*, Vol. 9, No. 1, 5-9.
- 2 For his service in Afghanistan, Eric Richard Green received the M.S.M.; his citation appears in Appendix 2.
- 3 For his actions on 16 May 2007, Michael Richard Stephen MacWhirter was Mentioned in Dispatches; his citation appears in Appendix 2.
- 4 For his actions on 16 May 2007, Jonathan Francis Williams was Mentioned in Dispatches; his citation appears in Appendix 2.
- 5 Lieutenant-Colonel Geoff Parker. Sadly, in May 2010, Colonel Parker was killed in Kabul, Afghanistan when a suicide bomber attacked the convoy in which he was travelling.
- 6 The Honourable Shawn Graham.
- 7 The Honourable Herménégilde Chiasson.
- 8 The Honourable Stéphane Dion.
- 9 The Right Honourable Stephen Harper.

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10 Peter John Devlin, later Major-General and Deputy Commander CEFCON, and later still, Lieutenant-General and Chief of the Land Staff. For his service on an earlier deployment to Afghanistan, he received the M.S.C.; his citation appears in Appendix 2.

11 For his service on an earlier deployment to Afghanistan, Wayne Arnold Ford received the M.S.C.; his citation appears in Appendix 2.

12 For his service on an earlier deployment to Afghanistan, Rick J. Hillier received the M.S.C.; his citation appears in Appendix 2.

13 Mentioned in further detail in Chapter 5; the citation for his M.M.V. appears in Appendix 1.

# APPENDIX 1

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## *ADDITIONAL VALOUR AND BRAVERY CITATIONS, 2001-2007*

### MASTER CORPORAL JASON CORY HAMILTON

STAR OF COURAGE ■ 2 OCTOBER 2003

On OCTOBER 2, 2003, after their convoy's lead vehicle had struck an anti-tank mine, MCpl Jason Hamilton and Cpl Danny Matthews entered an undefined minefield to recover three of their stricken comrades, near Kabul, Afghanistan. Despite the imminent danger of exploding ammunition and grenades complicating an already chaotic scene, MCpl Hamilton courageously led the rescue party, prodding the ground in front of him for more mines. He and Cpl Matthews worked their way onto the dangerous terrain until they reached the first fallen soldier. After escorting the wounded victim back to safety to administer first aid, Cpl Matthews then returned and followed MCpl Hamilton, advancing farther into the minefield only to discover that the mine blast had claimed the lives of the two other soldiers.<sup>1</sup>

### MASTER CORPORAL COLLIN RYAN FITZGERALD

MEDAL OF MILITARY VALOUR ■ 24 MAY 2006

Master-Corporal Fitzgerald deployed with 5 Platoon, B Company, 1 PPCLI Battle Group in Afghanistan. He is recognized for outstanding selfless and valiant actions carried out on MAY 24, 2006, during an ongoing enemy ambush involving intense, accurate enemy fire. Master-Corporal Fitzgerald repeatedly exposed himself to enemy fire by entering and re-entering a burning platoon vehicle and successfully driving it off the roadway, permitting the remaining vehicles trapped in the enemy zone to break free. Master-Corporal Fitzgerald's courageous and completely selfless actions were instrumental to his platoon's

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successful egress and undoubtedly contributed to saving the lives of his fellow platoon members.<sup>2</sup>

### PRIVATE JASON CARL ALLAN LAMONT

MEDAL OF MILITARY VALOUR ■ 13 JULY 2006

Private Lamont was deployed with the Health Support Services Company, 1 PPCLI Battle Group during Operation ARCHER. On **JULY 13, 2006**, an element of the reconnaissance platoon came under heavy enemy fire from a compound located in Helmand Province, Afghanistan, and was isolated from the rest of the platoon. During the firefight, another soldier was shot while attempting to withdraw back to the firing line and was unable to continue. Without regard for his personal safety, Private Lamont, under concentrated enemy fire and with no organized suppression by friendly forces, sprinted through open terrain to administer first aid. Private Lamont's actions demonstrated tremendous courage, selflessness and devotion to duty.<sup>3</sup>

### CORPORAL BRYCE JEFFREY KELLER

MEDAL OF MILITARY VALOUR (POSTHUMOUS) ■ 3 AUGUST 2006

On **AUGUST 3, 2006**, while exposed to intense enemy fire in Afghanistan, Corporal Keller demonstrated courage and leadership in order to allow his comrades to attend to a critically wounded soldier. Sadly, Corporal Keller made the ultimate sacrifice that day, but his selfless actions contributed to saving lives and enabled his platoon to hold vital terrain until reinforcements arrived.<sup>4</sup>

### CORPORAL CHAD GERALD CHEVREFILS

MEDAL OF MILITARY VALOUR ■ 19 AUGUST 2006

On **AUGUST 19, 2006**, Corporal Chevrefils, a member of Alpha Company, 1st Royal Canadian Regiment Battle Group, was the driver of a light armoured

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vehicle during an engagement with numerically superior Taliban forces in Masum Ghar. During the three-hour firefight, he successfully manoeuvred the vehicle through difficult terrain with consummate skill, enabling it to remain unscathed by enemy fire. He subsequently dismounted his vehicle under enemy fire to assist in the recovery of another light armoured vehicle. Corporal Chevrefils' courageous and skillful actions helped to prevent the Taliban forces from out-flanking the remainder of the Company and undoubtedly saved numerous lives.<sup>5</sup>

### WARRANT OFFICER MICHAEL WILLIAM JACKSON & MASTER CORPORAL PAUL ALEXANDER MUNROE

MEDAL OF MILITARY VALOUR ■ 19 AUGUST 2006

In the midst of a three-hour battle in Afghanistan on **AUGUST 19, 2006**, Warrant Officer Jackson and Master Corporal Munroe's platoon was forced to conduct a withdrawal while under enemy fire. Fully exposed to the violence of the enemy, these soldiers risked their lives to coordinate the safe movement of personnel and damaged vehicles. Their heroic actions under constant fire enabled the platoon to regroup and continue the fight, while denying the enemy an opportunity to capture and make use of stricken Canadian equipment.<sup>6</sup>

### SERGEANT DEREK JOHN SCOTT FAWCETT

MEDAL OF MILITARY VALOUR ■ 3 SEPTEMBER 2006

On **SEPTEMBER 3, 2006**, while serving with Charles Company, 1st Battalion, The Royal Canadian Regiment Battle Group, in Afghanistan, Sergeant Fawcett demonstrated great valour during an intense firefight in which one Canadian soldier was killed and others were wounded. Continuously exposed to intense enemy fire, Sergeant Fawcett repeatedly crossed open terrain to lead the evacuation of casualties back to the designated collection point. Realizing that much of the company's senior leaders had been wounded, he took charge of a subsequent mass casualty evacuation. His actions and professionalism in combat saved the lives of his fellow soldiers and inspired those around him.<sup>7</sup>

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### CORPORAL JOSEPH JASON LEE RUFFOLO

MEDAL OF MILITARY VALOUR ■ 3 SEPTEMBER 2006

Corporal Ruffolo was deployed with Charles Company of the 1st Royal Canadian Regiment Battle Group in Afghanistan. On **SEPTEMBER 3, 2006**, while engaged in combat operations in the opening phase of Operation MEDUSA, a bulldozer vainly attempted to extract his light armoured vehicle and came under heavy enemy fire. Without regard for his own safety, Corporal Ruffolo placed himself in a very vulnerable position to unhook his vehicle. In a subsequent attack, he again exposed himself to enemy fire to render first aid to a casualty. His courage and professionalism under extreme duress brought great credit to the Armed Forces and to Canada.<sup>8</sup>

### CORPORAL SEAN TEAL

STAR OF MILITARY VALOUR ■ 3 SEPTEMBER 2006

On **SEPTEMBER 3, 2006**, during Operation MEDUSA, the light utility vehicle driven by Corporal Teal, a member of 7 Platoon Charles Company, was hit and destroyed by enemy rocket-propelled grenade fire. Despite being wounded, Corporal Teal assessed the situation and, under heavy enemy fire, moved to report the situation and bring assistance. He then returned twice to the vehicle to provide treatment to his severely wounded comrades, including the platoon medic, and to evacuate all personnel injured or killed. His brave and professional actions saved lives and allowed the orderly withdrawal of his platoon under heavy fire.<sup>9</sup>

### PETTY OFFICER 2ND CLASS JAMES ANTHONY LEITH

STAR OF COURAGE ■ 28 SEPTEMBER 2006

On **SEPTEMBER 28, 2006**, Petty Officer 2nd Class James Leith risked his life to prevent the loss of civilian and military lives by dismantling an improvised explosive device (IED) on a road in the Pashmul area of Afghanistan. After his vehicle had been struck, Petty Officer 2nd Class Leith discovered an unstable IED.

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As his equipment had been destroyed in the original blast, he dismantled the IED using only his bayonet. His courageous actions enabled the reopening of a vital route for coalition forces.<sup>10</sup>

### CORPORAL PIOTR KRZYSZTOF BURCEW & CORPORAL ADRIAN ROMAN MARKOWSKI

MEDAL OF BRAVERY ■ 3 OCTOBER 2006

On **OCTOBER 3, 2006**, in Kandahar, Afghanistan, Corporal Piotr Burcew, Captain Jason Demaine, then Lieutenant, Corporal Adrian Markowski and Master Corporal Stephen Thomas, then corporal, saved the lives of their fellow soldiers and local Afghan civilians by unloading ammunition from a disabled burning vehicle during a suicide bomber attack. Despite having to cross through flames, they repeatedly returned to the vehicle to retrieve mission-essential cargo and high-explosive ammunition that posed a deadly threat to those nearby. They moved away from the scene just moments before the fire raged out of control, detonating the remaining rounds.<sup>11</sup>

### PRIVATE JESS RANDALL LAROCHELLE

STAR OF MILITARY VALOUR ■ 14 OCTOBER 2006

On **OCTOBER 14, 2006**, Private Larochelle of the 1st Royal Canadian Regiment Battle Group was manning an observation post when it was destroyed by an enemy rocket in Pashmul, Afghanistan. Although he was alone, severely injured, and under sustained enemy fire in his exposed position at the ruined observation post, he aggressively provided covering fire over the otherwise undefended flank of his company's position. While two members of the personnel were killed and three others were wounded in the initial attack, Private Larochelle's heroic actions permitted the remainder of the company to defend their battle positions and to successfully fend off the sustained attack of more than 20 insurgents. His valiant conduct saved the lives of many members of his company.<sup>12</sup>

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### MASTER CORPORAL JEREMY JOSEPH JAMES LEBLANC

MEDAL OF MILITARY VALOUR ■ 14 OCTOBER 2006

On **OCTOBER 14, 2006**, Master Corporal Leblanc's section was occupying a position in Afghanistan when insurgents unleashed a devastating attack that resulted in several casualties, including the death of his section commander. Seamlessly assuming command, he rallied his section to return fire while personally tending to the wounded. Despite being injured himself and under constant fire, he continued to lead and inspire his section to keep fighting and hold its ground against a determined enemy. His selfless actions no doubt saved the lives of some of his fellow soldiers.<sup>13</sup>

## NOTES

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- 1 *Canada Gazette*, Part I, Vol. 139, No. 4 (22 January 2005), 188.
- 2 *Canada Gazette*, Part I, Vol. 141, No. 8 (24 February 2007), 325.
- 3 *Canada Gazette*, Part I, Vol. 141, No. 8 (24 February 2007), 325.
- 4 *Canada Gazette*, Part I, Vol. 142, No. 48 (29 November 2008), 3032.
- 5 *Canada Gazette*, Part I, Vol. 141, No. 25 (23 June 2007), 1716.
- 6 *Canada Gazette*, Part I, Vol. 144, No. 51 (18 December 2010), 3188.
- 7 *Canada Gazette*, Part I, Vol. 142, No. 4 (26 January 2008), 172.
- 8 *Canada Gazette*, Part I, Vol. 141, No. 25 (23 June 2007), 1718.
- 9 *Canada Gazette*, Part I, Vol. 141, No. 25 (23 June 2007), 1716.
- 10 Announced in *Canada Gazette*, Part I, Vol. 143, No. 13 (28 March 2009), 752. Citation from Canada, Governor General, <<http://gg.ca/honour.aspx?id=25436&t=3&ln=Leith>>, last accessed 19 July 2012.
- 11 Announced in *Canada Gazette*, Part I, Vol. 142, No. 40 (4 October 2008), 2728-2729. Citation from Canada, Governor General, <<http://gg.ca/honour.aspx?id=27928&t=3&ln=Burcew>>, last accessed 19 July 2012.



## APPENDIX 1

- 12 *Canada Gazette*, Part I, Vol. 141, No. 25 (23 June 2007), 1716.
- 13 *Canada Gazette*, Part I, Vol. 144, No. 51 (18 December 2010), 3188.



## APPENDIX 2

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### *CITATIONS OF OTHER CF MEMBERS MENTIONED IN THE TEXT*

#### SERGEANT BRIAN VINCENT ADAMS

##### MENTION IN DISPATCHES

Sergeant Adams, who was deployed with Alpha Company, 1st Royal Canadian Regiment Battle Group in Afghanistan, is recognized for his leadership and courage under fire. On **AUGUST 19, 2006**, during an intense 12 hour firefight with the Taliban insurgents in Masum Ghar, he implemented effective perimeter security and coordinated the extraction and recovery of an overturned light armoured vehicle as well as the subsequent withdrawal of his platoon. His composure and personal efforts under hostile conditions instilled the utmost confidence in his platoon, which contributed to the success of the operation.<sup>1</sup>

#### CAPTAIN HUGH LLEWELLYN ATWELL

##### MENTION IN DISPATCHES

Captain Atwell was deployed to Afghanistan in command of 7 Platoon, 'C' Company of Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry, 1st Battle Group. On **MARCH 27, 2006**, Captain Atwell's platoon received multiple and significant casualties when Forward Operating Base Robinson came under sustained attack from a numerically superior enemy force. Despite the traumatic losses, Captain Atwell led his platoon throughout the intense and sustained attack and directly contributed to the coalition victory. A month later, on April 28, his platoon engaged and defeated an approaching enemy force, and prevented the ambush of a combat logistics patrol.<sup>2</sup>

## APPENDIX 2

### CHIEF WARRANT OFFICER MARK LESLIE BAISLEY

#### MERITORIOUS SERVICE CROSS (MILITARY DIVISION)

While deployed in Afghanistan as the regimental sergeant major of 2nd Battalion, The Royal Canadian Regiment Battle Group, from JANUARY to AUGUST 2007, Chief Warrant Officer Baisley maintained an unwavering focus on his mission and an exemplary discipline. His effective management of personnel, from soldier welfare to force protection, was highly regarded and respected.<sup>3</sup>

### MASTER WARRANT OFFICER JOHN GERARD BARNES

#### MERITORIOUS SERVICE MEDAL (MILITARY DIVISION)

Master Warrant Officer Barnes was deployed as company sergeant major of Charles Company, 1st Battalion, The Royal Canadian Regiment Battle Group, in Afghanistan, from AUGUST 2006 to FEBRUARY 2007. His exceptional leadership and composure under enemy fire directly contributed to his company's success under the extreme adversity of intense combat operations and significant casualties. Severely injured during Operation MEDUSA, he insisted on returning to the front lines. Master Warrant Officer Barnes' unwavering sense of duty was instrumental to his company's cohesion and effectiveness during the mission.<sup>4</sup>

### MASTER WARRANT OFFICER WAYNE ALAN BARTLETT

#### MERITORIOUS SERVICE CROSS (MILITARY DIVISION)

Master Warrant Officer Bartlett is being recognized for his outstanding military expertise while deployed as the regimental sergeant-major of the Operational Mentor and Liaison Team in Afghanistan, from FEBRUARY to AUGUST 2007. His integrity and profound regard for cultural differences greatly contributed to improving the confidence of the Afghan National Army and its operational effectiveness.<sup>5</sup>

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### LIEUTENANT-COLONEL JOHN DAVID CONRAD

#### MERITORIOUS SERVICE MEDAL (MILITARY DIVISION)

Lieutenant-Colonel Conrad served as the commanding officer of the National Support Element in Kandahar, Afghanistan, from **FEBRUARY 8 to AUGUST 15, 2006**. His tireless work ensured effective and flexible combat service support to all elements of the Canadian contingent and to numerous multinational partners throughout intense combat operations. Leading by example and sharing the risks of ambushes and improvised explosive device attacks, Lieutenant-Colonel Conrad frequently accompanied soldiers on combat logistic patrol and missions to evacuate the wounded. His exceptional leadership, professionalism and dedication were the driving force behind the great success of the National Support Element and of Task Force Afghanistan.<sup>6</sup>

### PRIVATE KEVIN YVES ROYAL DALLAIRE

#### MENTION IN DISPATCHES (POSTHUMOUS)

Pte Dallaire was deployed with 9 Platoon, C Company, 1 PPCLI Battle Group during Operation ARCHER Rotation 1. On **AUGUST 3, 2006**, during combat operations in the Pashmul region of Afghanistan, he exposed himself to great personal risk to provide cover fire for his section. Traversing an open field under enemy fire, Pte Dallaire directed his section to keep moving until it reached its destination safely while he provided cover fire. His actions reflect the highest standard of his regiment and the Canadian Forces.<sup>7</sup>

### COLONEL PETER JOHN DEVLIN

#### MERITORIOUS SERVICE CROSS (MILITARY DIVISION)

Col Devlin was Acting Brigadier-General and Commander of the Kabul Multi-National Brigade on Operation ATHENA, in Afghanistan, from **JULY 2003 to JANUARY 2004**. Understanding the importance of building good relations

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through mutual respect, Col Devlin personally met all the key players of the Afghan Transitional Authority, his allied coalition and his NATO partners. He was involved in the creation of a joint security coordination centre where military, police and para-military organizations shared information and developed the common goal of safeguarding citizens and the Afghan Transitional Authority. Col Devlin distinguished himself by his exceptional dedication to the mission, during an extremely complex and strategic situation.<sup>8</sup>

### CORPORAL BRIAN MICHAEL RAYMOND DUVAL

#### MENTION IN DISPATCHES

Cpl Duval was deployed with the 3rd Battalion, The Royal Canadian Regiment, on Operation ATHENA, Task Force Kabul, Afghanistan. In **OCTOBER 2003**, as a member of the Initial Response Team, he witnessed a deadly mine strike on a Canadian vehicle patrol near Kabul. Despite the dangers of exploding ammunition and fire, he cautiously entered the dangerous minefield to assist in the rescue of a fallen comrade. In the face of imminent danger throughout the ordeal, Cpl Duval remained calm and distinguished himself in a manner befitting the highest standards of his Regiment and of the Canadian Forces.<sup>9</sup>

### CORPORAL WILLIAM JONATHAN ELLIOTT

#### MENTION IN DISPATCHES

On **AUGUST 19, 2006**, Corporal Elliott of Alpha Company, 1st Royal Canadian Regiment Battle Group, was a crew member of a light armoured vehicle during an engagement with numerically superior Taliban forces in Masum Ghar. During the three hour firefight, he successfully engaged the enemy, skillfully conducted ammunition uploads and prevented a potential “friendly fire” incident with an Afghan National Security Force vehicle. Under enemy fire, he subsequently dismounted his vehicle to assist in the recovery of another light armoured vehicle. His courageous and skillful actions helped to prevent Taliban forces from outflanking the remainder of the Company and undoubtedly saved numerous lives.<sup>10</sup>

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### CORPORAL JEFFREY ALLAN FEHR

#### MENTION IN DISPATCHES

Acting MCpl Fehr's Forward Observation Officer Detachment was attached to 5 Platoon, B Company, 1 PPCLI during Operation ARCHER in Afghanistan. On **MAY 17, 2006**, during Operation BRAVO GUARDIAN, his platoon came under enemy fire in an ambush. When his commander was fatally wounded, he assumed command of the light armoured vehicle, successfully egressing out of the area under a barrage of rocket-propelled grenades and small arms fire. He continued to command the crew effectively, coordinating fire support and managing the engagement. Acting MCpl Fehr's decisive actions under enemy fire undoubtedly prevented more casualties and brought great credit to the Canadian Forces and to Canada.<sup>11</sup>

### MASTER CORPORAL TIMOTHY WAYNE FLETCHER

#### MENTION IN DISPATCHES

For outstanding initiative and courage in Afghanistan, on **24 JUNE 2006**. Under intense fire, he selflessly took command of the Company Mortar Crew, supplied them with ammunition and quickly suppressed an enemy attack, thus safeguarding the lives of his comrades.<sup>12</sup>

### CHIEF WARRANT OFFICER WAYNE ARNOLD FORD

#### MERITORIOUS SERVICE CROSS (MILITARY DIVISION)

CWO Ford was deployed as the Kabul Multi-National Brigade Sergeant-Major on Operation ATHENA in Afghanistan, in **2003**. He has acted as an ambassador for Canada and the Canadian Forces by establishing and maintaining key relationships with Afghan political and military personnel, thus ensuring the accomplishment of the Brigade's mission. His energy and enthusiasm contributed significantly to the organization and maintenance of Camp WAREHOUSE, the

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Brigade soldiers' living spaces. CWO Ford played a leading role in guaranteeing the success of Operation ATHENA and his contributions to the daily operations of the Brigade reflected highly on Canada in an international environment.<sup>13</sup>

### COLONEL DAVID ALLISON FRASER

#### MERITORIOUS SERVICE CROSS (MILITARY DIVISION)

As the Commander of Task Force Afghanistan and multinational forces in Afghanistan from MARCH 1 to NOVEMBER 1, 2006, acting Brigadier-General Fraser experienced challenges of a breadth and depth unmatched in Canadian military operations carried out over the past half-century. In complex, intensive counter-insurgency operations, he created the operational conditions that led to a seamless and highly successful transition to NATO command. His exceptional leadership, unflinching resolve and superb professionalism have contributed to enhanced collaboration between the Afghan government, the international community and coalition forces.<sup>14</sup>

### MAJOR MARK ANTHONY GASPAROTTO

#### MERITORIOUS SERVICE MEDAL (MILITARY DIVISION)

Major Gasparotto was deployed as officer commanding 23 Field Squadron, 1st Battalion, The Royal Canadian Regiment Battle Group, in Afghanistan, from AUGUST 1, 2006, to FEBRUARY 15, 2007. With force protection as his priority, he effectively transformed forward operating bases and battle positions into highly defensible locations that enabled effective enemy engagement. Under continuous contact with the enemy, he led his squadron through the construction of Route Summit, a critical enabler for battle group operations. Major Gasparotto's innovative thinking, dedicated efforts and exceptional leadership under enemy fire made a strategic impact on the battlefield of Afghanistan that enhanced battle group operations and saved the lives of Canadian soldiers.<sup>15</sup>



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### CHIEF WARRANT OFFICER ROBERT MICHEL JOSEPH GIROUARD

MERITORIOUS SERVICE CROSS (MILITARY DIVISION) (POSTHUMOUS)

Chief Warrant Officer Girouard was deployed in **AUGUST 2006**, as the Regimental Sergeant Major of the 1st Battalion, The Royal Canadian Regiment Battle Group, Joint Task Force Afghanistan. Throughout his tour of duty, up to the moment he was killed in action on **NOVEMBER 27, 2006**, he led from the front, sharing the dangers and hardships associated with combat operations. He contributed greatly to the battle group's fighting spirit, which led to the defeat of the enemy during Operation MEDUSA. Chief Warrant Officer Girouard's outstanding leadership, professionalism and courage brought singular credit to the Canadian Forces and to Canada.<sup>16</sup>

### CAPTAIN NICHOLA KATHLEEN SARAH GODDARD

MERITORIOUS SERVICE MEDAL (MILITARY DIVISION) (POSTHUMOUS)

Captain Goddard is recognized for her exemplary service in Afghanistan as the Forward Observation Officer and Forward Air Controller for C Company, Operation ARCHER, from **JANUARY 2006**, until her death in combat in **MAY 2006**. Her spirit and unfaltering dedication were without equal. She accepted all risks as she coordinated a complex mix of artillery, aircraft and electronic warfare equipment with technical perfection and unwavering calmness. This courageous soldier volunteered on at least five occasions to conduct reconnaissance operations in villages where, only weeks before, the enemy had inflicted devastating attacks on coalition forces. Captain Goddard's passionate and professional approach to her duties and to those in her charge directly inspired all mission members and greatly contributed to the mission's success.<sup>17</sup>

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### WARRANT OFFICER ERIC RICHARD GREEN

#### MERITORIOUS SERVICE MEDAL (MILITARY DIVISION)

Warrant Officer Green was deployed to Afghanistan as the second in command of 7 Platoon, India Company, The Royal Canadian Regiment Battle Group, Joint Task Force Afghanistan, from JANUARY to AUGUST 2007. While acting as commander, Warrant Officer Green led his platoon to significant gains on the battlefields and effectively mentored junior personnel during several close engagements with the enemy.<sup>18</sup>

### CORPORAL NIGEL JASON GREGG

#### MENTION IN DISPATCHES

On AUGUST 19, 2006, Corporal Gregg of Alpha Company, 1st Royal Canadian Regiment Battle Group, was a crew member of a light armoured vehicle during an engagement with numerically superior Taliban forces in Masum Ghar. During the three hour firefight, he continuously and effectively engaged the enemy with his personal weapon, while at the same time acting as loader for the vehicle's primary ammunition bin. Under enemy fire, he subsequently dismounted his vehicle to assist in the recovery of another light armoured vehicle. Corporal Gregg's courageous and skillful actions helped to prevent Taliban forces from outflanking the remainder of the Company and undoubtedly saved numerous lives.<sup>19</sup>

### MAJOR NICHOLAS JAMES ELLIOTT GRIMSHAW

#### MERITORIOUS SERVICE MEDAL (MILITARY DIVISION)

As the Officer Commanding B Company, Operation ARCHER Rotation 1, in Afghanistan from JANUARY to AUGUST 2006, Major Grimshaw demonstrated exceptional leadership under arduous combat conditions. Engaged in a long series of running battles with insurgents, he led his company with superb skill, dedication and calmness. Major Grimshaw directed platoons in intense

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firefights, coordinated actions with battle group artillery and reconnaissance, as well as surveillance and intelligence assets. He was courageous in the face of enemy ambushes and improvised explosive device attacks. Consistently displaying exemplary leadership under fire, Major Grimshaw brought great honour to the Canadian Forces and to Canada.<sup>20</sup>

### CAPTAIN JONATHAN HEWSON HAMILTON

#### MENTION IN DISPATCHES

For outstanding courage and perseverance while commanding Reconnaissance Platoon in Afghanistan, on **3 AUGUST 2006**. His professionalism and selfless determination was key to an exemplary assault he led under heavy enemy fire. Although wounded, his dedication to his soldiers during their withdrawal resulted in a safe evacuation.<sup>21</sup>

### WARRANT OFFICER DARREN JOHN HESSELL

#### MENTION IN DISPATCHES

For outstanding professionalism and leadership as a Platoon Commander, in Afghanistan, on **17 MAY 2006**. His actions during an intense engagement saved both the lives of a stricken platoon and local civilians, and inflicted heavy enemy casualties.<sup>22</sup>

### LIEUTENANT-GENERAL RICK J. HILLIER

#### MERITORIOUS SERVICE CROSS (MILITARY DIVISION)

LGen Hillier, now General, is recognized for his outstanding contributions to NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and to the citizens of Afghanistan during his tenure as Commander ISAF V from **FEBRUARY to AUGUST 2004**. Under challenging and demanding circumstances, he guided

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the ISAF during a critical transition period. This included projecting influence through provincial reconstruction teams, building the capacity of Afghan security institutions, and providing assistance and security for voter registration during the electoral process. LGen Hillier's leadership, fortitude and dedication were of the highest calibre and enabled him to foster relationships with Afghan authorities that will assist NATO for years to come.<sup>23</sup>

### CORPORAL JASON HOEKSTRA

#### MENTION IN DISPATCHES

For outstanding professionalism and leadership in Afghanistan on **3 AUGUST 2006**. His courageous actions during heavy fighting were instrumental in suppressing the enemy and extracting wounded soldiers. His selfless and valiant conduct under fire saved the lives of fellow soldiers during this long and difficult engagement.<sup>24</sup>

### SERGEANT DAN JAMES HOLLEY

#### MENTION IN DISPATCHES

Sergeant Holley is mentioned in dispatches for service with Alpha Company, 1st Royal Canadian Regiment Battle Group, in Afghanistan. On **AUGUST 19, 2006**, during an engagement with Taliban forces in Masum Ghar, the light armoured vehicle in which he was the gunner came under intense fire from a numerically superior enemy force. During a three hour battle, he effectively engaged the enemy with his vehicle's weapons systems, while providing strong leadership and encouragement to his less experienced crew. His actions enabled them to successfully defend the rear flank of a friendly position, saving the lives of numerous Canadian and Afghan soldiers.<sup>25</sup>

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### MASTER CORPORAL LANCE THOMAS HOOPER

#### MERITORIOUS SERVICE MEDAL (MILITARY DIVISION)

From **AUGUST 1, 2006** to **FEBRUARY 15, 2007**, Master Corporal Hooper, a combat engineer with 23 Field Squadron, 1st Battalion, The Royal Canadian Regiment Battle Group, in Afghanistan, demonstrated exceptional dedication to duty. During three separate incidents, either enemy fire or explosive devices destroyed the engineering vehicle he was operating. On two of these occasions he was wounded and required medical evacuation. In spite of being hit, he eagerly returned to duty each time. Master Corporal Hooper's remarkable dedication and professionalism in combat set an inspiring example for all ranks of the battle group.<sup>26</sup>

### MASTER WARRANT OFFICER JOHN WILLIAM HOOYER

#### MERITORIOUS SERVICE MEDAL (MILITARY DIVISION)

Within the first six weeks of arriving in Afghanistan, Master Warrant Officer Hooyer's company was under near-daily attack from enemy mortars and had suffered numerous casualties. His outstanding leadership as the company sergeant-major kept his soldiers operationally focused during this challenging period, as well as during a large NATO-led ground offensive. Providing exceptional support to his company commander during intense combat, Master Warrant Officer Hooyer was instrumental to the success of Alpha Company from **AUGUST 2006** to **FEBRUARY 2007**.<sup>27</sup>

### LIEUTENANT-COLONEL IAN HOPE

#### MERITORIOUS SERVICE CROSS (MILITARY DIVISION)

In **2006**, Lieutenant-Colonel Hope served as the Commanding Officer of Task Force Orion, the Canadian battle group that experienced the first major land combat operations since the Korean War. Leading from the front, Lieutenant-Colonel

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Hope worked tirelessly under difficult conditions to achieve Canada's strategic aims in Afghanistan. A dynamic leader, he assembled an effective combat team that was instrumental in expanding the Canadian presence throughout the region and in achieving considerable success in suppressing enemy activities. His exceptional knowledge and understanding of Afghan culture strengthened the bond between local Afghan authorities and the Canadian contingent.<sup>28</sup>

### SERGEANT TEDDY RAYMOND HUGHSON

#### MENTION IN DISPATCHES

Sgt Hughson was deployed with the 3rd Battalion, The Royal Canadian Regiment, on Operation ATHENA, Task Force Kabul, Afghanistan. In **OCTOBER 2003**, as the Initial Response Team commander, he witnessed a deadly mine strike on a Canadian vehicle patrol near Kabul. Although aware of the dangers of exploding ammunition, he coordinated and provided first aid to the casualties. His calm demeanor and leadership inspired his subordinates to follow him in the removal of the victims from the minefield. In the face of imminent danger, Sgt Hughson distinguished himself in a manner befitting the highest standards of his Regiment and of the Canadian Forces.<sup>29</sup>

### SERGEANT VAUGHAN INGRAM

#### MENTION IN DISPATCHES (POSTHUMOUS)

For outstanding leadership and professionalism, in Afghanistan, on **3 AUGUST 2006**. His determination in the face of an overwhelming and aggressive enemy was an example to all his soldiers, and his actions were key to motivating his troops to carry on under extremely perilous circumstances.<sup>30</sup>

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### MASTER WARRANT OFFICER STEPHEN GOWARD JEANS

#### MERITORIOUS SERVICE MEDAL (MILITARY DIVISION)

Master Warrant Officer Jeans was Company sergeant major, India Company, 2nd Battalion, The Royal Canadian Regiment Battle Group, Joint Task Force Afghanistan, from JANUARY to AUGUST 2007. He is recognized for his leadership, exemplary performance and extreme loyalty to his soldiers and the mission during diverse and complex operations while under intense enemy fire.<sup>31</sup>

### CORPORAL JASON JOE

#### MENTION IN DISPATCHES

Cpl Joe was deployed with 9 Platoon, C Company, 1 PPCLI Battle Group during Operation ARCHER Rotation 1. On AUGUST 3, 2006, during combat operations in the Pashmul region of Afghanistan, he exposed himself to great personal risk to ensure the safety of his crew after a mine strike against his light armoured vehicle. Although wounded in the leg and burned on the arms, he climbed from the turret to the rear compartment to help the commander evacuate and then returned to the vehicle to rescue the driver. Cpl Joe's actions under difficult conditions were befitting the highest standards of his regiment and the Canadian Forces.<sup>32</sup>

### CAPTAIN RYAN JURKOWSKI

#### MENTION IN DISPATCHES

For outstanding determination and leadership as a Company Commander, in Afghanistan, from MAY to JUNE 2006, May to June 2006. He selflessly led his soldiers in a dismounted advance, under extremely demanding conditions, and successfully assaulted insurgent positions, causing numerous enemy casualties and with no loss of Canadian lives.<sup>33</sup>

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### LIEUTENANT-COLONEL OMER HENRY LAVOIE

#### MERITORIOUS SERVICE CROSS (MILITARY DIVISION)

From **AUGUST 2006 to FEBRUARY 2007**, Lieutenant-Colonel Lavoie commanded the 1st Battalion, Royal Canadian Regiment Battle Group, in southern Afghanistan. He played a leading role in two complex brigade operations, including Operation MEDUSA, the most significant ground combat operation in NATO's history. His battle group's actions throughout their operational tour set the conditions for thousands of Afghans to return to their homes. During this period of sustained intense combat, Lieutenant-Colonel Lavoie led from the front, sharing the dangers and harsh living conditions of his troops. His exceptional professionalism and leadership in combat brought great credit to the Canadian Forces, to Canada and to NATO.<sup>34</sup>

### MAJOR-GENERAL ANDREW BROOKE LESLIE

#### MERITORIOUS SERVICE CROSS (MILITARY DIVISION)

MGen Leslie was deployed as the Commander for Task Force Kabul and also served as Deputy Commander of NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) of Operation ATHENA in Afghanistan, from **AUGUST 2003 to FEBRUARY 2004**. He guided the ISAF team of 2 200 members to exceptional results, and in doing so, ensured that a safe and secure environment was maintained within Kabul, while building mutual respect between the Afghan Transitional Authorities and the ISAF coalition partners. MGen Leslie's outstanding leadership, dedication and tireless efforts were pivotal to the successful completion of this mission.<sup>35</sup>

### CORPORAL DERICK LEWIS

#### MERITORIOUS SERVICE MEDAL (MILITARY DIVISION)

On **SEPTEMBER 3, 2006**, Corporal Lewis' company was advancing across the Arghandab River in Afghanistan, when it came under enemy fire from a



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defended position; they quickly incurred several casualties. While the fight continued around him, and despite being wounded, he assisted with the assessment, treatment and evacuation of the other casualties until his own injuries forced him to stop. Demonstrating exemplary perseverance and devotion to duty, Corporal Lewis continued in spite of his injuries and helped save the lives of his fellow soldiers.<sup>36</sup>

### PRIVATE MICHAEL RICHARD STEPHEN MACWHIRTER

#### MENTION IN DISPATCHES

On **16 MAY 2007**, an insurgent force numbering more than 30 ambushed Private MacWhirter's Platoon in Sangsar, Afghanistan. The insurgents were dispersed in multiple well-sited positions and were focussing their effective, co-ordinated fire on the lead Section. On the Platoon Commander's orders and with no regard for his personal safety, Private MacWhirter exposed himself to heavy small arms fire as he dashed across a 40 metre fire-swept field to take up a position to identify and neutralize the enemy. Private MacWhirter's skill and courage under fire enabled the pinned down rifle Section to withdraw unharmed from this extremely perilous situation.<sup>37</sup>

### CHIEF WARRANT OFFICER RANDY ALLAN NORTHRUP

#### MERITORIOUS SERVICE CROSS (MILITARY DIVISION)

From **JANUARY to AUGUST 2006**, Chief Warrant Officer Northrup was the Regimental Sergeant-Major of the 1st Battalion, Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry Battle Group in Kandahar. There, he oversaw the transformation of the Battle Group into a highly effective combat unit. Chief Warrant Officer Northrup demonstrated leadership under intense combat conditions, which included direct and indirect enemy fire, multiple casualties, extreme environmental conditions and a determined enemy. His exemplary performance demonstrated the highest level of duty, leadership and courage and greatly contributed to the success of the mission and to the reputation of the Canadian Forces.<sup>38</sup>

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### MASTER CORPORAL MATTHEW PARSONS

#### MENTION IN DISPATCHES

For outstanding courage and leadership in Afghanistan on **3 AUGUST 2006**. His determination in selflessly manoeuvring his vehicle as a shield and establishing a defensive position around the casualty collection point was vital in the successful extraction of friendly casualties.<sup>39</sup>

### MASTER CORPORAL TONY WADE PERRY

#### MENTION IN DISPATCHES

MCpl Perry was deployed with 9 Platoon, C Company, 1 PPCLI Battle Group during Operation ARCHER Rotation 1. On **AUGUST 3, 2006**, during combat operations in the Pashmul region of Afghanistan, he exposed himself to great personal risk to extract his comrades stranded in the open by sustained fire from a numerically superior enemy. Without prompting, and ignoring the threat from possible improvised explosive devices, he manoeuvred his light armoured vehicle to shield the casualties and those providing first aid and suppressed the enemy with coax machine-gun fire. MCpl Perry's actions under difficult conditions were befitting of the highest standards of his regiment and the Canadian Forces.<sup>40</sup>

### MAJOR DEREK PROHAR

#### MERITORIOUS SERVICE MEDAL (MILITARY DIVISION)

As Operational Mentor and Liaison Team operations officer and headquarters company commander in Afghanistan from **SEPTEMBER 2009 to MAY 2010**, Major Prohar planned and influenced operations, guaranteeing the necessary support to mentor teams operating in isolated and high-threat locations. His coordination with Canadian, American and Afghan units, his detailed knowledge of unit capabilities and his outstanding situational awareness reduced the level of risk and facilitated task force success. Major Prohar's leadership and professionalism were critical to the success of operations and brought great credit to the Canadian Forces.<sup>41</sup>

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### CORPORAL PAUL DANIEL RACHYNSKI

#### MENTION IN DISPATCHES

Cpl Rachynski was deployed with 9 Platoon, C Company, 1 PPCLI Battle Group during Operation ARCHER. On **MAY 29, 2006**, while employed as the air sentry in a light armoured vehicle, a determined enemy ambushed his convoy using rocket-propelled grenades, as well as small arms and machine gun fire. Since the close proximity of the enemy precluded the use of the light armoured vehicle's main armament, Cpl Rachynski stood exposed in the air sentry hatch and maintained a constant rate of fire, despite his vehicle being struck repeatedly by grenades and small arms fire. His generous actions contributed to the suppression of the enemy fire and enabled the convoy to escape the ambush.<sup>42</sup>

### MASTER CORPORAL PAUL DANIEL RACHYNSKI

#### MEDAL OF MILITARY VALOUR

On **MAY 6, 2008**, a Kandahar Provincial Reconstruction Team patrol was ambushed in the Zharey district of Afghanistan. After neutralizing the initial threat, Master Corporal Rachynski selflessly led both Canadian and Afghan soldiers through heavy insurgent fire to rejoin his besieged patrol. Master Corporal Rachynski's determination and calm under fire allowed his patrol to evacuate the wounded and execute a fighting withdrawal with no further casualties.<sup>43</sup>

### CORPORAL CHRISTOPHER JONATHAN REID

#### MENTION IN DISPATCHES (DECEASED)

For outstanding courage and dedication to duty and his comrades in Afghanistan, on **27 JULY, 2006**. Under heavy enemy fire, he voluntarily dismounted to extract a stuck vehicle. His selfless actions enabled fire from the recovered vehicle to suppress the enemy.<sup>44</sup>

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### LIEUTENANT-COLONEL SHANE BRUCE SCHREIBER

#### MERITORIOUS SERVICE MEDAL (MILITARY DIVISION)

As the Assistant Chief of Staff at the multi-national brigade headquarters in Afghanistan from FEBRUARY to AUGUST 2006, Lieutenant-Colonel Schreiber faced the daunting task of providing oversight to all brigade operations. He successfully brought together a multilingual, multinational staff during a period of unprecedented activity, while expertly synchronizing numerous high-tempo operations across Sector South. Lieutenant-Colonel Schreiber's high level of energy and activity directly contributed to the successful implementation of digital command and control tools. These proved fundamental to the maintenance of tactical control and awareness within the brigade's vast area of operations. His actions contributed directly to the success of the mission.<sup>45</sup>

### PRIVATE ALEX SHULAEV

#### MENTION IN DISPATCHES

For outstanding courage and decisive action in Afghanistan, on 8 JULY 2006. Under intense enemy fire, he selflessly charged forward to engage an insurgent position. When one of his comrades was injured during the assault, he provided first aid and suppressive fire to facilitate the evacuation.<sup>46</sup>

### MASTER CORPORAL MAX ROBERT SMITH

#### MENTION IN DISPATCHES

Master Corporal Smith fought with Charles Company, 1st Battalion, The Royal Canadian Regiment Battle Group, in Afghanistan, during Operation MEDUSA. On SEPTEMBER 3, 2006, although he was under enemy fire, Master Corporal Smith dismounted from his disabled vehicle to direct its recovery and maintained his position until ordered to withdraw. At great personal risk to himself, Master Corporal Smith then helped the wounded back to the casualty

## APPENDIX 2

collection point where he assisted in the treatment of the casualties, and the evacuation and processing of those killed in action. Master Corporal Smith demonstrated exceptional professionalism in combat.<sup>47</sup>

### CAPTAIN JONATHAN SUTHERLAND SNYDER

#### STAR OF MILITARY VALOUR (DECEASED)

Corporals [Cary] Baker, [Donovan] Ball and [Steven Joel] Bancarz, and Captains [Robert] Peel and [Jonathan] Snyder were deployed to Afghanistan to serve as mentors to an Afghan company, when they were ambushed by Taliban insurgents on **JUNE 4, 2008**. With little chance of survival, they exposed themselves to great peril and retaliated against the enemy while encouraging the Afghan soldiers to do the same. Captain Snyder seized control of the situation and ensured that the Afghan soldiers retrieved their wounded comrades. Corporal Ball led a two-man team across broken terrain to secure an extraction route that allowed for the execution of a fighting withdrawal by Captain Peel and Corporals Bancarz and Baker. Because of their dedication, leadership and valour, many Afghan and Canadian lives were saved.<sup>48</sup>

### MASTER WARRANT OFFICER SHAWN DOUGLAS STEVENS

#### MERITORIOUS SERVICE MEDAL (MILITARY DIVISION)

Master Warrant Officer Stevens is recognized for his outstanding leadership while serving with C Company, Operation ARCHER Rotation 1, in Afghanistan, from **FEBRUARY to AUGUST 2006**. His in-depth planning of combat operations, coupled with his thorough knowledge of counter-insurgency operations, made him a trusted and sought-after advisor. He oversaw the fighting echelon and synchronized support elements. Selflessly concentrating on his mission and the welfare of soldiers in the midst of intense combat conditions, he successfully coordinated numerous casualty evacuations while threatened by enemy fire. Master Warrant Officer Stevens excelled under pressure and demonstrated courage and calm under fire.<sup>49</sup>

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### CHIEF WARRANT OFFICER SHAWN DOUGLAS STEVENS

#### MERITORIOUS SERVICE CROSS (MILITARY DIVISION)

Chief Warrant Officer Stevens was the regimental sergeant-major of the battle group in Afghanistan from **OCTOBER 2009 to MAY 2010**. His exacting standards and attention to detail enabled every soldier in the unit to succeed during intense operations. Whether providing sage advice to senior leaders or sharing the risk with ground troops, he enabled the battle group to work as a unified fighting force. His outstanding leadership and professionalism ensured operational success and brought great credit to the Canadian Forces and to Canada.<sup>50</sup>

### LIEUTENANT-COLONEL PATRICK BENTON STOGRAN

#### MERITORIOUS SERVICE CROSS (MILITARY DIVISION)

From **JANUARY 8 to JULY 30, 2002**, LCol Stogran commanded the 3rd Battalion, Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry Battle Group, in Afghanistan — the regiment which spearheaded Canada's contribution to the international campaign against terrorism. In this, Canada's first deployment of an army unit in combat operations against a declared enemy in five decades, LCol Stogran has proven to be an excellent tactician, a determined negotiator and a tireless and inspiring leader under complex operational conditions. His truly outstanding professionalism on Operation APOLLO has brought great credit to Canada and to the Canadian Forces.<sup>51</sup>

### LIEUTENANT-COLONEL ROBERT DAREN KEITH WALKER

#### MERITORIOUS SERVICE CROSS (MILITARY DIVISION)

Lieutenant-Colonel Walker was deployed as the commanding officer, 2nd Battalion, The Royal Canadian Regiment Battle Group, Joint Task Force Afghanistan, from **FEBRUARY to AUGUST 2007**. His dynamic leadership enabled the expansion of the Kandahar Afghan Development Zone and empowered the Canadian International Development Agency in its rehabilitation efforts.<sup>52</sup>

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### PRIVATE TIMMY DEAN WILKINS

#### MENTION IN DISPATCHES

On **AUGUST 19, 2006**, Private Wilkins of Alpha Company, 1st Royal Canadian Regiment Battle Group, was a crew member of a light armoured vehicle during an engagement with numerically superior Taliban forces in Masum Ghar. During the three hour firefight, he effectively employed the vehicle's general purpose machine gun to suppress a group of enemy fighters on one side of the vehicle. He also provided accurate and valuable targetting information to the vehicle's turret crew. Private Wilkin's skillful actions helped to prevent the Taliban forces from outflanking the remainder of the Company and undoubtedly saved numerous lives.<sup>53</sup>

### SERGEANT AUSTIN KANE WILLIAMS

#### MERITORIOUS SERVICE MEDAL (MILITARY DIVISION)

From **OCTOBER 2009 to MAY 14, 2010**, Sergeant Williams ensured the best possible surveillance coverage was provided to ground forces in Afghanistan. He forged the Tactical Operations Centre into a cohesive team and implemented new capabilities to provide uninterrupted surveillance coverage, gaining the highest confidence of senior leadership. Sergeant Williams' personal commitment in this regard contributed directly to operational success and brought great credit to the Canadian Forces.<sup>54</sup>

### CORPORAL JONATHAN FRANCIS WILLIAMS

#### MENTION IN DISPATCHES

On **16 MAY 2007**, an insurgent force numbering more than 30 ambushed Corporal Williams' Platoon in Sangsar, Afghanistan. The insurgents were dispersed in multiple well-sited positions and were focussing their effective, coordinated fire on the lead Section. On the Platoon Commander's orders and

## APPENDIX 2

with no regard for his personal safety, Corporal Williams exposed himself to heavy small arms fire as he dashed across a 40 metre fire-swept field to take up a position to identify and neutralize the enemy. Corporal Williams' skill and courage under fire enabled the pinned down rifle Section to withdraw unharmed from this extremely perilous situation.<sup>55</sup>

### COLONEL RICHARD STEPHEN WILLIAMS

#### MERITORIOUS SERVICE MEDAL (MILITARY DIVISION)

From MAY to NOVEMBER 2006, Colonel Williams of the United States Army applied dogged determination, as well as outstanding leadership, to ensure that Task Force Grizzly performed to exceptional standards. As deputy commander of the Multinational Brigade — Regional Command South, in Afghanistan, he coordinated combat enablers and implemented quick impact reconstruction projects in the battlespace. His combined experience in the area of operations, his knowledge of resources and his well-established relations with high-ranking officials and key leaders of Afghanistan served to directly support the strategic goals of the Canadian mission in Afghanistan. A tireless advocate for the region, Colonel Williams has brought great credit to the United States, to the Canadian Forces and to Canada.<sup>56</sup>

### MAJOR MICHAEL CHARLES WRIGHT

#### MERITORIOUS SERVICE MEDAL (MILITARY DIVISION)

Major Wright was deployed as officer commanding Alpha Company, 1st Battalion, The Royal Canadian Regiment Battle Group, in Afghanistan from AUGUST 2006 to FEBRUARY 2007. He responded to the leadership challenge of being in constant contact with the enemy, and successfully planned and executed many company and combat team-level operations. Extremely adaptable, he effortlessly changed his warrior role to that of a humanitarian when working with senior Afghan politicians and the Afghan National Army. Major Wright's



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professionalism and devotion to duty has significantly contributed to the success of the mission and has left a lasting legacy in Kandahar province.<sup>57</sup>

## NOTES

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- 1 Announced in *Canada Gazette*, Part I, Vol. 141, No. 25 (23 June 2007), 1720. Citation from DND, DH&R.
- 2 Announced in *Canada Gazette*, Part I, Vol. 141, No. 43 (27 October 2007), 3016. Citation from DND, DH&R.
- 3 *Canada Gazette*, Part I, Vol. 142, No. 16 (19 April 2008), 1089.
- 4 *Canada Gazette*, Part I, Vol. 142, No. 4 (26 January 2008), 174.
- 5 *Canada Gazette*, Part I, Vol. 142, No. 16 (19 April 2008), 1089.
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- 10 Announced in *Canada Gazette*, Part I, Vol. 141, No. 25 (23 June 2007), 1720. Citation from DND, DH&R.
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- 24 Announced in *Canada Gazette*, Part I, Vol. 142, No. 45 (8 November 2008), 2909.  
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- 34 *Canada Gazette*, Part I, Vol. 141, No. 32 (11 August 2007), 2262.
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- 40 Announced in *Canada Gazette*, Part I, Vol. 141, No. 8 (24 February 2007), 326. Citation from DND, DH&R.
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- 44 Announced in *Canada Gazette*, Part I, Vol. 142, No. 45 (8 November 2008), 2910. Citation from DND, DH&R.
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- 47 Announced in *Canada Gazette*, Part I, Vol. 141, No. 43 (27 October 2007), 3016. Citation from DND, DH&R.
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- 52 *Canada Gazette*, Part I, Vol. 142, No. 16 (19 April 2008), 1091.
- 53 Announced in *Canada Gazette*, Part I, Vol. 141, No. 25 (23 June 2007), 1720. Citation from DND, DH&R.
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- 55 Announced in *Canada Gazette*, Part I, Vol. 142, No. 45 (8 November 2008), 2910. Citation from DND, DH&R.
- 56 *Canada Gazette*, Part I, Vol. 141, No. 14 (7 April 2007), 771.
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# ABOUT THE EDITORS

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**Craig Leslie Mantle** graduated from Queen's University in 2002 with his MA in Canadian history and has been employed by the Canadian Forces Leadership Institute ever since. He is currently a PhD candidate at the University of Calgary where, under the supervision of Dr. David Bercuson, he is studying leader-follower relations in the Canadian Expeditionary Force during the First World War. He has a number of Canadian Defence Academy Press books to his name dealing with such diverse subjects as disobedience, small unit leadership, trust and the participation of Aboriginal peoples in both Canadian and international military forces.

**Chief Petty Officer 2<sup>nd</sup> Class Paul Pellerin (Ret'd)** enrolled in the Canadian Forces in 1981 and retired in 2009. He served onboard HMCS *Saskatchewan* and HMCS *Terra Nova* from 1982 to 1986. After becoming an Intelligence Specialist in 1986, he served in several locations including Valcartier, Kingston, Bagotville and Ottawa, with deployments to Cyprus, Visoko in Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Sarajevo. He was also posted to the Canadian Embassy in Moscow from 1995 to 1997. CPO2 Pellerin was recently School Sergeant-Major at the Canadian Forces School of Military Intelligence and finished his career at the Canadian Forces Leadership Institute in Kingston as Staff Officer Leadership Lessons Learned and Outreach.

**Tom Douglas** is the author of four books on Canada's role in the two world wars: *Canadian Spies*, *D-Day*, *Great Canadian War Heroes* and *Valour at Vimy Ridge*. He also ghostwrote *Permission Granted*, the memoirs of a Second World War Royal Canadian Air Force squadron leader. Tom once served as the Communications Assistant to the Minister of Veterans Affairs and has written speeches for several other federal and provincial cabinet ministers, as well as senior officials of the Department of National Defence. He was also the English copy editor of the *Canadian Military Journal* for a number of years and more recently has served as the Associate Editor of the DND publication *Maritime Engineering Journal*.

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# GLOSSARY

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2IC	Second-in-Command
3IC	Third-in-Command
4IC	Fourth-in-Command
9/11	11 September 2001
AAR	After Action Review / Report
AHSVS	Armoured Heavy Support Vehicle System
ANA	Afghan National Army
ANP	Afghan National Police
ANSF	Afghan National Security Forces
AOR	Area of Responsibility
ARV	Armoured Recovery Vehicle
ASIC	All Source Intelligence Centre
BDA	Battle Damage Assessment
BEW	Ballistic Eye Wear
BG	Battle Group
Capt	Captain
CAS	Close Air Support
CC	Command Centre
C.D.	Canadian Forces Decoration
CDA	Canadian Defence Academy
CDS	Chief of the Defence Staff
CEFCOM	Canadian Expeditionary Forces Command
CF	Canadian Forces
CFB	Canadian Forces Base
CFLI	Canadian Forces Leadership Institute
CH of O	Cameron Highlanders of Ottawa

## GLOSSARY

CIDA	Canadian International Development Agency
CIMIC	Civil-Military Cooperation
C.M.	Member of the Order of Canada
CMBG	Canadian Mechanized Brigade Group
C.M.M.	Commander of the Order of Military Merit
CMTC	Canadian Manoeuvre Training Centre
CO	Commanding Officer
COIN	Counter-Insurgency
Col	Colonel
Cpl	Corporal
CPR	Cardio-Pulmonary Resuscitation
CQ	Company Quartermaster
C.V.	Cross of Valour
CWO	Chief Warrant Officer
D&S	Defence and Security
DH&R	Directorate of Honours and Recognition
DND	Department of National Defence
D.S.O.	Distinguished Service Order
É.C.	Étoile du courage
ECM	Electronic Countermeasures
EIIR	Elizabeth II Regina; Queen Elizabeth II
É.V.M.	Étoile de la vaillance militaire
FOB	Forward Operating Base
FOO	Forward Observation Officer
G.C.V.O.	Dame (or Knight) Grand Cross of the Royal Victorian Order
GG	Governor General
GPMG	General Purpose Machine Gun
GPS	Global Positioning System



## GLOSSARY

HE	High Explosive
Herc	Hercules
HLTA	Home Leave Travel Assistance
HMCS	Her / His Majesty's Canadian Ship
HQ	Headquarters
HSS	Health Support Services
ICS	Integrated Communications System
IED	Improvised Explosive Device
IFOR	Implementation Force
IMP	Individual Meal Pack
IRF(L)	Immediate Reaction Force (Land)
ISAF	International Security Assistance Force
JDAM	Joint Direct Attack Munition
KAF	Kandahar Airfield
KFOR	Kosovo Force
KIA	Killed in Action
LAV	Light Armoured Vehicle
LCol	Lieutenant-Colonel
L.G.	Lady Companion of the Most Noble Order of the Garter
LGen	Lieutenant-General
loc stat	location status
LS	Light Support Vehicle
M.B.	Medal of Bravery
M.C.	Military Cross
MCpl	Master Corporal
medevac	medical evacuation
MGen	Major-General

## GLOSSARY

ML	Medium Logistic Vehicle
M.M.V.	Medal of Military Valour
MRE	Meal Ready to Eat
M.S.C.	Meritorious Service Cross
M.S.M.	Meritorious Service Medal
MiD	Mention in Dispatches
M.V.M.	Médaille de la vaillance militaire
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NCM	Non-Commissioned Member
NCO	Non-Commissioned Officer
ND	Negligent Discharge
NDHQ	National Defence Headquarters
NSE	National Support Element
NVG	Night Vision Goggles
OC	Officer Commanding
O.M.M.	Officer of the Order of Military Merit
OP	Observation Post
Op	Operation
para	parachute; airborne
PBW	Patrol Base Wilson
PDC	Panjwai District Centre
PPCLI	Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry
Pri-One	Priority 1
Prod O	Production Officer
PRR	Personal Role Radio
PRT	Provincial Reconstruction Team
PSYOPS	Psychological Operations
PT	Physical Training

## GLOSSARY

Pte	Private
PTSD	Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
QRF	Quick Reaction Force
R22 <sup>e</sup> R	Royal 22 <sup>e</sup> Régiment
RC	Regional Command
RCD	Royal Canadian Dragoons
RCMP	Royal Canadian Mounted Police
RCR	The Royal Canadian Regiment
recce	reconnaissance
RMCC	Royal Military College of Canada
R NFLD R	Royal Newfoundland Regiment
roto	rotation
RPG	Rocket-Propelled Grenade
RSM	Regimental Sergeant-Major
S.C.	Star of Courage
SF	Special Forces
Sgt	Sergeant
sit rep	situation report
S.M.V.	Star of Military Valour
SOP	Standard Operating Procedure
SUV	Sport Utility Vehicle
SVBIED	Suicide Vehicle-Borne Improvised Explosive Device
SWR	Steel Wire Rope
TCCCS	Tactical Command and Control Communication System
terp	interpreter
TIC	Troops in Contact
TO&E	Table of Organization and Equipment
T-Trip-C	TCCC; Tactical Combat Casualty Care

## GLOSSARY

UN	United Nations
UNMAS	United Nations Mine Action Service
U.S.	United States
V.C.	Victoria Cross
VIP	Very Important Person
VMO	Village Medical Outreach
VRI	Victoria Regina et Imperatrix; Victoria Queen and Empress
WO	Warrant Officer
WWI	World War I; the First World War
WWII	World War II; the Second World War
XO	Executive Officer
ZL	Zettelmeyer

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Individuals mentioned in passing throughout the text who died as a result of their service are indicated with an asterisk, others who received formal recognition for their service are noted through the appropriate abbreviation for their award (their citations appearing in either Appendix 1 or 2 if they do not have a chapter to themselves), while American personnel are signified by their country's acronym.

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*In Their Own Words* vividly presents the personal accounts of twenty-three Canadian soldiers who have been recognized with some of the nation's highest honours for their courageous actions in Afghanistan between 2001 and 2007. This groundbreaking book offers profound insight into the daily challenges faced in the field, the hazards of combat, the trials and rewards of military service, and the "mind of the soldier." By recounting the circumstances under which he earned his decoration, each recipient, in his own voice, provides a positive example of the many values that the Canadian Forces itself cherishes: duty, loyalty, integrity and courage. Whether engaging the enemy, saving the life of a fellow soldier from certain death or preventing civilian casualties, the experiences recounted within these pages are nothing short of inspiring and deserving of the highest possible respect.



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