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War: Canadian-style

Bringing the war home | A special report

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SOMEWHERE NEAR GOMBAD, AFGHANISTAN - Eyes are watching tonight as the blackness settles in on the barren mountaintop. Eyes that seek Canadian blood. They have been watching for weeks, from the very first moment Alpha Company of the First Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry Battle Group made its presence known in the high hills of the Shawali Kot region of northern Kandahar Province.

Everyone can feel the eyes.

"Tonight is different, something weird is going on," a Canadian soldier announces tersely, his face drawn with tension.

He points toward the distant shadows of the western valley below, where telltale car headlights push through the darkness. He points to the eastern valley opposite, and here too the single headlamp of a motorbike can be seen flickering along a goat path. All of this movement is wrong, because nothing in these war-ravaged valleys moves after dark. The night means danger, a time for the ethnic Pashtun villagers to stay indoors and wait for daylight. Those who defy the darkness are the dangerous ones.

The Canadians do not panic. There is no need, for, after a hard day's hump through knee-high rushing rivers and on up the mountainside laden with full combat attire, they have settled upon a campsite from which all can be seen. It is a campsite others have favoured before them, judging by the empty weapons cache discovered nearby.

From here, the Canadians have the strategic advantage. They have a belly full of high-energy MREs — meals, ready-to-eat. They have night-vision equipment. They have clandestine Rules of Engagement more generous than anything their kind has known since the Korean War. And they are ready.

It helps also that they came with friends — a dozen Afghan National Army (ANA) recruits and their special-forces trainers, who work under the flag of a country that can't be named at the request of Canadian Forces.

In the falling dark, a commotion erupts. The Afghan army regulars have snatched their weapons and now are bounding down the mountain in pursuit of an enemy scout they spotted below the Canadian position. The unarmed intruder escapes capture, fleeing into the night.

Calm is restored, but sleep comes fitfully under a dazzling canopy of stars. There was no room for tents in the Canadian backpacks; the soldiers hunker down on the bare ground in bivvy bags, weapons at their side. They take turns on sentry duty in two-hour rotations.

An icy wind arrives before daybreak, bringing with it a climactic culture shock. The Canadians remain snug in temperatures that don't quite qualify as winter camping. But their Afghan companions are a shivering mess, numbed by altitudes no Afghan contemplates outside the summer months.

The morning brings new challenges still. The Canadians will resume their march down to the isolated village of Kundalan, where they are required to change hats, transforming instantly from warriors to peacemakers. The pointy tip of the Canadian army must blunt itself, if only for a moment, to extend the hand of friendship to the locals.

The campaign to win Afghan hearts and minds will play out repeatedly in village after village over the platoon's 10-day mission. Tragically, it will be a campaign from which not all the Canadians will return.

Drugs, dogma and insurgents

Some of these Canadian soldiers have been to Bosnia, some to Croatia, some also to Kosovo, and many have seen the far more stable face of Afghanistan from the capital, Kabul, where Canadian Forces have contributed handsomely to

NATO peacemaking efforts almost since the fall of the Taliban regime in late 2001.

But none has seen the modern stone-age family quite the way it presents itself in these distant and deeply tribal mountains north of Kandahar.

Here, mud-walled homes stand in clustered communities that lack virtually everything one associates with modernity. They have no electricity, no teachers, no doctors, no roads worthy of the name, no means with which to rise from the ashes of a quarter century of conflict.

What these villages do have are mosques, with calls to prayer five times a day the only sound that carries apart from the crowing of roosters. And, interspersed among spindly wheat sprouts, one can see the green beginnings of what will become a new poppy harvest — the obvious harbinger of opium-processing drug lords whose interest in reversing any Afghan recovery matches that of remnant Taliban insurgents.

Drugs and medieval religious dogma, an unholy alliance that is filtered further still through the almost inscrutable subtleties of Pashtun tribal rivalries, is what the Canadians find themselves up against.

What these particular Canadian soldiers bring with them, however, is something more substantial than most Canadians realize — actual combat capability. A capability that, despite the Cold War-era teachings of the Canadian military, includes more than a little knowledge of modern counter-insurgency techniques.

It would be unfair to quote them by name, for they hardly deserve the top-down retributions of the Canadian Forces' bloated middle management. But know this: Many of Canada's front-line combat soldiers, who number barely 3,500 in total, view as wholly inadequate the training they receive at home.

"The teaching model is still based on the assumption that when we go to war, that war will be conventional, as in the Godless Russian hordes lined up in tanks coming at us from one direction," a veteran non-commissioned officer at Kandahar Airfield told the *Toronto Star*.

"It is not the fault of the instructors. That was the environment they came up in. But at the same time, that's not what war is anymore. The reality today is counter-insurgency. The top Canadian brass realize this and so do the front-of-line soldiers. But in between, there is a layer of the army locked in hidebound thinking, basically resistant to change.

"So a lot of us deployed in Afghanistan today have basically had to throw out the book and educate ourselves. It's really not that difficult, because so many armies around the world have been training in counter-insurgency techniques for so long now that there is a substantial library of knowledge available. And we're studying it on our own."

In other words, Canadian soldiers in training are buying and reading books and going online in search of post-Cold War military doctrine, particularly the strategies of dealing with an insurgent or guerrilla-style enemy (who hits and runs, rather than standing and fighting).

Some combat soldiers here say the decayed state of military education in Canada is merely a by-product of overall neglect for the forces as a whole by successive Canadian governments. And that, they say, speaks to Canada's enduring cultural love affair with the notion that our soldiers are simply peacekeepers, nothing more and nothing less.

Capt. Kevin Schamuhn, 26, commander of Alpha Company's 1st Platoon, into which the *Star* was embedded at Gombad, articulated the reality of the battlefield that surrounds him with a yearning for what used to be.

"I crave World War II. You have Germans in grey uniforms with specific weapons. Roger. Got it. No problem," he said.

"But here in Afghanistan, I've shaken hands with a dozen enemies. I'm sure of it. And that one kid walking around in the background, who knows what's in his head? If they are able to come out and fight us one-on-one, there's no doubt we would have the overwhelming authority and dominance in the region. But they don't play by our rules.

"Nobody in the chain of command has a false sense of that reality," Schamuhn added. "It's just that the mechanisms of the Canadian military system have been inactive for so long that it is taking time to get the cobwebs out. Okay, so this is a counter-insurgency. Let's deal with it head on."

Pt. 2: A fruitful meeting

A fruitful meeting

The Afghan with one eye sits fidgeting through the Canadian platoon leader's monologue. Capt. Schamuhn has made the Canadian case abundantly clear, via an Afghan interpreter.

"I cannot promise to solve all your problems," Schamuhn tells the leaders of the tiny village of Kundalan, who are gathered in an impromptu *shura* — an Arabic word that means "consultation" — at the request of their announced guests from Canada.

"What I can do is help your government solve your problems for you. You must understand that these are not Canadian problems, these are Afghan problems. The Canadians are here to help the Afghan government find solutions.

"But I want to emphasize one point — we will not be here forever. We are only here temporarily to help get your government back on its feet. My concern is for after we leave. You are the men who must take the initiative to become actively involved in solving your problems, so you will have better lives after we're gone."

The one-eyed man raises his hand, announcing dramatically, "Now it is *my* turn to speak."

He is not the leader of Kundalan, that title belongs to one Salah Makmad, who had opened the meeting by describing the plight of this wholly illiterate village of some 130 families. Water is the biggest issue; rather, the inability to store water. When the spring runoff subsides in the coming weeks, Kundalan will run dry through yet another parched summer.

Schamuhn's assistant, Lieut. Trevor Greene, 41, has already taken down the details. As Canada's civil-military co-operation officer on the ground with 1st Platoon, Greene is a dove among the hawks of Canadian combat.

He has already learned that when the people of Kundalan get sick, one of two things happen. Maybe they go to Kandahar, he is told. Or maybe they just die. And Greene has already learned that Kundalan's leaders, however much they welcome a school, will not allow the education of girls. Not even if a separate school is constructed.

The one-eyed man draws breath and unleashes his torrent of doubts and reservations. Firstly, he says, the village has already seen American soldiers come with notepads in hand, dutifully writing down all that ails Kundalan. The village has nothing to show for all their promises.

It may be that Canada is trying to help a government that has no intention of helping this village, he continues. And even if Canada's help makes it to Kundalan, he concludes, the village then runs the risk of inviting attacks from Taliban fighters.

Schamuhn acknowledges the concerns but stands firm. He tells the villagers that they must make a choice. The Canadians are ready to do their best for Kundalan, but Kundalan has a critical role to play.

"Already we have been bombed," Schamuhn says. "Lieut. Trevor was in the vehicle that was bombed. And the Canadian base at Gombad came under rocket attack 10 days ago.

"As much as I want to help you and focus on humanitarian aid, I cannot do that if we're always fighting people."

The one-eyed man softens at this news and, in the next breath, his combative tone vanishes. "If you give us a school, a medical clinic, we can keep security in these places. We can help you. The Taliban is not made of Afghans. It is made of Pakistani people who come here to fight," he says.

The sudden Afghan warmth is sanctified by the serving of tea and bread. With it comes the rest of the villagers, who until now had stood at a distance. The Afghans remark favourably on the Canadians' willingness to share in the ritual, noting that when U.S. soldiers came to visit, they refused the offer of the sweet tea.

"My American friends have weak stomachs," laughs Schamuhn, raising his glass to salute his hosts. "So when they drink your chai they get sick."

Schamuhn cannot help but pay an additional compliment, commenting on how the village elders have spent an entire hour squatting on bended knee.

"I am a young man from Canada, much younger than you," he tells them. "But I could not sit in such a position for more than a few minutes without feeling pain. The Afghan people obviously have very good genes."

A round of handshakes follows and the Canadians withdraw, satisfied that an ice-cold village has begun to show the first signs of thaw. On the march out of Kundalan, a special-forces adviser accompanying the party points to fist-sized plants growing on one of the village's fields.

"Poppies," he says to no one in particular. **Pt. 3: The birthplace of dust**

The birthplace of dust

A constant tension reverberates in the background at the Canadians' forward operating base camp, a steel-reinforced compound that, from the exterior, has the deceptive appearance of being made entirely of mud like every other building in the valley.

But the soldiers of Alpha Company have something here they don't get at the mother base to the south, where Canada's military brass resides — freedom from rules. The dress code is lax and there is a deceptively high tolerance for diversions, from the playing of guitar — an army-issue acoustic six-string has made its way here — to spontaneous games of Euchre.

There is a trade-off for the soldiers of 1st Platoon, and that is that they are expected to be "switched on" at all times. They must know their own jobs and the jobs of those above and below, so as to slip seamlessly into alternate roles on a moment's notice.

There is no running water here. And so there will be no showers for 10 days, let alone the ability to wash one's clothes, body or hands, even.

Antiseptic, waterless soap is readily available as a stopgap; the soldiers are also expected to make ready use of wet wipes as a means of maintaining basic hygiene.

'We're basically chasing the bomb planters around the country. Hopefully they will eventually get tired of being chased and move out of Afghanistan altogether'
U.S. Army Specialist Russ Snyder

Ratpicker operator

There is a plywood outhouse, already heavily decorated with locker-room graffiti. Each day the unluckiest of the bunch assumes the task of removing the catch barrel, dousing its contents with diesel and setting it alight. The acrid smoke, thick with fecal matter, only adds to the airborne hell that is southern Afghanistan, the apparent birthplace of dust.

The creeping dust finds its way everywhere, from the deepest pores of the exposed members of the LAV crews, who stand two abreast with guns at the ready through the open sentry hatches of the vehicle, to the inner workings of the weapons themselves. Hundreds of cases of aerosol air duster will be consumed during this mission.

In the indelicate words of one soldier, "Boogers around here make good sandbags — if you can ever get them out of your nose."

The camp was by all descriptions a den of filth last month when the Canadians took over from the departing U.S. forces, members of Task Force Gun Devil's Legion Company. But whatever their sense of hygiene, the former occupants win high praise from the 1st Platoon's leaders for the manner in which they handed over the file on these valleys.

"The Americans went out of their way to stay with us until the very end," says the Canadian platoon's Warrant Officer, Justin Mackay, 33. "They showed us the site of every IED (improvised explosive device, or roadside bomb) and every rocket attack; they helped us understand the mood in the various villages, which ones were friendly and which were problematic.

"They stayed until the day before they were due to fly home, which was impressive."

The area around Gombad went bad not because of those particular U.S. troops but because of *their* predecessors, a U.S. infantry company that opted to bar itself within the compound's gates and venture only rarely "beyond the wire," the Canadians say. The valleys were allowed to fester unchecked with an ever more emboldened insurgency, eager to test the will of the coalition soldiers.

Now that turf must be reclaimed, village by village, with Canadian boots on the ground.

Pt. 4: LAVs and luck

LAVs and luck

A breathtaking sunrise washes away our first chilly night in the desert en route to Gombad, illuminating mountain ridges that belonged by turns to Alexander the Great, Genghis Khan, Timur, the British and the Soviets. Everyone, it seems, was able to take Afghanistan. None was able to keep it.

The Canadian troops are mindful — some are in awe — that vast armies of horse-mounted warriors once trammelled these plains. And now they will mount their modern equivalent — the high-tech LAV III, a Canadian-made light-armoured troop carrier upon which their survival in Afghanistan depends. Each platoon, like the 1st, has three of them.

To comprehend life in a LAV, imagine climbing inside a giant, eight-wheeled, tempered-steel fortune cookie. The cookie is designed to sustain direct explosions beneath it. Should the cookie crumble, most likely you will die.

The LAV did not crumble when a mechanized section of 1st Platoon was struck the evening of Feb. 9 in an area that some of the soldiers now call "Sphincter Alley," a narrow, natural ambush site on the approach to Gombad.

Some who were in the LAV that night remember a blinding flash of light, others a massive boom, others still recall nothing but the shock wave. As the 10-man section emerged from the vehicle, it was apparent the injuries were limited to cuts and bruises, save for those of Lieut. Trevor Greene, the CIMIC officer, who would be evacuated back to Kandahar Airfield with a moderate concussion.

"It sounds strange to say, but because nobody was badly hurt, the attack was the best thing that could have happened to the unit," says Sgt. Scott Proctor, commander of the 10-man mechanized section.

"It let everybody know this isn't Wainwright anymore. This is not a training exercise. This is a place where, if you don't pay attention, somebody will get killed."

Proctor, 36, from Espanola, Ont., kept his unit overnight at the bomb scene. The next morning they found what hit them — the remains of two buried artillery rounds with wires attached. They learned that an insurgent had triggered the device by remote control in real-time from his hiding spot overlooking the scene. He was crouched behind a cover of desert bushes uprooted and tied together in the fashion of a duck blind.

The $3.5 million LAV didn't appear much worse for wear — a front left tire was shredded and various parts were lying on the ground. But in fact it was a write-off, its hull apparently cracked by the blast. It had done its job, though, saving the 10 men inside.

The LAV III, however effective, is hardly perfect in these uneven hills north of Kandahar. Rollovers have become an issue for the rather tippy 20-tonne vehicle, whose sheer heft can ravage the sometimes soft shoulders beneath it. Powered by a 350-hp Caterpillar engine, it is rated to move 40 kilometres-per-hour off-road. The soldiers know that, in a pinch, it can do more than twice that.

Warrant Mackay rates the LAV III as an outstanding piece of kit that brings Canadian Forces into "a whole new world." The key, he says, is the vehicle's electronics package, which includes the STAB System, a device that automatically compensates for movement of the vehicle so that, even over washboard terrain, the LAV's turret gunner remains on target.

"Not everyone can be a gunner with this machine, because the eyes and the body get different messages, and that makes some people nauseous," says Mackay.

"But compared to the old systems in the Grizzly, the LAV outranges, outperforms and fires on the move with phenomenal power."

The LAV's top-mounted 25mm cannon is the biggest gun — it fires a supersonic round whose shock wave alone can be fatal within one metre of its target. But there are many more inside. Each mechanized 10-man section comes with a range of standard-issue Canadian-made C7-A2 assault rifles, two of which are fitted with M203-A1 grenade launchers. Then there are the C9 machine guns for creating cone-of-fire coverage, fed by belt or magazine. Inside the LAV are two types of C8s — the "pencil-neck," for shorter range fire and the "heavy-barrel" centre-weighted gun. All fire the same ammunition — 5.56mm. The C-class also includes the C6, a GPMG or general-purpose machine gun that works as both a mounted or handheld firearm, firing 7.62mm rounds.

Inside each LAV you will also find M72 66mm rocket launchers, 60mm mortars, and a Remington 870 shotgun, suitable for blowing locks away and kicking in doors. It serves the same purpose as that you would find in a police cruiser.

The last piece in the gun kit is the leg-holstered 9mm Browning handgun. And if all else fails, Canada's frontline troops have been issued new German-made bayonets.

With this kind of firepower, one wouldn't expect Canadian soldiers to need much else in situ. But the men of 1st

Platoon come also with a few superstitious tricks up their sleeve. One has gone so far as to have the symbol for "luck" tattooed onto his neck in Mandarin. Others, when asked about good luck charms, empty their pockets to show such unlikely totems as "three lucky bullets."

Pvt. Matt McFadden, 32, of Wallaceburg, Ont., wears around his neck a silver pendant he calls "beer and money."

"It belonged to my grandfather and there's a story behind it that I've never heard," says McFadden. "My uncle gave it to me to wear in Afghanistan, and when I get back he promises to fill me in on what it represents."

Cpl. Jeremy Hand, 32, of Brantford, Ont., wears a chain with crucifix, St. Christopher medallion and a holy medal, all of which came from different members of his family. "I'm not overly superstitious but it feels better to have it on," he says.

Pte. Daniel Hodas, 25, of Courtenay, B.C., came to Afghanistan with a prized Zippo lighter that his grandfather carried in Korea. But he left it behind at the platoon's lockup at Kandahar Airfield for safekeeping.

Cpl. Aaron Penner, 24, of Winnipeg and Pte. Chad Wright, 30, of Comox Valley, B.C., both carry Bibles given by their families. "I have it in my bag most of the time," said Wright.

Pte. Charles Matiru, 25, a Kenyan-born Canadian who now calls Vancouver home, shrugs off such talismans. "My luck is right on my bed in the compound. It's called a C7-A2 assault rifle," he says.

The `ratpicker'

There are secret weapons in the field of which, under the rules of engagement for embedded reporters with Canadian Forces in Afghanistan, we can say very little. But if Canada's preparations for counter-insurgency are in any way akin to those of the U.S. Forces in Iraq, they almost certainly will include a substantial deployment of special forces from various countries in the vicinity of the Canadian regulars.

They are likely also to include the cultivation of information on local villages from sources other than the direct face-to-face encounters 1st Platoon is undertaking in the area. Put another way, paid collaborators.

But there is one weapon we can describe — the "ratpicker." We saw it first after a tense dismounted patrol through the comparatively hostile village of Padah, where scowling men ignored the friendly but cautious waves of the marching Canadians and in some cases admonished Afghan toddlers who waved back in greeting.

Dead ahead on the other side of Padah was the ratpicker, or Meerkat — a kind of giant praying mantas on wheels whose sole purpose is to detect and disable roadside bombs before the Canadians drive over them.

U.S. army Specialist Russ Snyder, 28, of the 391st Combat Engineer Battalion, has been driving the Meerkat and its larger variant in Afghanistan for almost a year. A reservist and former Philadelphia city cop, Snyder's crew is the only mine clearance team of its kind in country — and therefore in high demand.

The team was assigned to Canada's Alpha Company after the Feb. 9 blast and has since been running its high-powered metal detectors across the broken roads of the region, siphoning danger. What the Meerkat doesn't detect, it triggers by accident. The driver, entombed in an armoured compartment, remains unharmed. The broken components of the machine are quickly replaced.

"I've been hit a few times but that's what the vehicle is designed for," says Snyder.

"Last June, I hit a double-stacked TC6 anti-tank mine, which sheared off the back of the vehicle. But we replaced the destroyed section and were up and running again in three days. Sometimes when pieces blow we can have it up in as little as 30 minutes."

The hope is that, before Snyder's team is called elsewhere in Afghanistan, bomb-planting insurgents will accept the futility of their efforts and move elsewhere, away from the Canadians at Gombad.

"We're basically chasing the bomb planters around the country," says Snyder. "Hopefully they will eventually get tired of being chased and move out of Afghanistan altogether."

Pt. 5: Fathers and sons

Father and sons

The pups of Alpha Company call him "Pops," or sometimes "The Old Man." To glimpse at his grey whiskers, it is easy to imagine Cpl. Erik Hjalmarson is a lifer with decades in the Forces.

Not so. Though Hjalmarson turns 55 this month, he didn't join the army until age 49, making him an extraordinarily mature recruit to Canada's front-line combat forces.

What drove the Duncan, B.C., native to call the Canadian Forces Recruitment Centre six years ago? In part, Hjalmarson explains, it was his last chance to share in a family heritage that dates back to World War I.

"There was no joining after age 50, so it was then or never and I just thought, `What the heck, let's see what they say,' " he says.

Hjalmarson had already put in decades of hard slogging in the heavy industries, from sawmills to cement plants to coal and copper mines throughout British Columbia, earning his papers as a millwright and machinist along the way. He describes a life of honest labour without shortcuts, each stint brought to an abrupt end as mines played out and companies went under.

"I've had some pretty nasty jobs but I've never been afraid of hard work. The worst I can remember was running jackhammer. You drag a 90-pound machine up the rock face and when you get it going it shakes the crap out of you," he says.

"But what we're doing here is probably the most demanding of all. Climbing out over these mountains through extremely rugged terrain, nobody gets to soak in a tub or have a beer when it's over.

"All you can do is recoup for a day, prep your kit, clean your weapons, and out you go again, rain or shine."

Hjalmarson has another overriding interest for being in these hills: It helps him keep tabs on his oldest son, also named Eric, 25, who is deployed at the main Canadian base at Kandahar Airfield, working with Bravo Company. Father and son have been in the same battalion for the past six years.

"I think I worry about him more than he worries about me, but that is what a parent does. It just goes to show how our family is steeped in military tradition. My dad was with the Royal Canadian Engineers in World War II, landing at Juno Beach and fighting right through to Germany," he says.

`The biggest satisfaction is watching these young guys become men of substance'

Cpl. Erik Hjalmarson

"And my grandfather served with 49th Battalion, the South Saskatchewan Regiment, in World War I.

"I've grown up with the stories. To me, it relates to a tradition of what Canadians used to call `citizen soldiers' — volunteers who joined up to fight. Canada always had an army that could make do with what they were given."

Hjalmarson brings a unique sensibility to Alpha Company's 1st Platoon, equal parts den mother and father of invention. A restless soul, he is always dreaming up improvements to make life more bearable in the stress-filled environment at the unit's temporary home in the hills north of Kandahar.

He is also one of 1st Platoon's unabashed keepers all things Red Devil — stickers, banners, patches and stencils — that cumulatively galvanize the esprit de corps for which Alpha Company is known.

This is not a politically correct undertaking: Army command does not always look fondly on the cultivation of the Red Devil nickname. But out here on the front, no such rules apply, and within a day of deployment the spray cans come out. Forward Operating Base Gombad is now the Red Devil Inn.

There are stuffed mascots at the inn, including a Wile E. Coyote with four tours of duty under his belt and a Kermit the Frog with two. Hjalmarson, who is fond of woodworking, filled in a few spare hours whittling wooden assault rifles for each.

One day he was spotted building a kite from scratch. When asked the purpose, he deadpanned, "Now when I tell one of these guys `Go fly a kite,' I can give them the means to do it."

He is a big part of the glue that holds together 1st Platoon, but don't tell him that. "Glue? That's what they make out

of old horses."

Hjalmarson expected to retire at age 55 when he joined, but the military has since extended the age of mandatory retirement to 60. He is on his third tour, having served in Bosnia and Kabul.

"I don't know if I'll be climbing these mountains at 60, but they've got a few jobs left at battalion for old broken soldiers," he says.

As long as the Canadian Forces will have him, Hjalmarson says he is ready to serve.

"I think the biggest satisfaction is watching these young guys become men of substance. We get people from all walks of life coming in, boys from the farms and cities and fishing villages. A lot of them already know what is it to work hard and some of them have to learn it the hard way.

"What we end up with is a fighting army. Not just a peacekeeping army, but a peacemaking army. Sad to say, most Canadians don't know about it. But it's here. We're here. And we're getting the job done."

True confessions

Around the campfire, the unshaven truth will come out. Between missions, the knee-high mud hearth at the centre of the Red Devil Inn is the place to be for those not collapsed on their army cots.

The open-air courtyard firepit is equal parts dining hall for the constant consumption of MREs and an open stage for flattop guitar and off-colour jokes. It is also a place for war stories — ever hear the one about the snoozing Canadian sentry who almost shot the Bosnian bread man? — and sometimes, even, a place for true confessions.

Encrusted river-soaked socks sometimes lay drying on the firepit's edge, set there by soldiers determined to sap all available energy from the glowing embers. The firewood is imported, for there is nothing to burn in this part of Afghanistan save for twigs, and the 1st Platoon appears maliciously determined to burn every scrap in the house before they are relieved by 2nd Platoon. Such are the ways of inter-company rivalry.

It emerges by firelight that the Red Devils resent that, somehow, in the minds of so many Canadians, they don't really exist. A crack combat unit, they feel, has no place in the eyes of what many perceive as anti-military Middle Canada. Like their grandfathers, they trained to fight. But somehow in the 50 years between then and now, these shadow warriors lost their hold on the country. Or Canada simply let go.

Do not make the mistake of viewing them as a single, monochromatic entity. Though they do their jobs bonded as one, 1st Platoon is a unit rich with NCOs of experience and nuance. There are men here who can quote you the finer points of leftist author Noam Chomsky, others who will shrewdly dissect the lesser points of polemicist filmmaker Michael Moore, gesticulating with tattooed arms for emphasis.

As embedded journalists, we are a practical liability, strategically useless occupants of two seats in the LAV that would otherwise go to soldiers capable of warcraft when the going gets pear-shaped.

But as the days and nights melt away, the initially sullen tolerance of such intrusion evaporates, and 1st Platoon begins to show itself for the unit it really is. They accept. They warm. They welcome.

Nowhere was that connection more evident than with Lieut. Greene, the CIMIC rep, who over the course of leaders' engagements in seven villages transformed from journalist-babysitter to respected peer.

On a journey to the north by LAV, Greene began inviting the *Star* to take advantage of the unit's Pashtun translator, effectively joining in the *shura* meetings with village elders to ask questions of our own.

By sheer happenstance, one such village was in the midst of a wedding ceremony when the Canadian convoy arrived. The women of the hamlet wore no burkas but instead were adorned with richly coloured gowns previously unseen by Canadian eyes in these parts. They dashed for cover when the Western soldiers emerged from their LAVs. The village elders gladly delayed the nuptials for a 15-minute chat, quickly revealing themselves eager to establish schools for both sexes. It was the first village to make such a declaration in our travels.

Other destinations proved substantially more hostile, such as the village of Tanachuy (pronounced "Tan-gee"), where, when Capt. Schamuhn made inquiries about two militants the Canadians were particularly interested in locating, a cluster of black-turbaned, scowling men erupted in furtive whispers among themselves. A nerve was struck, but when asked directly whether they were aware of the suspects, they denied any knowledge.

Still, even at tense Tanachuy, the Canadian mission to get to know the locals paid dividends. A literate villager, rare in these parts, presented to Greene a notebook he had made for his son — a handwritten cross-cultural dictionary providing the same words in English and Pashtun.

Yes, the man told Greene, he would like to be a teacher. And if a school could be built, he would happily share his knowledge with the village children. Perhaps one day, the man said, his son could even become a doctor. "We have no

medicine in Tanachuy. But we need a doctor for the elderly. My son could be that man."

For Greene, the work in the villages was proceeding slower than he had hoped. During his final night at the campfire, he spoke candidly about where the mission was headed, wondering aloud whether a more effective way to reach out to the local Afghans was possible.

"Some days it feels like we're getting somewhere. Some days it feels like I'm spinning my wheels," he said.

"Maybe what we need to do is have Afghans up front, instead of people like me. I would like to get some of these interpreters to Ottawa, get them some training to improve their English, get them fired up about what a fully developed nation is like. And then get them back here to work on persuading these villagers where their future lies," he said.

"What we're doing is good. But imagine having actual Pashtuns doing this job. Then they could reason with themselves."

Pt. 6: Axe attack

Axe attack

Crew up!"

Warrant Mackay barks the order to the Red Devil Inn and instantly the men sprint for their gear. Flak jackets, helmets and guns are gathered in seconds. The cause of alarm is not yet known. Everyone knows better than to ask.

It is 2:02 p.m., Saturday, March 4. And something has gone terribly wrong at the village of Shingai, three kilometres away, where Capt. Schamuhn and Lieut. Greene are visiting the third village of the day to meet with village elders. The first radio transmission announced "Contact." That means contact with the enemy. Shots were fired, there were explosions. No other details are known.

"Get Charlie mounted up," Mackay orders. "They'll launch on my order." Charlie is 1st Platoon's third LAV, crewed and commanded by Sgt. John May, and ready to race into the firezone as backup.

"Orion One-One" is the radio codename for Schamuhn's crew, currently entangled in unknown trouble. He is informed that reinforcements are ready. Schamuhn answers with haste, "This is Orion One-One. Launch Charlie now!"

Tense minutes pass. Schamuhn radios Red Devil Inn, telling them to prepare to receive a "Nine-Liner," data with which a medical evacuation helicopter can be called to the scene.

"Orion One-One: number of patients — one times urgent, break," radios Schamuhn.

"Orion One-One: ZAP Number of patient — 6013. I repeat, 6013. Break"

Purple smoke will be released to mark the helicopter landing zone, he says. The location is an open *wadi*, or river valley. The area appears secure for now.

Mackay reaches into his pocket and retrieves a master list of military ZAP numbers, which put names to the soldiers' numbers. His hands are trembling as he scans for the identity of the wounded man.

Lieut. Trevor Greene. The CIMIC rep. The one man in the platoon whose sole purpose in this country is to help Afghan villagers.

Headquarters at Kandahar Airfield, codenamed "Orion Zero," enters the radio conversation, informing Schamuhn that U.S. Apache helicopters are on the way. They will advise when the Medevac is "wheels up." Headquarters requests for additional details about the nature of the casualty, in order to better prepare base hospital staff.

"Orion One-One: casualty is (unintelligible). He has received an axe wound to the head."

Radio silence.

Then headquarters repeats its query: "Orion One-One this is Orion Zero: Say again the nature of the wound, over."

Schamuhn keys his microphone to repeat. "Orion One-One: I say again. The nature of the wound is an axe to the head. Over."

Backup arrives

Three kilometres away, field medic Sean Marshall, 26, an Etobicoke native, tends to the stricken Greene as Schamuhn's men push out a security cordon and prepare smoke flares for the incoming Medevac. Greene is still breathing.

There was a secondary attack this day, immediately following the strike on Greene, but the Afghan National Army regulars and the Canadians chased away the threat. The situation now is under control.

Greene's attacker, later identified as Abdul Kareem, 16, lies dead in the *wadi* just a few metres away. The teenager uttered a single cry of "Allahu Akbar" (God Is Great) before raising an axe without warning and driving it two-handed down into the top of Greene's head. Seconds later, he was cut down by 14 bullets from three Canadian guns.

Kareem was a native of Kundalan, the village Schamuhn and Greene had first befriended one week earlier at the outset of the mission.

The helicopter sets "wheels down" at 3:17 and six minutes later Greene is en route to Kandahar Airfield. A day later he would become Capt. Greene — promoted while he lay unconscious, though the entitlement had been expected long before the attack — before being airlifted to Germany, where a neurosurgery team awaited.

The Afghan National Army regulars travelling with 1st Platoon round up the remaining villagers of Shingai, but few are to be found. There is little left to do but photograph the body of the attacker, document his belongings, turn over the

corpse to the villagers.

The Charlie section LAV arrives at the *wadi* with a sound Schamuhn would later describe as "deeply comforting, just knowing we had Canadian backup." Charlie sweeps one side of the valley, clearing the way for Schamuhn to order a return to Red Devil Inn.

We're okay

There are moments when journalists need simply to vanish. When Capt. Schamuhn and his men returned to the Red Devil Inn, that moment was now.

Photographer Rick Madonik and I found a quiet corner far out of earshot as the 1st Platoon closed ranks to make sense of the incomprehensible. They huddled at the firepit, a private murmur of voices whose words will never be known.

Eventually, they came to us. And came to realize that, under the circumstances, their wound was in some way our wound as well.

This is dangerous terrain, we knew. The business of newspapering is built upon practiced detachment. But there was no detachment on this night, as Trevor Greene lay prone in the hospital at Kandahar Airfield. He was — he is — simply too likeable a man to now revert back to the neutrality with which we joined the Red Devils.

Schamuhn told the story that night to the *Star*, and later in a conference call to other journalists at the main base in Kandahar, with a frankness and degree of detail that sent shock waves through the Canadian Forces high command. He spoke of the "poison" he saw in the eyes of the teenage attacker in that nanosecond before the axe came down. He named the three Canadian shooters, himself among them. He numbered the bullets at 14.

It has been a long hard slog for Canada's army since the scandals of Somalia, and only now is it coming around to a relationship with the media that one might describe as approaching transparent. Still, the surfeit of embeds in Afghanistan makes high command very, very nervous.

Many hours later, after the stories were filed, Schamuhn, Madonik and I sat together at the firepit, the rest of the platoon bedded down.

The captain was apprehensive of sleep, apprehensive about the images that might play out in his dreams. We all took turns on the *Star*'s Thuraya satellite phone, calling family to break the news before they learned it elsewhere. We're okay. Sort of.

Pt. 7: One soldier's week

One soldier's week

Of all the soldiers who served at Gombad last week, none will remember it quite like Sgt. Rob Dolson.

On Tuesday morning at 3:30 a.m., he was awakened by Capt. Schamuhn with a momentous call via satellite phone. He was now a first-time father, his wife Jennifer having given birth to a baby girl, Sierra Grace. Later that morning when the camp awakened, it was cigars and back-slapping all around. Dolson didn't even get a glimpse of his new baby until the end of the 10-day mission, when he was able to log on to the Internet at Kandahar Airfield.

Four days after the birth of his daughter, on that Saturday afternoon, Dolson was the first to respond when the axe descended into Trevor Greene, firing a burst of bullets into the attacker with reflexive speed ahead of followup fire by Schamuhn and Pvt. Matt McFadden.

A life begins. Another life ends. A third life — that of Greene — remains in limbo, the outcome still in doubt.

Dolson acknowledges he could have sat the whole thing out and remained in Edmonton, had he played his cards differently. So too could the other five men of 1st Platoon who are soon to be fathers. Men like Master Cpl. Martin Cook, whose wife is expected to give birth to their third child sometime this week.

"The army won't wreck families to get people in the field. There's an interview process before you deploy. If there are problems, you can opt out," says Dolson.

"My wife is amazing. She would have loved me to be there (for the birth), I would have loved to be there.

"But she understands I have guys to look after as well. She knows I would have been a bad husband sitting there at home knowing the guys I trained, and trained with, were here without me. If I was in Edmonton hearing about what happened to Lieut. Greene, I would be in agony. I would hate myself."

A Hamilton native, Dolson is also the son of a Canadian veteran of Vietnam. His father was among the estimated 16,000 Canadians who enlisted stateside in the 1960s.

But Dolson said he never grew up envisioning a life in the army, despite his dad's background with the U.S. Marines. He signed up with the Canadian Forces almost by default, opting to try it for a spell rather than plunge directly into university.

He now has nine years under his belt with Alpha Company and couldn't imagine doing anything else.

Over the span of the *Star*'s time with 1st Platoon, it was clear Dolson carries himself with a natural confidence bordering on infectious. On the night after the attack on Greene, for example, he trekked outside the wire of the Red Devil Inn to the unit's Observation Post after the soldiers their radioed that something was amiss. The problem: Things were *too* quiet. The road was uncommonly bereft of traffic.

When Dolson reached the OP, the men settled down, almost as if their walking good-luck charm had arrived to set things right. He spent the night and all was well.

Quiet unlike the soldiers of old, Dolson is an advocate of talking through the trauma of conflict. And like many of 1st Platoon's leaders, he speaks in glowing terms of the pioneering work of retired U.S. Army psychologist Lt.-Col. Dave Grossman, whose Pulitzer-nominated book *On Killing* stands as the first scholarly study of how soldiers react after taking a life.

"This week has had its ups and downs," Dolson says with understatement. "Having a baby girl at the beginning of the week, and then seeing how that one moment of joy can be dashed by chaos, you definitely need to keep grounded out here."

Dolson is among those who admit to some degree of extracurricular research before coming to volatile southern Afghanistan, simply because he didn't believe his Canadian training fully prepared him for what he would find in the field.

"The Canadian military was looking at this more as a Bosnia thing, and you can't really blame them because that's what they have to fall back on in terms of past experience," he says.

"And I was thinking, `Well, I don't think it's going to be like that.' So together with a buddy of mine we started researching everything we could find on counter-insurgency warfare. We really looked at what we are doing. We referenced a lot of American sources, but other countries as well."

Yet Dolson credits his Canadian training with getting him through his most critical moment in the country. When he raised his gun last Saturday to lead the takedown on Greene's attacker, he was acting reflexively on the Gunfighter Program drills he and 1st Platoon underwent in preparation for deployment. The ammunition-intensive program instils the doctrine of rapid-reaction fire without the need for the weapon sights.

"All I can remember is hearing the words ("Allahu Akbar") and seeing this guy coming down two-handed on Trevor. I couldn't believe this was happening. But it was happening," he says.

"I picked up my weapon and moved in, firing several shots. The attacker staggered backward. I heard more rounds. Then I fired three more and that's when he fell on his back.

"Once he was down, I realized the three of us who shot him were all in the same stance, knees bent, weapon up. We just reverted to the Gunfighter Program training without even realizing it."

In the chaotic aftermath, as shots rang out from unknown sources in an apparent follow-up ambush, Dolson also remembers his shock upon seeing that some Afghans within his line of vision were going about their business totally oblivious to the firefight.

"It is hard for Canadians to understand that farmers could continue working their fields while a battle is raging next door," he says.

"But that's Afghanistan. So many guns and so much shooting for so many years — people here are used to it being a part of normal life. You have to see it to believe it."

Dolson, along with almost all of the NCOs of 1st Platoon, expects to be shipped off to a military training facility in Canada in the coming years after his tour of duty ends. The plan is to cycle the fresh front-line experience directly down the ranks of incoming recruits. The new school of Canadian warfare, he says, will be driven by boots still dirty with Afghan dust.

"A lot of us will be teaching. Ideally, I'd like to go into a lessons-learned cell because the truth is that sometimes the Canadian army is a little behind. We can take what everyone here experiences and push it out a lot quicker."

A chance to fight

For Capt. Kevin Schamuhn, one doubt lingers.

Not about the question of whether it was right to kill the Afghan teen. Not about the question of whether he or his men behaved in a manner that did justice to their uniform. On those questions, he is certain everyone came through what he calls "the most adrenalin-pumping experience of my life" with honour.

What troubles him is that killing was the only available option in those fleeting moments after the axe came down. Schamuhn saw the "pure poison hatred" in the young Afghan's eyes. It was a look that sought death, for his victim, for himself. And all the Canadians on the ground could do was oblige.

"When I first played the memory back in my mind, I saw myself reaching for my gun and killing him *before* he reached Trevor. I kept getting that image in my head over and over. I stop him, I save Trevor," says Schamuhn.

"Now I'm forcing myself to see it exactly as it happened. There is no escaping reality. A guy directs a look of pure evil at Trevor, a good friend who is there to help them. And all I could do is shoot him dead. I wish I could have done more to react."

The impulse to do more comes naturally to the soft-spoken Schamuhn, who commands his platoon with a maturity and nuance beyond his 26 years. On one hand, the Regina-born commander is a pastor's son, spiritually committed to the humanitarian mission of changing lives for the better half-a-world away. Another part of him is a warrior's son, dedicated to the belief that there is no greater honour than leading men into battle and getting everyone out alive.

"Dad was a military man. He went to Royal Military College, became an engineer. And then he got the calling, he became a pastor and took over a church in Chilliwack," said Schamuhn.

He followed his father's first instinct, attending Kingston's RMC, majoring in military history and English. It was a year-round experience, attending classes in uniform through the fall and winter, attending officer training through the summer. He completed Phase Four platoon commander studies and graduated a commissioned officer ready for his first command.

`Canada, whether

they want to know it

or not, has a very

strong warrior class.'

His ascension through the ranks came almost too fast for Schamuhn to see active duty in southern Afghanistan.

Already he had led 2nd Platoon in Edmonton, followed by two years with a heavy arms platoon. When the deployment to Kandahar began to take shape, he had already moved up to Battalion Headquarters as an Operations Captain. It was a desk job, albeit a significant one, exposing him to battalion-level planning.

But when 1st Platoon found itself in need of a commander last fall, Schamuhn actively lobbied for the downwardly mobile career move. These men were actually going to fight. And he wanted to lead them.

"There is a tic in every infantry officer," he explains. "It is the whole reason we join. Whether it is because of the movies we've seen or the stories we've heard, we want to find out if we have what it takes, not only to lead other guys but to get them out alive."

Schamuhn understands some Canadians might view such a craving as morbid. He asks that they take a moment to consider the context.

"It is so rare for Canadian soldiers to be put in a situation by our government where we are actually able to use the weapons we've been trained to use," he says.

"As morbid as it may seem to an outsider, we get to be soldiers. And a lot of us are going to go home very satisfied that we got to do it. Imagine an EMT worker training all their life in medicine and never getting the call."

As a student of military history, the young captain also has something to say about the Canadian tendency to take its peace for granted. The sheer lack of fighting on our own soil, he says, has damaged the Canadian perception of what really goes on in the world and fostered a culture of blithe pacifism.

"It is one thing for someone to come back from seeing reality in a place like this and to say, `I'm a pacifist. I don't want Canada to have an army.' I can respect that, even if I don't agree," says Schamuhn.

"But if you're born in Canada and that's all you've ever known, your words mean nothing to me. Because you haven't seen the other side of the world. You haven't seen the necessity of conflict. There are people who are fighting against peace, against stable government.

"And Canada, whether they want to know it or not, has a very strong warrior class. I guess that is what the front-line soldiers really want Canadians to understand. We want Canadians to get on board, to realize we are out here and to allow us to do what we are prepared to do."

Pt. 8: Frustrations

Frustrations

And still the eyes are watching. Out there, somewhere, always watching.

For the first week of our 10 days at the Red Devil Inn, it was an almost daily ritual to pass by the "sitting rock" — a smooth, sun-baked crest of exposed stone just a few metres beyond the razorwire boundaries of the compound. Invariably, at least a few local Afghans would be perched upon it, idly watching the Canadians come, go, or just putter about the yard. A military base never sits still. There is always something to see.

These were among the friendliest faces in the valley, for the most part, and their curiosity about the newly arrived Canadians was often reciprocated by the soldiers. Occasionally, you would see a young Afghan child on the sitting rock clutching a new stuffed toy to their chest, courtesy of the Canadians.

Afghan boys get most of the booty, because the young girls are either too shy, or already too aware of cultural taboos, to accept gifts from foreign men. Or any man, for that matter.

The one lovely exception to that rule came on our very first day at the Red Devil Inn, when a female Canadian soldier from the 2nd Platoon, just before she was rotated back to Kandahar Airfield, decided to play same-sex Good Samaritan, sidestepping the boys and placing colouring books and markers directly into the hands of the delighted girls.

After the attack on Trevor Greene, the sitting rock just wasn't the same. The ANA soldiers encamped with the Canadians were sent out to turn the rock into a checkpoint. Nothing would pass, be it car, truck, donkey cart or wheelbarrow, without thorough scrutiny.

When the first suspicious carload of men arrived at the checkpoint from the direction of Greene's attack, the Canadians were worried the ANA weren't searching thoroughly enough.

"Ask them where they are from," Warrant Mackay shouted down to the ANA guardsmen from the Red Devil Inn's radio tower.

"They say the are from Kandahar," the ANA answered.

"Bullshit," Mackay whispered under his breath.

The Canadian frustrations were evident also in the words of another soldier standing near Mackay, who said in exasperation: "Just get the f—king artillery up here and lob it in the Belly Button."

The Belly Button — a more precise geographic description cannot be published for security reasons — is one of the nodes coalition forces believe may be harbouring insurgents. Sooner or later, the Canadians know, they will have no choice but to probe deep into such areas.

When that day comes, the real flavour of the Canadian counter-insurgency will begin to come clear. We will begin to see how Canadian Forces contend with the immense challenge of fighting shadows, shadows that hide behind a dirt-poor civilian population who must be brought onside if Afghanistan is to stand whole again.

First Platoon's Sgt. Scott Proctor, now on his fifth overseas tour after previous deployments in Croatia, Bosnia, Kosovo and Kabul, is realistic about what lies ahead. In past deployments, when local populations began to indulge in internecine guerrilla warfare, Proctor said it was possible to appeal to people's better judgment.

'Just get the f---cking artillery up here and lob it in the Belly Button'
A CANADIAN SOLDIER
On the frustrations of fighting insurgents. The 'Belly Button' is an area known to harbour them

"We were dealing with fairly educated populations in the past," he said. "You could say to them, `Come on, you actually know better than this.' And they would say, `Well, yeah. We do.'

"That's not the case with Afghanistan, and that's part of what makes this such a big task.

"But it is doable," he said. "And we're trying to go about it the right way with the support for the new Afghan government. We need to get them used to having a government and to get them to see that their police are actually police and not just another extortionist group.

"Right now, the people around here don't have anything Canadians would even consider a lifestyle. They live in a mud hut and have a little patch of dirt on which they grow a meagre existence. Right now they probably just want us to leave, along with Taliban and other opposing military forces. But we can't leave until they leave and the government gets up and running."

Back over the wire

It is the last LAV ride of the trip, a bone-rattling six hours in the crew compartment, scrunched together with the soldiers on opposing benches, knees interlocked. Clouds of dust billow in through the open sentry hatches, where the rear gunners stand, their lower bodies exposed to us, their upper bodies to the rest of the world.

We drive off-road for much of the journey. Along the way we pass the burned-out hulk of an ANA pickup truck that was ravaged in a roadside bombing, killing eight Afghan troops, before 1st Platoon arrived in the region. Now the Red Devil Inn and the eyes that watch it are 2nd Platoon's problem. We're going back to Kandahar Airfield.

Not for long, however. After 10 straight days of MRE rations, the young men of 1st Platoon have been salivating about the pizzas and burgers available at the mother base. But barely are their bellies full before word comes down of new orders to send them back "over the wire."

This time, however, 1st Platoon will not be alone. The new mission, codenamed Operation Peacemaker, or Sola Kowel, in the vernacular of the local Pashtun, involves hundreds of soldiers from two companies of the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry. They will have air support and artillery along for the ride.

It is the single largest Canadian mobilization since the arrival of 2,200 troops in Kandahar last month. And 1st Platoon is part of it, somewhere in the mountains north of Kandahar, as you read this.

Small victories

We came into 1st Platoon wondering whether the Canadian Forces even had a pointy tip. Now we know it does. The acute irony is that now we come out wondering about the other part of the mission, the job of drinking tea and making friends without getting killed.

You may call the Afghan villagers of Gombad and places like it helpless. The lingering paradox now is that they may also be unhelpable - altogether too shredded by successive generations of conflict and decline to accept the hand within reach.

It is a question Capt. Schamuhn has been pondering for months, even before he came to Kandahar. He went to his father, the pastor, for answers.

"I was struggling with the problem that we can't help everybody. We could be here for the rest of our lives and we still won"t be able to solve Afghanistan, it is such a complex and deeply rooted problem," he says.

"But my dad's advice was, 'Don't worry about changing the world. Just change individual people's worlds, one at a time."

"There will always be war, there will always be bad guys," says Schamuhn. "It is the nature of humanity. But just to smile at the kids as we go through these villages, to see their faces light up, you are touching a life on the other side of the planet.

"That's what we have to focus on: the individual victories."