

On Afghan Casualties J.L. Granatstein

Suicide bombers. An axe attack on a Civil-Military Cooperation officer at a shura. Road accidents caused by fear of improvised explosive devices or rocket attacks. It's Kandahar, Afghanistan and the casualties, still only a few, are beginning to mount. Are Canadians ready for this war?

To ask the question, unfortunately, is to answer it. They're not. The military reporter for one of our big city newspapers asked me if Canadians could cope with such casualties. Is this our Vietnam?, he wondered. The Opposition M.P.s, columnists, letter writers, and bloggers all bemoan Canada's turn away from "traditional" peacekeeping, and knowingly blame this for the dead and wounded in what they perceive as just another of George W. Bush's wars.

You would almost believe that Canadians had never fought a war before, that they had not sustained 60,000 dead in the Great War, 42,000 in the Second World War, more than 500 in Korea, and an additional hundred in "traditional" peacekeeping. When a Syrian missile shot down a Canadian Buffalo aircraft on United Nations service in August 1974, there were 9 servicemen killed, but there was scarcely any official or public attention paid to this terrible incident. But now, in Afghanistan, where eleven Canadians have been killed since 2002, Canadians notice.

Why? Why are the media, the politician and the public so fixated on the Afghan mission? There are many reasons, including Canadians' present unhealthy obsession with a mythic concept of "traditional peacekeeping". Of course, it is right and proper to be concerned with our men and women overseas, but a fuller understanding of why the Canadian Forces do what they do might help those at home. What no one discusses is the bargain soldiers strike with their government.

There is an implicit contract in every military, especially in an all-volunteer service such as the Canadian Forces. When he enlists, the soldier accepts an arrangement of unlimited liability. He recognizes that his commitment to military service requires him to go where his government says and to do what it wants. It demands that he obey the orders of his military superiors, even if those orders put him into a situation where he might be killed or wounded. The soldier's job, willingly accepted, is to do his duty to his comrades and to serve his nation's interests.

But this is not a one-sided bargain. The national government implicitly undertakes not to put its sons and daughters into impossible situations. It pledges to equip them adequately, to train them for the challenges they will face, and to sustain them in operations with reinforcements of men and materiel. It also promises to care for them in perpetuity if they are wounded, to assist their family members, and to hallow their memory if they are killed.

It is fair to say that historically servicemen have honoured this contract far more willingly than Canadian governments. There are many shameful errors: to cite only two, Ottawa sent soldiers into Belgium in 1915 with inadequate training and near-useless Ross Rifles, and it deployed a semi-trained brigade to Hong Kong in 1941, knowing that the colony was indefensible. But, although the Canadians in Kandahar lack their own helicopters, National Defence Headquarters has demonstrated a willingness to buy critically needed equipment (German-made G-Wagons and South African-produced anti-

mine vehicles, for example) and the Canadians' light armoured vehicles are top-of-the-line. The troops on the ground are also highly trained and very professional volunteers, possibly the best troops Canada has ever deployed. The government's side of the bargain in Kandahar has been met.

No one wants casualties, neither the troops on the ground nor Canadians back home. But casualties occur in war, even in small-scale counter-insurgency operations such as that being waged against the Taliban and al-Qaeda. The soldiers understand the risks, and they are trained to minimize them. Nonetheless, there will be more killed and wounded.

Our governments know this. The Liberals who accepted the Afghan commitment and the Conservatives who have pledged to honour it understand what is at stake. In their considered judgment, the benefits to be gained by putting Canadian troops into Kandahar, the achievement of Canadian national interests, outweigh the risks. That is a hard calculation, and if the voters in Montreal and Musquedobit decide that the government got it wrong, the political price can be electoral defeat. It's up to ministers and M.P.s to explain that what the troops are doing in Kandahar matters, and if they fail in that task, they will pay the political price. But that is why we elect our leaders to make the tough judgment calls, to defend Canada, and to share the burdens of democracy with other free nations.

Most soldiers likely aren't very sophisticated politically. But they clearly understand the basic equation: they will do Canada's dirty work and accept the blood and pain if their government and people back them up. If only our sophisticated Opposition politicians and media columnists had as much sense....

(Historian J.L. Granatstein writes on behalf of the Council for Canadian Security in the 21st Century. Free of use may be made of this column providing reference is made to the Council and its website www.ccs21.org)