



praise for
A LINE IN THE SAND

“With *A Line in the Sand*, Ray Wiss has given us a moving and personal account of his second tour of duty as a doctor with the Canadian Forces in Afghanistan. Frank and thoughtful, the book brings in sharp focus the day-to-day doings of the interesting array of characters among whom he finds himself. We get a feel for the strange stresses of war . . . the pain and uncertainty, as well as the humour and camaraderie that make the awful reality bearable. The lines in the sand are clearly drawn with humanity and grace. This is a book for anyone who cares about the human face of mankind’s oldest activity. Highly recommended reading!”

BRUCE COCKBURN, OC, singer/songwriter

“Volunteer paramedic with the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, Canadian infantry platoon commander, emergency-department director and combat doctor, Ray Wiss has never compromised in his brave and distinctly Canadian idealism. Now as a battle diarist, Wiss is every bit as uncompromising in his devotion to the unadorned truth about life and death in the merciless heat and amid the bombs and bloodshed of the Afghan front. This is a gripping, heartbreaking and inspiring book. It’s about ordinary Afghans and ordinary Canadian soldiers whose humbling, everyday bravery will take your breath away. The Afghanistan you will encounter in *A Line in the Sand* is not the country you’ve read much about in your newspapers. The Afghanistan in the pages of this book is the one that matters. It’s about the cause that matters, and why so many young Canadians have died fighting for it.”

TERRY GLAVIN, award-winning journalist and author

“A doctor with an infantry background, Captain Ray Wiss gives us a unique insight into the lives and sacrifices of Canadian soldiers ‘outside the wire’ in Afghanistan. Read on and be proud to be Canadian.”

MAJOR-GENERAL (RET’D) LEWIS MACKENZIE, CM, OOnt, MSC and Bar, CD

“Captain Wiss captures the soldiers’ view on the ground and in the thick of it. Just as they did on the muddy battlefields of Europe in the First and Second World Wars, the steep hills of Korea and on numerous peacekeeping missions around the globe, Canadians distinguish themselves today on the dusty roads of Afghanistan. Words like valour, commitment and sacrifice are just as apt today when describing the current generation of Canadian heroes. Thankfully our nation has awakened to this reality, and within these pages you find the stirring stories to keep their memory alive.”

THE HONOURABLE PETER MACKAY, Minister of National Defence

A LINE IN THE SAND

A LINE IN THE SAND

Canadians at War in Kandahar



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*For my daughters, Michelle and Julianne.
Why do soldiers risk their present, if not for their future?*

*And in memory of Nico, Conan, Boomer, Glen,
Michael, Colin, Kristal and, most of all, Andrew. These combat
medics lived and died by the words Mili Succiurimus (We aid
the soldier) and provided the finest battlefield medical care this
planet has ever seen. It is an honour to wear the same badge they did.*

*On ne lâchera jamais.
We will never quit.*

Motto of Bravo Company Combat Team
Second Battalion, Royal 22e Régiment / Royal 22nd Regiment
Les Van Doos
Kandahar, Afghanistan, 2009

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Foreword

THROUGHOUT CENTURIES OF conflict, ethicists have struggled to determine when a war may truly be said to be just. Occasionally, one occurs whose circumstances leave little room for argument. Such is the international intervention in Afghanistan, on behalf of that troubled country's government-sanctioned by the United Nations organization, undertaken by NATO and fully supported by Canada.

We all know the story. Nearly fifteen years ago, the Taliban regime seized power in Kabul and imposed its reign of horror upon a nation already wearied by many years of war. The regime brutalized Afghan society. Men were forced to conform to the arbitrary dictates of often-illiterate religious leaders. Women were deprived of all rights as human beings. Few children received even basic education. And in stadiums where once people played soccer, summary public executions—often for modest offences—became a frequent occurrence. It was a detestable and nihilistic regime dedicated only to destruction—of art, of anything Afghans took pleasure in, of any hint of personal choice that deviated from its own narrow strictures, of human life itself.

Hidden away in the remote mountain fastnesses of Asia, east of Iran and north of Pakistan, the Taliban might nevertheless have stumbled along for years, but for its leadership's fatal alliance with al Qaeda. However, by making common cause with Islamist terrorists determined to take their self-declared jihad to the West, the Taliban transformed itself into a present danger to the international community. It sheltered the al Qaeda organization, even as al Qaeda planned and perpetrated multiple outrages against Western interests abroad over a period of several years.

Then, on September 11, 2001, terrorists used hijacked airliners to destroy New York's World Trade Center and to attack the Pentagon. A total of 2,976 people died that day in the two attacks and in the related crash of Flight 93. Among the casualties were twenty-five Canadians. These actions were conceived and planned in Afghanistan.

The Taliban could no longer be ignored: the justice of the world's prompt and vigorous intervention in the Taliban homeland in response to the 9/11 provocation was, and remains, unassailable.

International law blesses self-defence. The moral tenets of every major religion endorse Common sense demands that when attacked, we remove the threat. And, even had time raised doubts, the lessons of the campaign would have settled them.

What we have now learned through fighting the Taliban revealed how deep was the chasm between our world views. There is a fundamental difference between Canada and our allies, and those we fight. The Western world view cherishes life and, however imperfectly, ascribes value to individuals.

Not so, this enemy.

This has been a widely reported war. However, there are valuable additional insights to be gathered from these writings of Dr. Ray Wiss. A Sudbury doctor who rejoined the army as an officer in early middle age specifically to serve on the front line in Afghanistan, he reveals through his vivid descriptions a layer of detail about the character of the enemy that horrifies, even as it informs.

It is not news, of course, that the Taliban place little value upon human life, although Dr. Wiss

description of their specific atrocities is no less chilling for being carefully understated. It is in the more mundane cruelty, however, that the mist clears on the chasm that separates us. Wiss writes, for instance, of a teenager who dies, despite all that he could do, from injuries inflicted by a Taliban explosive—an event of a type “so common as to be barely worth mentioning.” And of a young boy whose broken leg becomes a lifelong impairment because, to the Taliban, taking him to a hospital would be an act of collaboration with the government.

It is true that there are accidents in war, but these were not accidents. Wiss expresses it with clarity: “[W]hen Afghan civilians are hurt by Coalition weapons, it is because we screwed up. When they are hurt by Taliban weapons, it is a direct and predictable result of intentional Taliban tactics.”

Canadian doctors—like Ray Wiss—treat even the enemy. Canadian soldiers strive to protect Afghans, even at great personal risk. And Canadians, and their allies, provide the conditions under which reconstruction projects—such as the Dahla Dam, which I visited in May 2009—are able to be developed.

Thanks to Ray, we have the chance to understand what Canadian troops experience on Afghanistan’s front lines, and why what they’re doing is worth it. Canadians should be very proud of our men and women in uniform, and of the extraordinary job that they are doing.

Importantly, he also reminds us of something we should never forget: yes, this is a just war.

Above all, it is also a war that we are fighting justly.

It is the Canadian way.

Just as with his previous book, *FOB Doc*, all royalties go to support the Military Families Fund established by General Rick Hillier to assist the families of our service people.

I am delighted to provide this foreword.

THE RIGHT HONOURABLE STEPHEN HARPER, M.P., P.C.

Prime Minister of Canada

Introduction

I WENT TO AFGHANISTAN in 2007 to serve my country. Canadians had been attacked by adherents of an ideology who considered our way of life abhorrent. It was clear that those ideologues intended to continue attacking us. Our choice was, and remains, to fight them now in Afghanistan or later closer to home.

I also went to fight for human ideals that are primordial. Idealism of this kind is often derided in modern society, but it is at the core of who I am.

My decision to go to war nonetheless shocked everyone who knew me. Interrupting a successful career was bizarre; putting myself in harm's way in my late forties, while I had a wife and young daughter at home, was incomprehensible. It was to explain my actions to my friends and family that I began writing a diary.

Readers of that diary felt I had done a good job of explaining what was at stake in this war and why our country should participate in it. By a series of serendipitous events, my diary became a book, *FO Doc*. This was a completely unexpected development, but one that had great potential benefit. To have more Canadians read my words would give these ideas greater exposure. That book, however, was an outgrowth of a conversation I had been having with those I was close to; my own experiences were the focal point.

When the Canadian Forces asked me to return to Afghanistan in 2009, I was determined to write a very different book. This second effort would be a conversation with all Canadians. I would look outwards, this time, and focus on the extraordinary men and women who were with me. I also wanted to write much more about the Afghans: those who were fighting to rid their country of the Taliban curse, those who fought against us, and the ordinary people caught between the warring camps.

This book is also an act of remembrance, and not only for our fallen. I hope that, by reading in detail about the experiences of one deployed group, Canadians will learn what life was like for those who served in Afghanistan. To this end, I asked many veterans to read my various entries. They offered clarifications when I asked for them, and corrections when my all-too-human memory lapsed. I hope that, with their help, I have succeeded in being accurate. I will know I have succeeded when my fellow veterans tell me that I got it right, and that I helped them to explain to their own friends and families what they experienced. That will be the highest accolade.

Lastly, this book seeks to raise the awareness of Canadians about a tiny piece of ground halfway around the world, a piece that most of them have never heard of. Many of our citizens will recognize Kandahar as the Afghan province in which we have been fighting for the past four years. Very few will recognize the names of Shah Wali Khot, Arghandab, and especially Panjwayi and Zhari. Those are the province's districts where virtually all the combat in which Canadians have been involved has taken place, an area roughly the same size as the Greater Toronto Area.

Why did we expend so much blood and treasure in such a small area? Because it is the birthplace of the Taliban, and the area where they have the most support. In 2006, with the Taliban resurging

Canadians took on the toughest assignment there was. We paid a heavy price to do so: on a per capita basis, Canada has suffered more casualties than any other nation in the Coalition. For over three years Canadian soldiers held the line against the worst the Taliban could throw at us. That is something Canadians need to know.

As I write these words, the outcome of the Afghan war is still in doubt. I worry not only about what the outcome will be, but also about how Canadians will perceive our participation in this conflict.

Defeat is an orphan. If the war ends in some kind of fiasco, there is the chance that Canadians will turn their backs on this memory.

But what if we win? Victory has a large extended family, all of whom want to come to the celebration. The British and the Dutch deserve to be there—they did their share of the heavy lifting in the Helmand and Uruzgan provinces respectively. Our other European NATO allies were conspicuous by their absence in the violent southern provinces during the difficult years, but they are sure to come out from their hiding places and demand a place in any victory parade.

In either scenario, there is the possibility that Canada's accomplishments will be downplayed. That would be a grave injustice. Canadian soldiers have fought and continue to fight in Kandahar with as much tenacity as their forebears did at Vimy Ridge and at Juno Beach. It is essential that the names of Panjwayi, Zhari, Arghandab and Shah Wali Khot become as much a part of our nation's collective memory as those storied places.

That is the true goal of this book.

The Diary

May 31 to September 27, 2009

MAY 31 | Departure

Going to war, a second time. How did I feel on this day? A lot different from the first time.

The last time I went, my preparations were rushed and my emotions were completely focused on the task at hand. Like a lot of soldiers, I disconnected from my family before I left. I particularly did not attend to my daughter very much. Michelle was only two then and not very verbal. My civilian job often took me away from home for days at a time, and Michelle's lack of a sense of time seemed to protect her from any feelings of missing me. I thought the same thing would happen during my deployment. I was wrong. In the second week of that first tour my wife, Claude, found Michelle crying silently one night in bed. She asked her if she was crying because she missed her daddy, and Michelle nodded yes. It would not be the last time she cried during that tour.

As happens with a lot of men, my connection to my daughter deepened after she turned three and began to interact in what I considered a meaningful way. I knew Michelle would react even more negatively to my absence this time, so I took a number of steps in hopes of lessening her pain. The most helpful thing was purchasing a high-quality video camera to record myself reading bedtime stories for her. I spent the first minutes of my last day at home recording a few more.

I had been videotaping for about half an hour when Michelle woke up and came looking for me. This is her normal practice, as we both wake up earlier than Claude. Michelle and I will often spend an hour or more together in the mornings.

For a couple of months before my departure, our routine had been the same: I would put Michelle in a backpack and work out on our Stairmaster while we watched a movie. This was the only time that Claude and I would allow Michelle to watch TV, so she looked forward to our morning sessions quite a bit.

For the past several weeks, she always asked for the same movie: *Monsters, Inc.*, an animated film whose central plot revolves around a father-daughter relationship. Michelle quickly learned that DVDs can be controlled, and she would ask for her favourite segments to be played over and over. By far the part she liked best was the ending, a rousing chase scene where the father figure struggles to save his "daughter" from an evil monster. She never seemed to get enough of that.

This scene is followed by a sad one in which the father figure must leave his "daughter" behind. Every time we viewed this scene, I explained to Michelle that her daddy would soon have to go away as well, for "a lot of sleeps." I explained that it was okay to be sad and that Daddy was going to come back. She took this in very thoughtfully.

We had almost finished breakfast when Claude got up. Our conversation was cordial, with only a trace of the strain that had been all too evident before my previous tour of duty in 2007.

I was much more present for Claude in the period leading up to my deployment this time. I spent more time at home, and I tried to keep things as normal as possible. I never wore my uniform around the house, and I even let my hair grow longer. Most importantly, I remained emotionally focused on

Claude as much as possible.

This is not to say that this deployment has been easier on her. What I am asking of Claude goes way beyond anything she imagined she would have to do when she entered into this relationship. Many of my friends have told me that their marriages would not have survived one combat deployment, much less a second.

I had finished packing the night before, so we were able to have a leisurely morning together as a family. But all too soon, it was time to put my bags in the car and head off. I spent one last minute looking around my neighbourhood before we left. Quiet, peaceful, prosperous. It seemed unbelievable that I was leaving this behind.

We first drove to my parents' home. Claude chose not to come in, partly to give my parents and me some time to ourselves, partly because she felt it would be stressful to watch me say goodbye to them. She was right—it was an awkward moment.

My father is one of only two true pacifists I have met in my life, individuals who would be incapable of harming another human being even if they were being attacked. We have discussed the various crimes of the Taliban, and he recognizes that they are horrible abusers of human rights. It does not follow for him that Canadians in general—and his son in particular—have to go to war to stop them.

As for my mother . . . well, she's a mom. Her spontaneous reaction, the first time I told her I was thinking of volunteering to go to Afghanistan, was: "If you do that, I'll shoot you myself!" Although I knew six months ago I would be going back, I did not tell my parents until four weeks ago. This time my mother said: "*C'est une bêtise!*" ("That's really stupid!"). You could say that things are improving.

My mother's initial reaction—motivated by her concern about my safety—was replaced within minutes by unconditional support. During my last tour, she e-mailed me every day and her messages were invariably upbeat and encouraging. I drew strength and comfort from those e-mails, more than my mom will ever know. I have no doubt she will do the same thing this time.*

We had a brief discussion about the mission and my role in it. It ended with my mother telling me that she would always support me, no matter what I did, as long as I always came back. I promised that I would, both of us knowing full well that might be a promise I would be unable to keep.

By the time we got to the airport, there were only a few minutes left before boarding. There is nothing good about being at the airport in this situation, so it is best if it is short and over with quickly. Claude and I shared a few more hugs and I love yous and it was time to go. Michelle was happy as I said goodbye to her and hugged her. She did not even seem perturbed when she called out to me, after I had gone through security, that "Mommy's crying." From where I was standing, I could see that Claude's cheeks were dry. Michelle, sensitive as all children are to a parent's distress, had noticed her mother's shiny eyes. I replied to her that Mommy was crying because Daddy was going away for a lot of sleeps but that Daddy would come back. I repeated "Daddy will come back" at least four times.

After an uneventful flight to Toronto and a quick stop to get a regulation haircut, I called up a taxi company the army uses to ferry soldiers from Toronto to Canadian Forces Base (CFB) Trenton. You have almost certainly heard of this base, as it is also the place our fallen return: the "Highway Heroes" leads from Trenton back to Toronto.

The ride to Trenton is a sombre one. You can't help but think of the Canadian soldiers whose return

to Canada was followed by a trip down this road. You can't help but desperately wish you will not join them.

I got to Trenton in time for dinner. I reported in to the base accommodations (which were—by army standards—superb, like a good roadside motel), called Claude to let her know I had arrived, then went out for one last restaurant meal. I then went for a long walk by myself before turning in for the night. I tried to reflect on what I was doing, but I couldn't focus.

I have given so many presentations since returning from Afghanistan that I am usually clear about why I am going back. But it is difficult to remember those motivations when I think about my wife crying, my daughter saying goodbye and the risks ahead.

I am going to war, again.

JUNE 1-2 | Getting to Kandahar: The Easy Way

My first flight from Canada to Kandahar had been a painful, prolonged and exhausting ordeal. Things were much better this time.

The trip began with a civilized wake-up at the unmilitarily congenial hour of eight o'clock. I threw on a pair of jeans and a T-shirt, revelling in my last chance to wear normal clothing. A short walk to the mess hall (cafeteria) next door was all that was needed to acquire breakfast. I then had to call a taxi to get from the sleeping quarters to the air terminal. And that's where the civilian part ended. Waiting for me in the terminal were several dozen other individuals with short hair and military packs.

The plane we boarded was a gigantic Airbus model, owned and operated by the Canadian Forces (CF). When we boarded—via the forward hatch—we were met with some extraordinary institutional insensitivity. What was in the first-class section for all to see? Generals in comfortable seats. Politicians with their entourage?

Stretchers.

These same planes ferry seriously wounded Canadian soldiers home from the tertiary care hospitals in Germany to which they are evacuated if they cannot be treated at Kandahar Air Field (KAF). We were on the outbound flight, so the stretchers were empty. Yet seeing these stretchers was sobering. I'm sure the administrators who organize these flights only consider the aircraft layout in terms of seating availability. They have probably never been on the aircraft itself, so they have never thought that it would be easier for all concerned if passengers entered only from the rear of the aircraft. This is not because of any discomfort I or other Canadian soldiers feel at the sight of our wounded. Rather, it is out of a desire not to intrude on them when they are so vulnerable.

After a couple of hours, I got up to stretch my legs and ran into an air force nurse named Rhonda Crew. We had worked together for a few weeks at KAF in 2008, and she had impressed me with her competence and collegiality. She was also pretty gutsy: she had volunteered to fly on the medical evacuation helicopters, landing on battlefields to pick up our wounded. She had even been under small-arms fire during several missions. This means that Taliban soldiers were shooting at her with rifles and machine guns from a distance of a few hundred metres. As I said, gutsy.

Rhonda was in charge of the medical evacuation component of these flights. She was on her way

Germany to pick up a couple of our guys. I commented on the layout of the aircraft, and she agreed that it was far from optimal.

We compared notes about our activities since we had last seen each other, and I got updates on friends we have in common. We were soon joined by the nurse and medic who made up the rest of the medevac team. As frequently happens in our small army (including reservists, the CF has fewer than 100,000 people in uniform), we all knew people in common. The medic had served on Roto 2 and had been on the scene when Glen Arnold and David Byers, two soldiers from my part of northern Ontario were killed in 2006. The nurse had served in the 1990 Persian Gulf War with a doctor who had been my roommate at KAF during my first tour.

The stopover in Germany lasted an hour and a bit. We all piled into a special military waiting area graced with the presence of a Subway restaurant, where I got one last dose of North American junk food. Six hours later we landed at a small, isolated civilian airport in the “host nation,” the Middle Eastern country that allows us to maintain a logistics base close to Afghanistan. After a short bus ride we arrived at “Camp Mirage,” our pseudo-secret base in the aforementioned host nation.

Before I racked out, I called home. I had promised to call every day. To make sure that I would be able to do so no matter what happened, I had bought my own global satellite phone. Voice communication with Canada, even from here, can be a little iffy. It was wonderful to be able to simply reach into my backpack and talk to my wife and daughter. Expensive, but worth it.

With things settled back at home (as much as they could be) I was able to focus on what was coming next. “Battlemind” preparation, getting oneself emotionally prepared for exposure to combat is an essential process for any soldier to go through. I had done very little of this before departure, for a number of reasons. As a veteran, there was no need for me to repeat many parts of the training process I had gone through the first time. Although this allowed me to spend more time with my family, it cut me off from my military brethren.

The military flight had not contributed much to my preparation. The host nation is extremely sensitive about having Canadian soldiers on its soil, so the trip is done in civilian clothing. You don't feel very soldierly when you're unarmed and wearing jeans and a T-shirt. And upon landing in the Middle East, the pilot wishes good luck to those who are “going up north.” No one seems to want to say “Afghanistan.”

After I got settled into my room, I went for a walk around the base to try to “get my head in the game.” Halfway around the world, alone and in the dark, having left a much-loved family behind and heading towards possible death or dismemberment, it can be hard to feel the clarity of purpose that was so strong a few months ago. The heart aches for peace and a soft, warm embrace.

JUNE 3 | Afghanistan Again

I woke up at 0900, dragged my gear over to the baggage loading area, then headed over to the weapon shack to draw my rifle, pistol and ammunition. This area is no longer a sea container but a real building; in the daylight I could see that the base had expanded considerably.

As we climbed aboard the Hercules, the transport gods (who had so cursed my last trip to KAF) smiled upon me yet again: the aircraft was only half full. There was ample room to stretch out. I tried hard not to sleep, to get over the jet lag quickly.

When we got to KAF, I went to the orderly room to get the routine in-clearance paperwork done.*

then reported to my company commander, Major Annie Bouchard, a little dynamo whom I had met during my pre-deployment phase.

Major Bouchard began by congratulating me on the impact that ultrasound has had on the ability of her medical company to provide cutting-edge emergency care. In the months before the company's doctors and physician assistants (PAs) deployed, I had given them a basic Emergency Department Echo (EDE)† course and conducted advanced training for three of them. I had also gotten the SonoSite company to donate (Yes, donate! For use in a war zone!) three brand-new systems for the duration of the rotation for use on the FOBS, or forward operating bases. The guys I trained have been making excellent use of this gear, detecting injuries that would have been missed otherwise.

Major Bouchard then briefed me on my mission. It's going to be a busy summer. A lot of enemy activity is expected, which we will do our best to counter. We will also continue to support reconstruction as much as possible. The "operational tempo" (military-talk for how hard we will be working) will be extremely high.

One thing hasn't changed: this is still a civil war, and it is still the Afghans who are enduring most of the suffering. Since the current rotation (Roto 7) began in late March, only one Canadian soldier has been killed: twenty-one-year-old Karine Blais, the second Canadian woman to die in combat in Afghanistan. Casualties among Afghan troops and Afghan civilians have been high.

Major Bouchard then said something that struck me as very odd. It seems that, at the FOBS, I will be treating Afghan casualties almost exclusively. The helicopter evacuation system has become much more efficient in the eighteen months since I was here last, and wounded Canadians are almost invariably picked up from the battlefield by air medevac. Helicopters have also changed the way non-medevac functions are accomplished. Since February of this year Canada has had its own helicopter squadron at KAF for transportation and air assault missions. We no longer depend on our allies to fly around. This should have a positive impact on our casualty rate, since most of our deaths have occurred as a result of roadside bombs striking our vehicles.

The major adroitly anticipated my next question. The Afghan army and police, she said, can call for helicopter evacuation, but to date they have not been fully integrated into the Coalition communication network. If they are not accompanied by a Coalition mentor, communication with the medevac choppers is extremely arduous. It is therefore more efficient for the Afghan forces to load their wounded, and even their dead, into the back of a truck and bolt for the nearest FOB.

I also learned that I will be joining this war very soon: I head for my first FOB at dawn tomorrow. That being the case, I had to draw additional ammunition as well as a desert-pattern flak jacket this evening. The ammunition was no problem, but getting my flak jacket proved to be a challenge because the clothing store where these items are kept is run by civilians and closes at 1800, and it was well past 2100 when I arrived. The clothing store supervisor explained that it was inconceivable—inconceivable!—that he would wake up one of his people to allow me to get the gear I needed. We had to get Captain François Aziz-Beaulieu, one of the senior officers of the medical company, involved. Captain Aziz-Beaulieu, who can bark with the best of them, resolved the problem. It seems that now everybody here accepts that we are at war.*

With all my gear collected, I went back to my room to pack. I started by loading my rifle with ammunition into the (many) additional magazines I had been given. My infantry background shows when I do this. At the top of the magazine I load a few ordinary bullets, to be fired off quickly if a firefight starts unexpectedly. This gives the enemy something to think about, and gives me something proactive to do. That helps to calm you down, even if the shots are only vaguely aimed. By the time

those shots are away I hope to be in good cover, trying to locate the source of the enemy fire. Once figure out precisely where the bad guys are, I want some tracer rounds ready to go to indicate to my comrades where the enemy is. Finally, I leave my mags slightly underfilled, because mags filled to capacity are more prone to jamming.

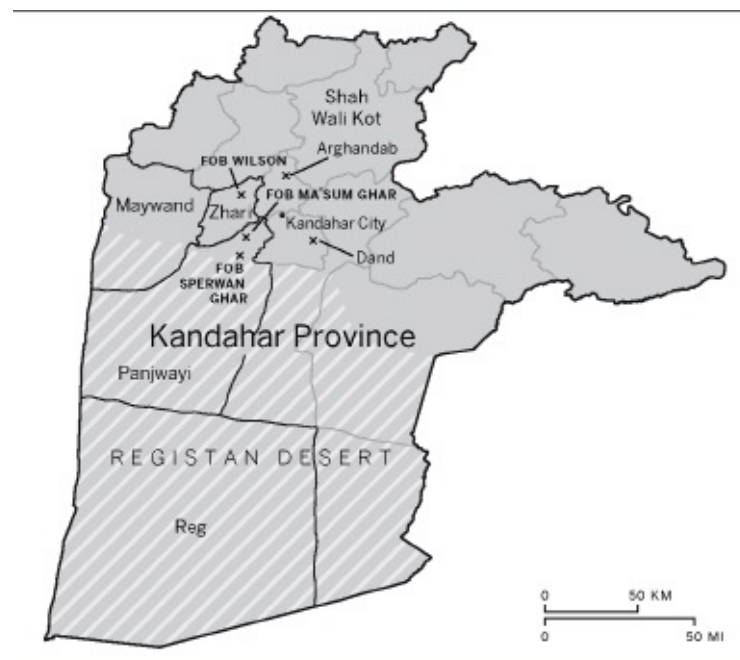
I finished loading my two backpacks with what I would need for the next four months: clothing (which, given the heat, is pretty limited), my laptop, my DVDs and some books. I learned during my previous tour that the boredom of the FOBs needs to be countered with more than movies. After the first month, I was desperate for something to read.

By midnight I was done, and I stepped outside to call home. I couldn't bring myself to tell Claudio that I was headed outside the wire the next day. This meant that I could also avoid talking about the worst part of the next day's activities: I will be going by road rather than helicopter. There is a convoy headed to my first FOB, and it makes more sense to send me now than to wait for a helicopter. The helicopters are so occupied with medevacs and combat operations that routine KAF-to-FOB transfers are unpredictable. It is essential that I get to my first FOB to provide coverage, so I have to go tomorrow. I will be going with the Bison (armoured ambulance) crew from my FOB. They returned from vacation today and are headed out tomorrow.

Going down the roads of Zhari-Panjwayi, the threat of roadside bombs and ambushes are ever present. The place where most Canadian deaths have occurred.

The worst thing you can do.

After Major Bouchard told me that, she sent me to get my picture taken. I went to pack my gear instead. The picture in question is the one they show on the news when you are killed, the one with the Canadian flag off to the left. No way was I letting anyone take that picture.



Afghanistan's Kandahar province, showing three Canadian FOBs



Kandahar street scene: dilapidated building . . . with satellite dish*

JUNE 4 | Back to the FOB

I woke up at 0500 and spent the next half hour finishing my packing. The Bison crew arrived in front of my quarters half an hour later to pick me up. I jumped in the back and took my usual position in the right rear (starboard) “air sentry” hatch, and we drove off to the area where the convoy was being marshalled.

The pre-convoy briefing began with a description of enemy activity in the area we will be traversing. The briefer began with a map indicating the locations where the Taliban had planted bombs or had sprung an ambush in the past week. I couldn’t believe how much activity there had been between Kandahar City and the FOB. Things were not nearly this bad when I was here during Roto 4, “winter tour”. There has always been an increase in the fighting in Afghanistan in the summer, and it was clear that the “fighting season” was upon us.”



The view from Northeast Observation Post, looking south

There are a number of routes you can take to get to Zhari-Panjwayi from KAF. The one we chose took us through Kandahar City. This is a strange experience. You’re driving through a city of a half-

million people that looks like many other communities in the developing world. This should be a cultural experience to be savoured. But here you're riding in an armoured vehicle, part of a convoy bristling with heavy weapons. Every vehicle that crosses your path might contain several hundred kilograms of high explosive accompanied by an individual convinced that he will go to heaven if he blows himself up beside you. Your attention is focused on vehicles that are within fifty metres of your own. The city itself goes by in a blur.

Away from the city, the likelihood of suicide bombers decreases. That leaves the possibility of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) that are either remote controlled or wire controlled or that blow up when you drive or step on them. The correct term for this is VOIED—victim-operated improvised explosive device. I hate that term: it implies that it will be my own fault if I step on one of these things.

In the end, the trip was a quiet but nonetheless unpleasant drive.

At 1100 we arrived at the first FOB I will serve at: FOB Wilson. It lies at the northern edge of Zhari district and at about its east-west midpoint. It is the northernmost of our FOBs. It was named for Trooper Mark Wilson, who was killed in action near here on October 7, 2006.

FOB Wilson is the only FOB I did not serve at during my first tour. Its layout is striking: whereas other FOBs are built on heights of land, Wilson is flat. It is a big square of Hesco Bastions (gigantic sandbags) plopped down in the desert. This explains why it has been hit by only two rockets in the past three years: it is difficult for these devastating but inaccurate weapons to hit a target that is flat on the ground.

This is not to say that the area around FOB Wilson is safe. Enemy activity is high, and one can watch Canadian and Afghan soldiers engage in close-quarters gun battles right outside the FOB's walls. IEDs have even been placed no more than a hundred metres from the main guard post. Be that as it may, life inside the FOB walls is quite safe. Everyone walks around in T-shirts—no helmets, no frag vests, no ballistic glasses. Things are a lot more relaxed than they were at either of the FOBs I served at in 2007-08.

As for creature comforts, things have improved considerably since my first tour. We get two hot meals a day, breakfast and supper, served in a wide-open area with handwashing stations that make it easy to be hygienic. At lunch, the cooks lay out all kinds of salads, cold cuts and warmed-up leftovers from the previous night's meal. The grub is fantastic. No more ration packs!

There are two "shower cans," each with *three* washing machines and dryers! No more washing by hand!



We have the same kind of communications shack I remembered from FOB Ma’Sum Ghar last time with three Internet connections (mostly reliable) and three phones (somewhat reliable).

Right beside the Internet shack we have an amazing gym. It is named “Greener’s Gym” in honour of Sapper* Sean Greenfield, who was killed in action on January 31 of this year. There had been a gym at the first FOB I served at in 2007, but it was a dark, dusty place with only a small amount of gear. I think I went twice before deciding that pumping iron in that place was too depressing.

And get this. There is also a “Rock House,” a wooden structure the size of a large room with a climbing wall on the outside and a music studio on the inside.

In the UMS, the unit medical station, we have a wall of munchies, a large coffee maker (permanently filled), a toaster, a microwave oven and a fridge. And outside we have a large freezer, filled with water bottles that have been frozen—ice in the desert!

Instead of being in a bunker with five guys, I am in a “sea can” that has three curtained-off “rooms” and a central area that serves as an office. My bed has a mattress (no canvas cot!) and my “room” has an air conditioner.

The FOB is home to a combat team centred on a company of infantry, Bravo Company of the Second Battalion of the Royal 22nd Regiment, the “Van Doos”—the same French Canadian outfit I spent most of my tour with last time. They left for an operation this morning, so the base is deserted.

The only downside of living at FOB Wilson is that the M777 155 mm cannons are located less than a hundred metres from my quarters. They often have to fire right over my shack. This isn’t dangerous but the noise and the concussion wave of the shot makes sleeping pretty much impossible.

The cannons can’t fire very close to the FOB—even with a minimum of propellant, the shells go to a great far. For close-in bombardment, the artillery has some 81 mm mortars. These weapons “arc” the bombs, making it possible for them to hit targets that are very close.

“The guns” (as everyone refers to the artillery) were busy today. Before the day was out, they would fire over eighty rounds in support of Bravo Company’s operations in the Panjwayi. This was one of the largest “fire missions” executed by Canadians since arriving in Afghanistan. The combat team had encountered an unusually high number of enemy while they were on foot and away from their vehicles. They had used the artillery to blast a path back to their “leager.”* After eight years of war, it is disappointing that there are still so many Taliban targets to shoot at—another disturbing indication that things are not going as well as we would like.

But as badly as things might be going, I learned two things at the end of the day that convinced me we are doing the right thing here. Two things that got my battlemind to where it needed to be.

First, on the national scale. In 2007, the Taliban burnt or blew up 130 schools in Afghanistan, which was forcing another 300 to close by threatening the teachers. They also murdered at least 105 students and teachers. Convinced of the correctness of this course of action, they have continued in the same vein since then.

If you look at everything written about Afghanistan in the news, you can catch a glimpse of this but it is something else to get a briefing that shows you, on a local map, all the schools that have been destroyed.

Locally, I learned that there is an Afghan medical clinic within sight of the FOB. This is the last functioning clinic in the area. Four others farther away have closed their doors because of Taliban

threats. Apart from this last clinic and our UMS, there are no health care facilities of any kind in Zhar district. This does not seem to matter to our enemies.

Regardless of the challenges, regardless of mistakes we may have made, whatever our chances of success, Canada is in the right place. I am in the right place.

I am here to help defeat the Taliban. Let's get on with it.

Addendum, June 9: Major Bouchard, ever mindful of the morale of the people in her company, called me tonight to see how I was doing. She asked how I was getting along with “the bayonets,” the slightly derogatory term used by the medical services to refer to the combat arms. I answered that I was getting along with them quite well, and I left it at that.

If I had known her better, I would have told her that I felt I was back with my brothers, and that I saw myself more as one of them than as a member of the health services. I am a bayonet.



Battlemind set—good to go

JUNE 5 | The Shop

Another night of lousy sleep, thanks to artillery fire over my head during the night and the first call of Muslim prayers from the Afghan National Army (ANA) compound ten metres away at 0430 (first light). I take over as FOB Wilson medical officer today—time to go to work.

The UMS is across the street from my quarters. There is also a four-stretcher tent close to it that can hold four more minor casualties. All told, the UMS can handle three times more patients than it could in 2007.

As a doctor, my first reflex was to be pleased with the improvements. I have spent a good part of my career in Canada pleading for more resources for emergency medicine, so I was chuffed to see that I would have more of everything with which to do my job than I'd had during my previous tour.



The FOB Wilson UMS

As a soldier, though, I was troubled. Those with access to far more information than I, our leaders and decision makers, believe that we are going to need these resources to care for a larger number of wounded. It seemed the major's briefing two nights ago was bang on.

The UMS itself shows the effects of the lessons learned over three years of warfare in Kandahar province. Again, I was pleased to see that many of the recommendations I made after my last tour have been put into effect. The place functions like a small community emergency department in Canada onto which the resuscitation area of a Level 1 trauma centre has been grafted. The specialized medications and gear that I'd had to request for myself last time are already in place. The military medical staff may not be familiar with all this stuff, but at least it is here. This makes me as functional as possible, and it will give me the chance to do a bit of teaching with the person I am replacing.

The communications have vastly improved. We now have e-mail right in the UMS, a land line to the key places on the camp (command post, district centre, etc.), and a phone that can make a call to Kabul or Canada as easily as a call across town back home. We also have secure communication devices that allow us to monitor what is going on with the units in the field so that we can anticipate their medical requirements. And my desk has drawers! We had none of this on Roto 4.

Wounded Afghans—who so far have represented 100 per cent of the casualties treated here—arrive via the main gate, regardless of whether they are military, police or civilian. This places them close to the UMS. Since they almost invariably arrive by vehicle, the warning call we get from the gate coincides with the arrival of the patients at the UMS door. For some reason, the Afghan soldiers and police rarely use their radios to alert the FOB of the arrival of their wounded.

It is therefore not unusual for a load of casualties to arrive at the doors of the UMS with very little warning. This is not unlike what I have been dealing with in emergency medicine for over a decade now, and it is something I have had a lot of experience with in the developing world. The worst MasCal (mass casualty) incident I ever dealt with occurred during the Nicaraguan Contra War and involved eighty patients, worse than anything Canadians have had to deal with in Afghanistan.

Rather unusually, the FOB had been covered for the past few weeks by a doctor, rather than by a P

She has had additional training to prepare her for the trauma patients who dominate the caseload here but she remains what the army calls a general duty medical officer, an office-based general practitioner.

The arrival of unscheduled patients was something she seemed to have found very surprising. She kept repeating over and over, “Patients will just show up!” as if to warn me of the probability of these anomalous events. I tried to reassure her that I had lived through these events many times before. As an emergency specialist, that is what my career entails: if bad things happen to people unexpectedly, I want to be there to take care of them.

Let me now introduce the crew of the Bison armoured ambulance based here. [*](#)

Master Corporal Nick Beaulieu (centre in the following photograph) is the crew commander. At the age of forty-one, Nick should be much further along in terms of rank. He is not lacking in courage—he still goes out on foot patrols when the combat units are short a medic—but he is one of those guys who is more comfortable with less responsibility and therefore less authority. You get the impression he has almost engineered various disciplinary incidents—some of them quite funny—so that he will not be promoted. [†](#)

The driver (left) is twenty-three-year-old Corporal Pierre Yves (“P.Y.”) Lavoie. P.Y. is on his second tour in Afghanistan, having been a convoy driver during Roto 4. P.Y. went down the roads of Zhari-Panjwayi—what I said yesterday was “the worst thing you can do”—almost every day for several months. He signed up for this tour two months before it was scheduled to go. Although he had never driven a Bison before, he quickly mastered the vehicle. He seems to be a natural around heavy machinery.

The Bison medic is twenty-nine-year-old Private Dominic Vaillancourt-Larose (even he laughs about the length of that surname). Like all our medics, he is extraordinarily competent when it comes to caring for a trauma victim. Dominic is also one of the most eager learners I have ever met in medicine: he is constantly asking me questions. There is also a medic assigned to the UMS proper, but he will not arrive for another week. Currently, that position is filled by Master Corporal Sylvie Guay



The FOB Wilson Bison crew

Only one trauma patient today. An Afghan convoy guard was shot through the top of his foot. Through-and-through, no major damage, but ultrasound confirmed a fracture of one of his metatarsals.

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