

## THE CANADIAN FORCES IN AFGHANISTAN

DND Photo IS2005-0451, November 21, 2005/Kandahar, Afghanistan. Photo by Master Corporal Robert Bottrill.

The chain of events that would bring Canadian soldiers into the desolate and dangerous terrain of Afghanistan began September 11, 2001. On that day, four airliners were hijacked in the skies over the eastern United States; two were deliberately crashed into the World Trade Center towers, in New York City and one into the Pentagon, resulting in terrible destruction and the deaths of nearly 3,000 people. These attacks shocked and galvanized the United States and much of the world. Plans were soon laid for the firm response to this horrific act and Canada would play a role in the ensuing international efforts to battle worldwide terrorism and help bring democracy to Afghanistan.

## AFGHANISTAN

Afghanistan is a rugged country in southwest Asia, located between Pakistan and Iran. This ancient, mountainous land is about the size of Saskatchewan and has a total population of approximately 30 million people. The various ethnic groups and factions that have made the country home over the centuries have given Afghanistan a rich heritage and diversity, but it has also often made maintaining peace and stability a difficult thing to achieve.

The civil war that broke out after the forces of the former Soviet Union withdrew from their occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s would see the Taliban regime gain control of most of the country. This extreme fundamentalist regime severely limited the civil rights of its citizens and supported international terrorist groups, including al-Qaeda, (the group which was behind the attacks in the United States). In the wake of September 11, this was seen as unacceptable by many in the international community and the United States and the world moved to act through the United Nations (UN) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

## THE WORLD RESPONDS

The first Canadian Forces contribution to the international campaign against terrorism in Southwest Asia came at sea. From October 2001 to late 2004, 18 Canadian ships saw duty in the waters off the region, providing support and defence to other ships in the international fleet as well as to locate, identify, and board unknown boats in the area to search them for illegal material, for members of al-Qaeda or the Taliban, or other suspicious activity.

In January 2002, Canadian Forces soldiers went to the region, working out of the city of Kandahar. They joined the Americans and British troops who had gone to Afghanistan a few months earlier to help oust the Taliban regime, to eliminate terrorist operations, and to establish the basis for lasting peace in the troubled country. At times, Canadian soldiers engaged in firefights with Taliban forces in an effort to search out, capture, and destroy enemy strongholds in eastern Afghanistan, performing an important role in the successes of these missions.

With the defeat of the Taliban, attention turned to stabilizing the country and helping the new Afghan government get established. The UN authorized a NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) to take on this challenge. The initial Canadian contribution to ISAF consisted of more than 700 Canadian Forces members stationed in Kabul, the country's capital, and 200 more providing support from other locations in Southwest Asia. In Kabul, the Canadian personnel were responsible for patrolling the western sector of the city, for assisting in the operation of Kabul International Airport, and in the rebuilding of the Afghan National Army. Canadian Lieutenant-General Rick Hillier commanded the ISAF mission in Afghanistan between February and August, 2004.





While Canada's participation in ISAF has drawn to a close, our contribution to the campaign against terror continues, with a "Provincial Reconstruction Team" deployment beginning operations out of Kandahar in August 2005.

The Aurora patrol aircraft and Hercules and Polaris transport planes of the Canadian Air Command were also active in Afghanistan and the waters off southwest Asia fulfilling important roles in surveillance of ship movements, transporting supplies and personnel, and evacuating casualties. Ship-based Sea King helicopters also provided a very important service in helping to identify merchant vessels.

In addition to their military activities, Canadian Forces members helped the people of Afghanistan by engaging in humanitarian efforts such as digging wells, rebuilding schools and distributing relief supplies (such as blankets, food and school materials, both as part of their official mission and also on a volunteer basis.

## FACTS AND FIGURES

Decades of war have had a devastating impact on Afghanistan, leaving it one of the least developed countries in the world. Massive international humanitarian aid has been flowing into the country.

Joint Task Force Two is a Canadian Special Operations Forces unit that takes part in highly-classified operations and has been active in counter-terrorism efforts in Afghanistan.

Over the past several years, more than 8,000 Canadian Forces members have helped Afghanistan in its transition to a democratic government.

## HEROES AND BRAVERY

A Canadian helicopter attempting to land on uneven terrain in Afghanistan made an unexpectedly quick climb, causing one of the crew members to fall out the door and dangle off the edge of the cargo ramp. Lieutenant Kyle Strong and Warrant Officer Zachary Vanthournout would be awarded Medals of Bravery for risking their lives to come to the person's rescue and pull him back in, despite the turbulence buffeting the open door of the helicopter.

During a deployment with the Afghan National Army, members of the Canadian Forces obtained critical information regarding Taliban and al-Qaeda activities to help in the battle against terrorism.

In July 2002, HMCS *Algonquin* co-operated with a Canadian Aurora patrol aircraft and a French warship to apprehend four suspected al-Qaeda members in two separate boardings of vessels.

## SACRIFICE

Time and again, members of the Canadian Forces have shown their resolve throughout the perilous action in Afghanistan and in the waters of the Arabian Sea. Our efforts there have made a difference, but this has not been without great cost.





As a grim legacy of years of conflict in the region, it is estimated that Afghanistan has literally millions of mines spread throughout the country which pose a grave risk. Canadian soldiers Sergeant Robert Short and Corporal Robbie Beerenfenger both lost their lives when a land mine exploded under their vehicle on October 2, 2003. As well, “friendly fire” incidents have taken the lives of four Canadian soldiers. On April 18, 2002, Sergeant Marc Leger, Private Nathan Smith, Corporal Ainsworth Dyer and Private Richard Green were killed and eight others injured when they were bombed by an American warplane during a military exercise in Afghanistan. The threat of suicide attacks and roadside bombs are a constant risk. Corporal Jamie Murphy was killed on January 27, 2004, when a suicide bomber jumped into Murphy’s vehicle.

In addition to these dangers, hostile fire, vehicle accidents, illnesses, and the psychological toll of serving in such a difficult environment are all risks that Canadian Forces members face when in a place like Afghanistan. Private Braun Woodfield was killed and four other Canadian soldiers injured November 24, 2005, when their armoured vehicle rolled over while on patrol. Even when the consequences of these risks are not deadly, they can still take a heavy and life-long toll. Over the past six decades, approximately 125 Canadian Forces members have lost their lives in the course of peace missions and other international operations.

## CANADA REMEMBERS PROGRAM

The Canada Remembers Program of Veterans Affairs Canada encourages all Canadians to learn about the sacrifices and achievements made by Canada’s Veterans during times of war, military conflict and peace, and to become involved in remembrance activities that will help to preserve their legacy for future generations of Canadians. Knowing about our country’s values and history helps us to understand the Canada we live in today and how we can build our future together.

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

- Veterans Affairs Canada:  
[www.vac-acc.gc.ca](http://www.vac-acc.gc.ca)
- Canadian Military History Gateway:  
[www.cmhg.gc.ca](http://www.cmhg.gc.ca)
- International Security Assistance Force:  
[www.afnorth.nato.int/ISAF](http://www.afnorth.nato.int/ISAF)
- Canadian Peacekeeping Veterans Association:  
[www.cpva.ca](http://www.cpva.ca)
- Canadian Association of Veterans in United Nations Peacekeeping: [www.cavunp.org](http://www.cavunp.org)
- The Royal Canadian Legion: [www.legion.ca](http://www.legion.ca)

