

## **WAR CASUALTIES, THE MEDIA AND THE INTERNET**

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### ***Introduction***

The toll of Canadian casualties in Afghanistan has been one of the more hotly debated problems in Canadian politics during the last 6 months. As each new casualty report makes its way through radio, television, newspaper and internet channels, the public and politicians feel free to question Canada's role in the Afghanistan conflict, while the immediate and regimental families deal with the pain of loss. In this first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the immediacy of the reports and the graphic details are critical factors that the public has not had to deal with in prior military actions. This detailed reporting, in all forms of media, and the up-to-date coverage of every event has alternately engaged and distanced the Canadian people and provided distinct platforms for political parties.

### ***Historical Context***

Throughout the ages, the worst aspect of armed conflict has been the toll of casualties. In centuries past, the only way anyone would find out if a soldier died in battle was if his fellow soldier or commander reported the death. Word of mouth was succeeded eventually by the posting of lists on church doors or town gates.

With the advent of newspapers, lists of casualties were reported as soon as such lists became available: from official sources, reporters or wherever information could be

acquired. The Battle of Waterloo, which took place on Sunday, June 18<sup>th</sup> 1815, was reported in detail on page two of the later edition of ***The Times*** of London on Thursday, June 22<sup>nd</sup>, with the heading of “We again stop the Press” reprinting of the full dispatch from Wellington, dated June 18 1815. <sup>1</sup> Wellington wrote “...Our loss was great as Your Lordship will perceive by the enclosed return...2 PS. I have not yet got the list of killed and wounded, but I enclose a list of Officers killed and wounded on the two days”. It was four days from battle to newspaper listing, much too early for all family members to be notified.

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<sup>1</sup> *Dispatch from Field-Marshal the Duke of Wellington. The Times*, 22 June 1815, p.2. (NOTE: This item is printed in an edition dated Thursday morning, 11 o'clock. It appears in the microfilm edition of ***The Times***, which is standard in many research libraries. The digital edition of the paper appears to be a later one and the dispatch does not appear until June 23<sup>rd</sup>).

BRITISH OFFICERS KILLED AND WOUNDED.

KILLED.

Duke of Brunswick Oels.  
Lieutenant-General Sir Thomas Picton.  
Major-General Sir W. Ponsonby.  
Colonel du Plat, K. G. L.  
Colonel Urmetta, ditto.  
Colonel Morrin, 69th Regiment.  
Colonel Sir W. Ellis, 23d.  
Lieutenant-Colonel Macara, 42d Regiment.  
Lieutenant-Colonel Cameron, 92d Regiment.  
Lt.-Col. Sir Alex. Gordon, K. C. B. A. D. C. to the Duke of Wellington.  
Lieutenant-Colonel Caning.  
Lieutenant-Colonel Currie, Lord Hill's Staff.  
Major the Hon. Fred. Howard, 10th Hussars.  
Major George Baib, Royal Artillery.  
Major Norman Ramsay, ditto.  
Major Cairnes, ditto.  
Major Chambers, 30th Regiment.  
Brevet Major Crofton, 5th Division.  
Brevet Major Rosewiol, 9d Light Regiment.  
Captain Bolton, Royal Artillery.  
Captain Crawford, Guards.  
Capt. the Hon.— Curzon, A. D. C. to His R. H. the Prince of Orange.  
Captain Chambers, A. D. C. to Lieut. Gen. Picton.  
Captain Charles Ellis, 95th Regiment.  
Captain Robertson, 73d Regiment.  
Captain Kennedy, 73d Regiment.  
Captain Schauman, 2d Lt. Bat. K. G. L.  
Captain Holycowan, 1st Ditto.  
Captain Henry Marshal, 1st Ditto.  
Captain Goeben, Ditto.  
Captain Gunnin, 10th Hussars.  
Captain Grove, 1st Guards.  
Lieutenant C. Manners, Royal Artillery.  
Lieutenant Lister, 95th Regiment.  
Esquis Lord Hay, Aide-de-Camp to General Maitland.  
Esquis Brown, 1st Guards.

WOUNDED.

General His Royal Highness the Prince of Orange, G. C. B. severely.  
Lieut.-General the Earl of Uxbridge, G. C. B. right leg amputated.

During World War Two, newspapers throughout the world were reporting casualties on a daily basis. The listings quite often postdated the event by days or even weeks, depending on how soon the information was released by the War Offices. This in turn reflected the sensitivity of troop movements or air raids; enemy agents were believed to monitor the units and other details of war casualties. Nearly one hundred and thirty years after Waterloo, the *Calgary Herald*, on the evening of Monday, June 22<sup>nd</sup> 1942, published under the heading "Died In Service", an official Casualty List which had been issued the morning of the 22<sup>nd</sup> by the RCAF. Sgt. George Brockington was listed as Killed in Action Overseas, with an additional 15 individuals listed as Missing.

There were 10 names of RCAF personnel killed in Canada. Brockington had died on June 12<sup>th</sup>: a gap of ten days.<sup>2</sup>

On June 22<sup>nd</sup> 1968, during the Tet Offensive in the Vietnam War, the ***New York Times*** published the Defense Department's daily list of war casualties: 2 Army and 4 Marine. The name, rank and hometown were given for all six, including Specialist 5<sup>th</sup> Class John J. Kedenburg, later awarded the Medal of Honor. His death had occurred nine days earlier on June 13<sup>th</sup>.<sup>3</sup>

The delay between the date of the casualty and the public announcement of the details, including name, was still significant even at a time when reporters were there to cover the war for newspapers, magazines and television.

## ***21<sup>st</sup> Century***

As late as 2000, Michael Ignatieff, in his book ***Virtual War: Kosovo and Beyond***, expressed concern that, for many people, war was becoming a virtual reality, a type of arcade or computer game. Many scholars and students of military history suggested a distinct decrease in the public's tolerance for "real" casualties during the many wars and skirmishes US, NATO, UN and other troops were engaged in.

Media coverage of the events of 9/11 created a different concept of casualties. Those killed by terrorists in event such as the destruction of the World Trade Centre or the London Underground bombings have become themselves a type of war casualty report. Suddenly, the individual face of war has become as real as it was in the local village newspapers of the First World War.

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<sup>2</sup> Died in Service. ***Calgary Herald***, 22 June 1942, p.5.


<sup>3</sup> *War Casualties*. ***New York Times***, 22 June 1968, p.10.

### **Television News Websites**

Today, television and the internet have brought almost instant notification of war fatalities. The public knows immediately that a NATO soldier has been killed in Afghanistan; soon after, we know the nationality. Hopefully, we do not find out the name until family has been notified. This focus on instant, in-depth coverage of war casualties has resulted in what amounts, in two cases, to a real-time Roll of Honour. Both CBC and CNN television have websites which feature a list of casualties of the war in Afghanistan.

In the case of CBC, this site is part of "CBC News Indepth: Afghanistan"

([www.cbc.ca/news/background/afghanistan/casualties/total.html](http://www.cbc.ca/news/background/afghanistan/casualties/total.html)).

|   |  |               |  |
|---|--|---------------|--|
|  | <b>Master Cpl. Jeffrey Scott Walsh</b> | <b>Killed</b> | Shooting accident, Aug. 9, 2006<br><a href="#">CBC Story</a> |
| <b>2 soldiers</b>   | <b>Wounded</b>                         |               | Firefight, July 8, 2006<br><a href="#">CBC story</a>         |

Focusing specifically on Canadian soldiers, the CBC site lists latest to earliest incidents in a table, with the sanitized headings of **Casualties**, **Outcome** and **Date**. Where the **Outcome** is given as Killed, the **Casualties** section lists name and rank and includes a photograph; while **Date** includes a succinct description of the incident. If the **Outcome** is Wounded, the **Casualties** section lists only the number of soldiers involved, with an occasional two or three word explanation, eg., "Roadside bomb". Follow-up links to individual CBC stories are appended to the listing.

Comparing the website on August 18<sup>th</sup> 2006 (2:52pm MDT) to that of August 21<sup>st</sup> 2006 (5:23MDT), it is apparent that CBC was not actively maintaining the site. On both days, the latest casualty was reported to be a soldier Killed in a Suicide bombing August 11, 2006. No update of name or photograph had appeared more than a week after these details were released in the general media and on CBC television itself.

The CNN website (<http://edition.cnn.com/SPECIALS/2004/oef.casualties/>), however, appears to be maintained on an almost hourly basis. The website is termed Enduring Freedom Casualties and, while it does not report wounded, it does report deaths of all participants in the coalition forces – except those of Afghanis themselves. The actual site is difficult to track and a search for "Afghanistan casualties" on the main CNN website results in a second site – <http://icasualties.org/oef/>. However, once the CNN sub site has been reached, it is apparent that considerable care has been paid to keeping it up-to-date. An introductory sentence sums up the number of deaths each of the coalition nations have suffered.

Again the site uses a grid to record information, in this case six sections. The first is a photograph, usually official. **Name** includes rank, **Age** is numeric, **Unit** is a full

and official unit listing, **Hometown** can be anything from county to village, while **Details** are specific as to cause, place and date of death.

On August 4<sup>th</sup> 2006, the CNN website was checked several times. At 8:21AM (MST), the introductory statement indicated that 20 Canadians were among the fatalities, with the most recent individual being Corporal Christopher Reid. However, the information on Reid had been inadvertently copied from the entry below him, that of Captain Alex Eida. Both were listed as members of the 7<sup>th</sup> Parachute Regiment, Royal Horse Artillery and “One of three British soldiers killed... August 1, 2006”. By 11:02AM (MST), Corporal Reid’s information had been updated. While his **Age** was not available, the **Unit** was correctly stated as 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, Princess Patricia’s Canadian Light Infantry, his **Hometown** as Truro, Nova Scotia, Canada and the **Details** correctly stated the date, August 3<sup>rd</sup>, and the fact that his LAV hit a roadside bomb.

By 2:18PM (MST), CNN had further updated its website to list three more Canadian soldiers killed in a grenade attack near Pashmul. Their **Unit**, 1<sup>st</sup> Bn PPCLI, and photographs were included although ages were not stated, only one **Hometown** was given and the actual number of Canadian deaths had not been updated from 20.

|   |                           |    |  |                    |  |
|---|---------------------------|----|--|--------------------|--|
|  | Pvt.<br>Kevin<br>Dallaire | 22 | 1st<br>Princess<br>Canadian<br>Infantry<br>Battalion,<br>Patricia's<br>Light | Calgary,<br>Canada | One of three<br>Canadian soldiers<br>killed in a rocket-<br>propelled grenade<br>attack that<br>occurred near the<br>village of Pashmul,<br>15 miles (25 km)<br>southwest of<br>Kandahar,<br>Afghanistan, on |
|---|---------------------------|----|--|--------------------|--|

|  |  |  |  |  |                |
|--|--|--|--|--|----------------|
|  |  |  |  |  | August 3, 2006 |
|--|--|--|--|--|----------------|

Why do the media feel so compelled to report these details? The reason has passed from simple information to a compulsive need to know. Is it the public who needs or indeed, even wants to know? Or is it another way that the media seeks “in-depth coverage as it happens”, needing to vindicate its own participation in the battles and operations it reports?

### ***Casualties Defined: Killed in Action and Killed in Accidents***

The definition of was casualty has varied over the years. Hugh Smith<sup>4</sup> states “In this context the term usually refers to deaths... such deaths are taken to be the result of hostile action”. More usually, however, the media and official sources seem to agree that, as in all casualty lists, not all deaths are as a result of Killed in Action or Died of Wounds. Even during World War I, Died of Disease was a common notation, particularly for groups such as Canadian natives, exposed to tuberculosis in the trenches. Accidental deaths are frequent: during World War II over 3,000 individuals of various Allied air forces were killed in training accidents within Canada itself. These were all included as war casualties. On CNN’s Operation Enduring Freedom Casualties website, while the majority of the deaths have been as a result of enemy action, many others have come from traffic accidents, accidental discharges, illnesses and the euphemistic “friendly fire”. During the first 4 months of Operation Enduring Freedom

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<sup>4</sup> Smith, Hugh. *What Costs Will Democracies Bear? A Review of Popular Theories of Casualty Aversion*. **Armed Forces & Society** 31:4 (2005) pp.490.



(October 2001-January 2002), CNN recorded 22 casualties, of which 20 were either as a result of accidents or friendly fire. From October 2005 to January 2006 there were 21 casualties, 13 of which were a direct result of enemy action. Regardless of the cause, however, the death of a soldier assigned to Theatre of Operations in Afghanistan, even if on leave in another country, is being counted as a war casualty and will go down in the historical statistics as such. Whether these statistics are official or not has yet to be determined.

### ***Effects of In-Depth Casualty Reports***

On many occasions in the past, most noticeably during the Vietnam War, the “casualty factor” has become a major rallying point for opposition to a military operation. Studies of the effect of this factor have indicated that war deaths and the public’s reaction to these, do make a difference in voting patterns and support for political platforms. (Smith, Gartner). In the Canada of 2006, politicians and the media are arguing whether the casualty factor of the Canadian military presence in Afghanistan can be justified. From the military point of view, according to General Rick Hillier, “we are soldiers. This is our profession. This is what we do”.<sup>5</sup> With each new death, however, the media push the question of public support for Canada’s role in Afghanistan. However, this does not seem to have translated into a public outcry against the mission. In fact, “The latest wave of deaths and injuries among Canada’s

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<sup>5</sup> Hillier, Rick. Speech to the Canadian Bar Association, 15 August 2006, St. John’s NF <http://www.cbc.ca/canada/newfoundland-labrador/story/2006/08/15/hillier-cba.html>

troops battling Taliban militants in southern Afghanistan has not translated into a loss of support at home for the mission, a new Ipsos-Reid poll says.”<sup>6</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Because of media attention, the public knows not just the name but the face and personal details of each Canadian casualty of the Afghanistan conflict. While this has certainly made the war much more “next-door” for the average Canadian, it remains to be seen whether it has any effect on a future electoral decision. At present, the Conservative government continues to pursue the former Liberal government’s commitment to Afghanistan, with the support of the Liberal Party and the Bloc Quebecois. The New Democratic Party, on the other hand, has officially come out in complete opposition to the deployment of Canadian troops.<sup>7</sup> Whether the casualty factor will play a role in the next federal election or not, only time will tell.

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<sup>6</sup> *Backing for Military Role Above 50 Per Cent, National Survey Shows*, by Norma Greenaway. Times-Colonist (Victoria) 9 Sept 2006 p.A5.

<sup>7</sup> *Policy Convention: 9 in 10 Delegates Vote to Recall Forces from Afghanistan*, by Mike De Souza, **Vancouver Province**, 10 September 2006, A23

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