

WAR

## With the boys in Afghanistan

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NOVEMBER 3, 2007

FIFTEEN DAYS

Stories of Bravery, Friendship,

Life and Death from Inside

the New Canadian Army

Print Edition - Section Front



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By Christie Blatchford

Doubleday Canada,

358 pages, \$34.95

In the interests of full disclosure, let me declare that I'm a past commanding officer of Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry (1PPCLI), a unit frequently mentioned in Christie Blatchford's *Fifteen Days*, that I like and admire the author, and that in 1993, when she worked for the Toronto Sun, I was pleased to be selected as her number-one Valentine.

From April to June, 1992, the violent civil war in Bosnia centred on Sarajevo and was the lead story on virtually every international newscast. Living with those of us serving with the United Nations Protection Force (UNPROFOR) headquarters in the city were representatives from every major media outlet in the world - except Canada.

When the Canadian Vandoos Battle Group arrived from Croatia on July 2, to start a 30-day task defending the Sarajevo airport, that glaring oversight was well and truly rectified by the appearance of one Christie Blatchford. Wearing the de rigueur split-knee jeans and T-shirt of the period, Blatchford was easy to spot - particularly by a few bored Bosnian Serb soldiers at her first checkpoint; they decided to detain her for an extended period during her first day in the city. Going where many others feared to tread was to become her passion.

*Fifteen Days* is the culmination to date of a career that has seen Blatchford infiltrate a number of professions in a successful search that reveals to the public what makes them tick, warts and all. The police and the courts have benefited from her analysis and her uncanny ability to put a human face on the stereotypes, destroying gross misconceptions along the way. More recently, she has focused on Canadian soldiers, and the result is this compelling and emotional tribute to their current achievements in the heat and dust of Afghanistan.

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A few prerelease reviews of the book complimented Blatchford's descriptions of individual soldier's stories, but lamented the lack of context and analysis of a complicated and controversial mission. Thank goodness for that "omission"! There has been and continues to be too much commentary, much of it partisan, ill-informed and downright misleading, regarding the mission. This is not a book about geopolitics, it's about soldiers and soldiering in the cauldron of combat, and equally, if not more, about the impact of those experiences on the families and friends left behind.

U.S. Army Lieutenant-Colonel Dave Grossman, author of *On Combat*, is quoted a number of times, including a chapter that opens: "We will never know those countless young men and women who went willingly into the heart of darkness, into the toxic, corrosive, destructive realm of combat ... the least we owe them is to understand the nature of combat and to truly understand what we are asking them to do."

If one wishes to follow the advice of Col. Grossman, and "truly understand what we are asking them to do," reading *Fifteen Days* would be an excellent start. In fact, it would probably be enough in and of itself. Blatchford has the rare ability to make her descriptions of combat, particularly those involving loss of life or serious injury, almost embarrassing to the reader. You feel that you are eavesdropping on very private matters. Her extensive research and her own recollections as she was caught up in the thick of some of the heaviest fighting are compelling, gut-wrenching and, unfortunately, real. Her admission that on one occasion during a firefight her bowels turned to water and got the best of her is ample proof that that she walked the walk. Her description, witnessed up close and under fire, of the evacuation of fatally wounded Corporal Anthony Joseph Boneca, shot in the throat and bleeding on the dirt under her feet, exposes the reader to the gut-wrenching reality of close combat.

During three extensive stays with the Canadians in Afghanistan, Blatchford was able to penetrate the macho façade presented by soldiers in combat, and to see the cohesion and affection born of an obligation to those vets who have gone before them, and of an intense dedication to their fellow soldiers. Contrary to popular myth, soldiers don't risk their lives - and in some cases die - for God, Queen, country or even the regiment. They do so for their fellow soldiers, their buddies, frequently only a few meters away due to the tunnel vision generated by the rush of adrenaline when someone is trying to kill you.

Setting *Fifteen Days* apart from many books on soldiers in combat over the ages is the linkage between encounters with the enemy in southern Afghanistan and the soldier's families, spread across the second-largest country in the world. Blatchford's hundreds of hours of interviews in Canada have produced a rare, intimate look at how individual families coped with an early-morning knock on the door, and the presence of a unit officer and a padre with devastating news, or having a vehicle chase down a father out for a jog with a request that he get in and return home because "the Army is at your house."

As someone who has been to Afghanistan visiting our troops a couple of times, I learned more about the performance of our soldiers from reading Blatchford's book than I did from being on the ground for short stays. After devouring the first few chapters, I was a bit irritated, because the descriptions of events was not in sequence. Once the penny dropped, I realized that each chapter stood on its own as a self-contained tribute to a particular group of soldiers and their families. I've never felt prouder of being Canadian than when I've had the pleasure of commanding, or, in the case of Afghanistan, observing Canadian soldiers performing their duties abroad. *Fifteen Days* reinforced that pride even more.

Bravo Zulu, Christie Blatchford.

*Major-General Lewis MacKenzie (ret'd) was the first commander of UNPROFOR's Sector Sarajevo at the start of the Bosnian civil war.*