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Canadians fear Afghan role not 'peacekeeping'

Critics say mission too much defense, too little diplomacy

By Kim Barker

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BOWMANVILLE, Canada — Near the corner of Temperance and Church Streets, a granite monument honors this town's dead soldiers and lists where they died.

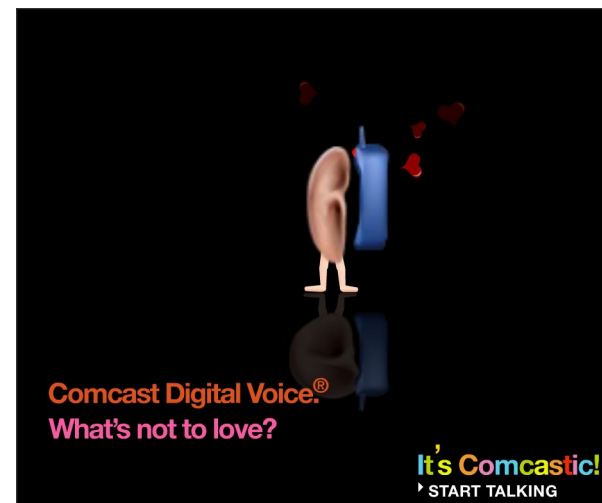
But when Darryl Caswell was killed by a roadside bomb last year in Afghanistan, no one was sure how to add his death, the town's 103rd military fatality but the first one in 43 years. Town leaders had planned to etch the word "peacekeeping" above his name, but to many in Bowmanville, a town of 31,000 east of Toronto, that description of Canada's role fighting with NATO in Afghanistan seemed wrong.

"I don't see where the peacekeeping comes in," said Paul Caswell, Darryl's father.

The war in Afghanistan has changed the way Canadians view war and their military — and in some ways, themselves and the U.S., their mighty neighbor to the south. After Canada declined to participate in the Iraq conflict, a decision to send up to 2,500 troops at a time to the bloodiest part of Afghanistan has transformed Canada from a nation proud of its peacekeeping missions to a nation figuring out how to be at war.

As the battle against Afghan insurgents heats up and the death toll increases — 87 Canadian soldiers have been killed so far, compared to 556 Americans — the debate over Canada's role in Afghanistan has intensified as well. While Canada's casualty toll is less than that of the U.S. or Britain, the rate of death compared to the number of soldiers deployed is much higher.

Some fear that Canada is doing the bidding of the Bush administration in response to the Sept. 11 attacks and that its mission in Afghanistan will



turn into a Vietnam-like quagmire. Others believe that Canada has no choice but to be in Afghanistan, to cement a new role in the world, to prevent the spread of terrorism and to help democracy develop in what has become a spot crucial to global security.

"It's not some classic peacekeeping mission," said Lt. Col. Bob Chamberlain, who recently returned from 13 months in Afghanistan, where he ran the Kandahar provincial reconstruction team. "But we sharpened our teeth in Africa and in the Balkans. We took on a number of increasingly difficult missions. I think it's recognized that Canada is pulling its share in Afghanistan and then some."

Canada as peacekeeper

In 2006, as NATO spread outside the capital, Kabul, and gradually took over leadership of the Afghan mission from the U.S., Canadian forces moved into the volatile southern province of Kandahar, a stronghold of Taliban-led militants.

In going to Kandahar, Canada made a statement — that its troops would not just stay in their barracks or focus on simply building roads and schools. Instead, Canada would take on the Taliban in the militants' heartland. Other countries, such as Germany and Spain, chose safer areas.

Some politicians have argued for Canada to remove its troops, stretched by the six- and seven-month deployments. In 2006 and 2007, it seemed unlikely that Parliament would agree to stay much longer in Kandahar. Now, after a political truce between liberals and the conservative-led government, troops are scheduled to be there until 2011.

Opposition politicians say the Canadian mission does not have the proper mix of diplomacy, development and defense. "This mission is very, very, very unbalanced," said Claude Bachand, a lawmaker from the Bloc Quebecois who has visited Afghanistan. "Most of it is all defense. What we don't like, I would say quite frankly, is the American approach."

After Canada's heavy losses in two world wars and moderate losses in Korea, a Canadian politician named Lester Bowles Pearson won a Nobel Prize for his efforts at peacekeeping. Ever since, Canada has largely defined its role in the international community as the leading peacekeeper. The country said no to sending troops to Vietnam and gave refuge to as many as 100,000 Americans then avoiding the draft.

Many in Canada view President George W. Bush and some aspects of the U.S.-led war on terror uncomfortably.

"The mood is, really, we should be in Darfur," said Jack Granatstein, a senior research fellow at the Canadian Defense and Foreign Affairs Institute. "Because that's real peacekeeping, and the Americans aren't there, and it would be good for us. There is a yearning to do peacekeeping, a yearning not to fight wars, a yearning not to be in George Bush's pocket."

Small town in wartime

Bowmanville looks like any small wartime town in America. Signs on streetlights urge people to support their troops, and yellow ribbons are tied to posts and trees. A street in the new Liberty Crossing subdivision has been named Darryl Caswell Way.

On Fridays, people wear red like the Canadian flag to remember the troops. And the main highway to Toronto from the nearby military base in Trenton — along which the bodies of soldiers are taken to the coroner's office — has been renamed. It's now called Highway of Heroes.

Christine Caswell, Darryl Caswell's stepmother, has made it her mission to support the troops. Whenever a soldier's body is driven down the highway to Toronto, she and her husband drive to a nearby bridge to wave a banner.

But she has not been to church for a while. Sometimes she wonders why God did not tell her stepson to move to the right or the left to dodge the bomb, she said.

Logan Caswell, whose 12th birthday was on June 11, 2007, the same day his older brother was killed, switched his birthday celebration this year to March. Only recently has he been able to talk about his brother.

Paul Caswell also is barely able to talk about his son. He tends to discuss the war in terms of what "some people" say — some people say it's like Vietnam, some people say it's impossible to win.

"It's a tough call," he said. "Some parts of me say should we be there in the first place? Or would we be there if it wasn't for oil and 9-11?" But mostly, he said, he has to believe that the war is worth it, that his son died for a reason.

In November, Darryl Caswell's belongings arrived home, including his diary.

The 25-year-old soldier, who got to Afghanistan in late January 2007, writes about his frustrations and his appreciation for Afghanistan. He describes how one of his best friends was killed and how he watched his body being loaded into a helicopter. He writes that he does not know how he will deal with people back home "who waste their time and walk circles in the dark, not knowing how well off they are just being born a Canadian."

He writes that he would come to Afghanistan again, but only for the children.

"These people have been kicked ... so many times by countries, it's no wonder they have trust issues," he wrote. "If Canada pulls out, all will be lost once more."

In May, his name was added to the top of the granite pillar. His entry reads simply "Afghanistan," a few inches above his name.

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