

THE AFGHAN MISSION: COMBAT DEATH

Canadian soldier killed by enemy fire 'wanted to help others'

UNNATI GANDHI

WITH A REPORT FROM DAWN WALTON IN CALGARY

MAY 7, 2008

A Canadian soldier on foot patrol in Kandahar's troubled western district was killed yesterday after Taliban insurgents opened fire on the troops, marking the first combat death for the Canadian Forces in nearly eight months. A second soldier was injured during the attack.

Corporal Michael Starker, with the Edmonton-based 15 Field Ambulance Regiment, was ambushed while soldiers were trying "to show their presence [and] interact with the local population" in the Pashmul region, a cluster of villages about 15 kilometres southwest of Kandahar city, Brigadier-General Guy Laroche said in Afghanistan yesterday.

Shots were fired from the road about 11:45 a.m., and there weren't any crowds nearby, he said.

The troops were airlifted to Kandahar Air Field, where the injured soldier, whose name was not released yesterday, was able to call his family and tell them of his injuries himself.

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Cpl. Starker, 36, a paramedic and reservist from Calgary, was pronounced dead at hospital.

"We lost a fine soldier today and our thoughts are with his family and friends," Brig.-Gen. Laroche said. "He died helping Afghans build a better future for themselves and their children. His dedication and sacrifice will not be forgotten."

Prime Minister Stephen Harper issued a statement yesterday offering condolences to Cpl. Starker's family and friends.

"Corporal Starker made the ultimate sacrifice and his efforts will remain a source of pride for all Canadians," Mr. Harper said.

The rare, up-close confrontation happened as NATO forces throughout the region brace for the anticipated surge in violence that usually

comes with the end of the poppy harvest.

Only two of the 27 Canadian casualties in Afghanistan since June of 2007 have been actual combat deaths. The vast majority have been the result of improvised explosive devices, or roadside bombs.

In fact, it has been nearly 20 months since a Canadian soldier was shot and killed in an ambush by insurgents, according to Department of National Defence records.

"If we have to readjust the way we are doing things, yes we will do that," Brig.-Gen. Laroche said. "But the intent is not to reduce our patrols, the intent is to increase our presence in the region. We have seen a lot of progress since we [have been] there. ... We have seen a lot of people coming back to the region."

Back in his hometown of Calgary, Cpl. Starker was remembered as a man who dedicated his life to saving others.

"He was one of those people who wanted to help others," Calgary Emergency Medical Services Chief Tom Sampson said of Cpl. Starker, who had been a paramedic with the city since June of 2005. "... I think he went to help there and it's such a shame that he should die while trying to help like that."

He became involved with the military a decade ago, and was deployed to Afghanistan in December.

His family asked for privacy as they mourned, but friends described him as a strong, caring individual with a "heart of gold" as well as the "best partner they ever worked with."