

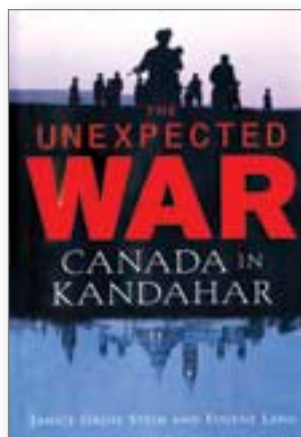
FIFTEEN DAYS:

**STORIES OF BRAVERY, FRIENDSHIP,
LIFE AND DEATH FROM INSIDE THE
NEW CANADIAN ARMY**

BY CHRISTIE BLATCHFORD

DOUBLEDAY CANADA, 2007
385 PAGES, HARDCOVER
ISBN 9780385664660

Review by Major Paul Johnston



THE UNEX- PECTED WAR:

CANADA IN KANDAHAR

**BY JANICE GROSS STEIN
AND EUGENE LANG**

VIKING, 2007
348 PAGES, HARDCOVER
ISBN 9780670067220

Why is Canada in Afghanistan? For such an important, and controversial, question it is perhaps surprising that it has taken so long for Canadian publishers to produce books touching on that issue. Or maybe it is not so surprising. Regardless, 2007 saw something of a flurry of books on the subject. Two that tackle the issue from opposite directions are *Fifteen Days: Stories of Bravery, Friendship, Life and Death from Inside the New Canadian Army* by Christie Blatchford and *The Unexpected War: Canada in Kandahar* by Janice Gross Stein and Eugene Lang.

They are opposite in many ways: *Fifteen Days* is a study of the human face of the Ca-

nadian soldiers undertaking the mission; *The Unexpected War* is a piece of policy analysis. *Fifteen Days* tackles it from the bottom-up, *The Unexpected War* from the top-down. One is gripping and at times frankly emotional; the other is abstract and rather dry. Both books have attracted their share of criticisms as well as plaudits. While you might not agree with everything they have to say, both should be read by those interested in following the issue of Canada's commitment to Afghanistan.

Christie Blatchford is a long-time reporter, currently for the *Globe and Mail*, who is most well known for her crime coverage, in which she tends to focus on the human interest angle—the victims, their families, the impact

on communities, and of course the perpetrators themselves. Not surprisingly, this is the approach she brings to *Fifteen Days*, the result of her time in 2006 as an embedded reporter with the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry battle group in southern Afghanistan.

Fifteen Days is very much a “face of battle” type study. It is also, as the author herself admits in the Author’s Note, a highly personal and somewhat selective view; the fifteen days of the title are fifteen days of her time in Afghanistan that stood out in her memory as the most significant. They were indeed significant days—days in which fatal casualties were incurred, and also as the author presumably intended, days that are emblematic of the general nature of our operations there. The lens through which they are reported is highly personal, and the selection is somewhat idiosyncratic—they are not even presented in chronological order. Blatchford recounts in her author’s note that she struggled with the writing of this book, eventually just pouring it out as it came to her.

It must be said, the result is a gripping page turner. The human face of the conflict is brought into vivid relief. It should also be mentioned that the focus is not solely on the young soldiers in the field; almost equal attention is paid to the impact on the families and communities back home, who Blatchford clearly spent a great deal of time interviewing. One particularly poignant section describes how the father of one young soldier received notification of his son’s death. Errol Cushley was out hiking on a side road near his home of Port Lamberton Ontario when one of his neighbours pulled up behind him and rolled down the window of his vehicle to say

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A few points do bear mentioning. As outlined above, there is no attempt at history or context, much less analysis. A bit more curiously, there is virtually no mention of the Afghans themselves. Surely an examination of the human impact on them would be illuminating. Finally, while this is not a criticism, readers of a journal such as this should be advised that the book is, as it says on the cover blurb, “stories of bravery, friendship, life and death from inside the new Canadian Army.”

It is indeed very much an account of the Land Forces’ contribution to the mission, with nary a mention of the Air Force. Finally, there are those who will believe that Blatchford is an example of what is wrong with embedded journalism, that she illustrates how “embeds” can lose their objectivity and become simple cheerleaders for the soldiers they live amongst. “The Blatch”, as she is known, might not dispute a claim that

she is a cheerleader for the troops; she might even revel in the assertion. Most recently, she has been making a speaking tour of the country to promote her book and tell the stories of our soldiers’ doings. In a recent newspaper column she describe how she “almost wept with relief” at the robust recommendations of the Manley report.²

The Unexpected War is very different. Individuals feature prominently in it too, but not the soldiers at the sharp end—it focuses on the politicians and officials in Ottawa. It is primarily an examination of the political decision making process that led to the commitment of a major Canadian force to the south of Afghanistan. As the authors note, sending troops to war is the “most difficult decision any government makes.”³

Or at least, it should be, for the main theme of the book is that the government essentially sleepwalked into a significant combat mission in Kandahar. The authors Janice Gross Stein and Eugene Lang argue that the decision to undertake this major commitment was essentially a result of two factors: a desire to curry favour with the Americans, and the driving personality of the new Chief of the Defence Staff, General Rick Hillier.

That analysis is not unreasonable, and the core chapters that present it are the strongest portions of the book. It is based primarily upon interviews with an impressive array of insiders, including Prime Minister Paul Martin, Defence Ministers John McCallum, Bill Graham, and Gordon O'Connor, Generals Ray Henault and Rick Hillier, and various other luminaries, including John Manley, and Colonel Bernd Horn (former Director Canadian Forces Leadership Institute), not to mention the US Ambassador to Canada of the time, Paul Cellucci.

The authors make some interesting assertions. One is that in 2005, Prime Minister Martin wanted to focus foreign military commitments not on Afghanistan—a mission he had inherited from the Chrétien government—but on Darfur primarily, Haiti secondarily and the Middle East (specifically the Arab-Israeli conflict) thirdly.⁴ “Afghanistan was a distant fourth at best.”⁵ Gross Stein and Lang assert that General Hillier, in a 21 March meeting and just a little over a month into his tenure as CDS, personally pitched to the Prime Minister the merits of a major commitment to Kandahar. It was only after Prime Minister Martin demanded, and received, personal assurances from General Hillier that a Kandahar mission would not preclude a major commitment to Darfur, Haiti or the Middle East, that Martin agreed.⁶

The authors' access to key personnel gives the book an aura of insider knowledge that can be fascinating. One of the little tidbits is the assertion (buried deep in the endnotes) that “Had John McCallum been minister of defence at this time [Jan-Feb 2005, when the new CDS was being selected], [then Major General Andrew] Leslie would have become CDS.”⁷ One of the

reasons for this access is one of the problems with this book—Janice Gross Stein is a respected academic at the University of Toronto, Director of the Munk Centre for International Studies no less. But Eugene Lang is a Liberal party insider—in fact, he was the chief of staff for Ministers of National Defence John McCallum and Bill Graham,⁸ a partisan position that the book is coy about admitting. While it is a defensible choice of writing style, never once does the text use the first person, even when describing meetings at which Lang was present. An interesting observation is that in the endnotes Lang continues to refer to himself in the third person. Not even the author's blurb on the back of the jacket can bring itself to admit that Lang was a partisan participant in the events the book describes. It does, however, slide in a vague reference to his work for “two ministers of national defence” who go unnamed. There is nothing wrong with someone like Lang making his argument for his interpretation of events, but that does not mean that the world has to accept it as the consensus conclusions of independent academics. Worse, this Liberal bias is clearly evident throughout the work, sometimes comically so. One raises an eyebrow at lines like “Prime Minister Martin's inquiring mind endeared him to officials and advisers—finally, here was a senior politician who didn't think he knew everything and really wanted advice.”⁹

The book also meanders a bit. Considerable attention is devoted to ballistic missile defence (BMD). This topic is pertinent in that the book argues that it was to placate perceived American pique over Canadian refusal to join BMD that largely motivated the decision to deploy to Kandahar. But did we need two whole chapters worth of material on the arcane intricacies of the subject? Similarly, we get a chapter that is little more than a potted overview of the theory and history of insurgencies. Finally, there is a chapter on the “vexatious detainees” which is interesting (and once again current), and another chapter on the “3D” or “whole-of-government” concept, and how this is failing to live up to the larger claims made for it. This material is all interesting, but not entirely relevant to the book's core study of the original decision making in Ottawa.

Nevertheless, for its exhumation of the political decision making process, it remains “an important piece of political archaeology,” as another former government insider put it in his review of the book.¹⁰ It also closes with a chapter on “Canada in Kandahar: Making Choices” which is cogent, clear-sighted and forceful. As the authors note: “That Canada slid into this war does not make the war either unjust or wrong.”¹¹ The authors believe that “Canada has at least three broad options” in Afghanistan: “extend its commitment in Kandahar and continue its combat.”¹² Alternatively, they argue that in 2009 Canada “could legitimately claim that it had done its share” and withdraw (presumably to be replaced by other troop contributors, but who, if anyone, would do that would be a separate issue).¹³ And finally, they believe that Canada could “withdraw its combat forces completely ... [and shift to] development assistance.” The Canadian commitment to Afghanistan “would not end, but change.”¹⁴ Clear-sightedly, the authors note that “no matter what Canada chooses to do, there is no guarantee of eventual success.”¹⁵

Gross Stein and Lang do not appear to be cut-and-run advocates themselves. While realistic about the difficulties and prospects for success, the book ends with an account of a plea from some of the Afghans themselves. An Afghani man, meeting then Deputy Prime Minister John Manley in May 2007, is described passionately declaring that “If the international forces leave, the central government will collapse, millions of people will be displaced.”¹⁶

In conclusion, both books are very different, not only in style and tone, but also approach. Both, however, have attracted a fair amount of attention and both can be recommended, for different reasons, to those seeking to learn more about Canada’s involvement in Afghanistan. ■

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- 1 Christie Blatchford, *Fifteen Days: Stories of Bravery, Friendship, Life and Death from inside the New Canadian Army* (Toronto: Doubleday Canada, 2007), 241.
 - 2 Christie Blatchford “Government must now Embrace the full, bloody truth of Afghanistan” *The Globe and Mail*, 23 January 2008.
 - 3 Janice Gross Stein and Eugene Lang, *The Unexpected War: Canada in Kandahar* (Toronto: Viking, 2007), 289.
 - 4 *Ibid.*, 189-190.
 - 5 *Ibid.*, 191.
 - 6 *Ibid.*, 192.
 - 7 *Ibid.*, 313.
 - 8 A political appointment in the Minister’s own office, not a civilian member of the Public Service or Department of National Defence.
 - 9 Janice Gross Stein and Eugene Lang, *The Unexpected War: Canada in Kandahar* (Toronto: Viking, 2007) pp 110-111.
 - 10 Robert Fowler, “Alice in Afghanistan” *Literary Review of Canada* Volume 16, Number 1, January/February 2008, pp 3-5.
 - 11 Janice Gross Stein and Eugene Lang, *The Unexpected War: Canada in Kandahar* (Toronto: Viking, 2007) p 290.
 - 12 *Ibid.*, 296.
 - 13 *Ibid.*, 298.
 - 14 *Ibid.*, 299.
 - 15 *Ibid.*, 299.
 - 16 *Ibid.*, 304.

