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Afghanistan: A Glimpse of War Contemporary History at the Canadian War Museum

Andrew Burtch

How do you exhibit the history of an ongoing conflict, with an unknown outcome and with most documents restricted on the basis of operational security? What story can you tell? *Afghanistan: A Glimpse of War*, a special exhibition developed by and currently on view at the Canadian War Museum (CWM), addresses these questions by using first-hand accounts from eyewitness records, media reports, interviews, open source material, and the visitors themselves. The exhibition presents the origins of the war in Afghanistan, and Canadian participation from the first deployments in 2002 to current operations in Kandahar province. The personal stories in the exhibition examine how individual Canadian soldiers and Afghans experienced conflict and reconstruction in Afghanistan, and were made available to the CWM primarily through the work of two Canadian journalists, Stephen Thorne and Garth Pritchard.

The work performed at the CWM in research, exhibitions, and collections is directed at informing our visitors about their military history in all its personal, national, and international dimensions. Our exhibitions provide context for specific conflicts based on historical research, present insight into the personal stories of those who served in or experienced Canadian conflicts through artifacts, photographs, film, and other media, and indicate some of the consequences for Canada's history. Visitors should walk away from our exhibits with an understanding of how conflict has shaped their history from 5,000 years ago to the present. The museum's temporary exhibitions allow the CWM flexibility to expand



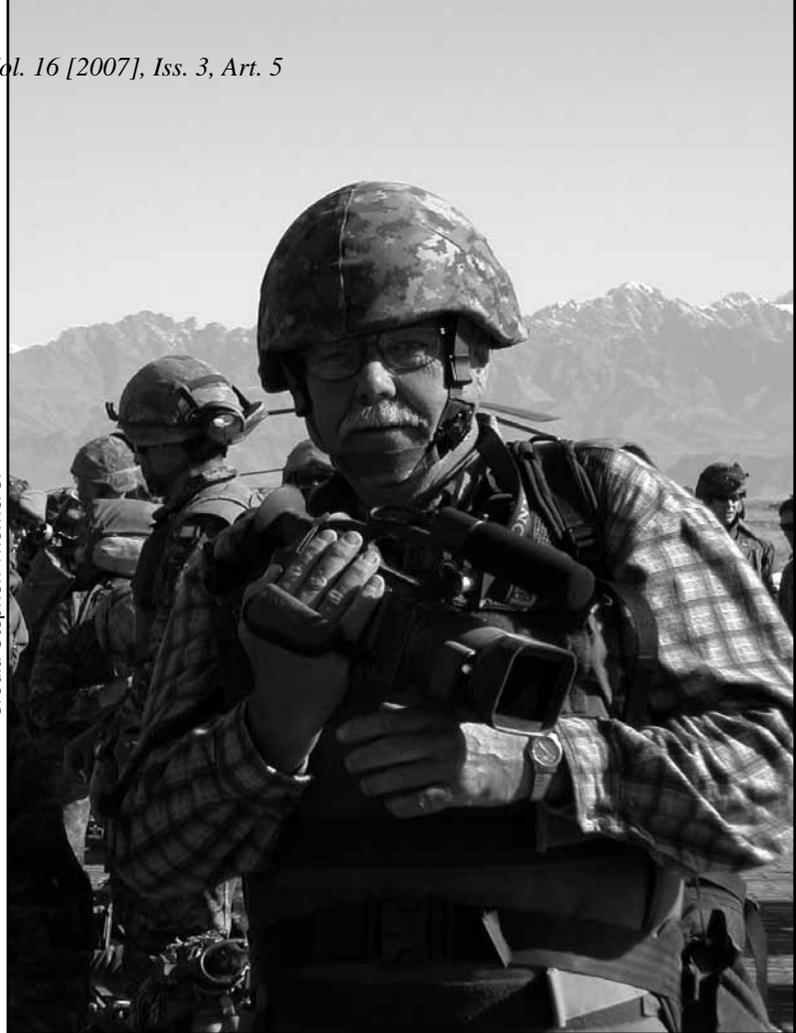
on historical themes and issues in its permanent galleries, to present new, compelling stories from Canadian military history, and to develop or import exhibitions dealing with global themes and special topics of interest to a wide audience.

It is important for the CWM, as the national museum for Canadian military history, to tell Canadians about the most recent and significant chapter of their military past. Five years on, the Afghanistan conflict is already longer than Canadian involvement in the First World War and Korea. Over 10,000 Canadian soldiers, sailors and fliers have served in Afghanistan or in support of the mission. At the time of writing, 67 Canadians have been killed there, and over 200 wounded. Presenting an exhibition on the subject allowed the CWM to explore the human experience of an ongoing war, both Canadian and Afghan. There were, however, challenges to overcome in preparing this exhibition. Foremost among these was defining the scope and reach of the exhibition to ensure that all the stories presented were based on verifiable historical research.

A comprehensive history of Canada's involvement in Afghanistan does not yet exist in the historiography. Although many historical details of Canada's involvement will be uncovered as time passes, most of the official records and documentation pertaining to operations, foreign policy, intelligence, and tactics, will remain strictly secret long after Canada's contribution to the Afghanistan mission has ended. Even when Canadian records are unlocked, research will



Credit: Stephen Thorne/CP



Credit: Stephen Thorne/CP

Above left: Canadian Press correspondent Stephen Thorne on the “Whale’s Back” ridgeline, March 2002.

Above right: Documentary filmmaker Garth Pritchard at Bagram Air Base, March 2002.

be restricted by the international composition of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), its information policies, and those of its member countries. Writing a history of Canadians under American command, for instance, will be difficult if American primary sources remain restricted.¹

Researching the conflict is further hindered by a void in the secondary literature. Few scholarly works exist on current operations, and those that do either focus on the rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan, international terrorism, or the fighting in Afghanistan in 2001-2002.² The absence of both secondary and primary sources precluded the possibility of writing or indeed exhibiting a comprehensive survey of the conflict. Given the limitations of the current historical record, and that the CWM already, in its permanent galleries, uses personal stories extensively to highlight the experience of conflict, the exhibition team determined at an early date that the scope of the Afghanistan exhibition should be limited to providing “glimpses” of

the war. The exhibition would not be a detailed interpretation of the conflict or a chronology of Canadian involvement (few exhibitions are) but would instead highlight personal experiences of war, in this case principally those of Stephen Thorne, Garth Pritchard, and the Canadian soldiers and Afghans they observed.

The exhibition is organized in a rough chronological order, with five sections representing different historical periods, extending from the 9/11 terrorist attacks to the present. Before visitors enter, they are informed about the scope of the exhibition in a prominent introductory text. The exhibition begins with the terrorist attacks on New York City on 11 September 2001, and the Canadian response at the personal, national and international levels. The atmosphere of the period immediately following the attacks is illustrated through reproductions of newspapers, and first-person quotations from Canadian and American decision-makers found in media sources, but also from ordinary Canadians. One of these is Cheryl Boyle of Charlottetown, Prince Edward

Island, who organized a group of volunteers to bake apple pies for rescue workers in New York City. The pie boxes were decorated by local school children, and three of these were chosen for display.³ The material in this section reveals different aspects of the Canadian response to terrorism, from the shock of the attacks, to the decision made by the Canadian government to participate in an international military intervention in Afghanistan. The 9/11 section sets the tone for the rest of the exhibition by reminding visitors that the period is part of their history. It is their story too. Visitors are therefore encouraged to share their personal history by posting their comments in response to questions mounted at feedback stations in the introductory section and throughout the exhibition.⁴

The next three sections of the exhibition explore successive Canadian deployments in Afghanistan. The material used to tell the history changes with the tone. Visitors leave behind familiar Canadian newspaper headlines, editorial cartoons, and political decision-making and join Canadian soldiers in the field. These sections feature the core content of the exhibition, the photography and film of veteran Canadian journalists Stephen Thorne and Garth Pritchard, and focus exclusively on their “glimpse” of war and those of the soldiers and Afghans they observed.

Stephen Thorne has worked for The Canadian Press for the past 23 years as a reporter, photographer, and editor, and was posted to Afghanistan three times between 2002 and 2004. His feature stories about Canadians in combat and Afghans rebuilding their country were published in national and local newspapers across Canada. Garth Pritchard is an award-winning documentary filmmaker who has filmed Canadian soldiers in Bosnia, Somalia, Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Sri Lanka. He travelled to Afghanistan five times between 2002 and 2005, from the first deployment of Canadian soldiers to the activities of the Provincial Reconstruction Team in Kandahar. Stephen Thorne provided the CWM with thousands of photographs, several artifacts he obtained on his trips, and his own written accounts, including all versions of his filed reports and his field notebooks. Garth Pritchard enjoyed unique access to Canadian soldiers and bases in Afghanistan, which is recorded in hundreds of hours of footage. This captures candid, personal reflections of soldiers and dynamic operations in the field. The journalists’ eye-witness accounts formed an important primary source for the study of a contemporary conflict, and their material constituted a vast resource of potential content.

The CWM applied the same standards of scholarship and historical oversight in the

Reproductions of newspaper headlines, artifacts, and first-hand accounts highlight Canada’s response to the 9/11 attacks.





Credit: Stephen Thorne/CP

Soldiers of the 3 PPCLI Battle group arrive at Kandahar Airfield in 2002.

selection of stories for display from this material as it does for all its exhibitions. As the lead historian on the exhibition team, I studied the available primary and secondary sources dealing with Canadian operations in Afghanistan from February 2002 to the present, identifying major operations and incidents affecting Canadians overseas. I then worked with the journalists, examining their material to see what photographs, films, and reports they had collected about the major events affecting Canadians, and identifying hitherto unknown or unseen personal stories from each deployment. These stories were then developed as photo essays, told mostly in the voice of the journalists or those soldiers they interviewed. A number of Canadian soldiers were introduced to the exhibition team by the journalists, many of whom they had accompanied on operations. These soldiers spoke about their own experience in interviews as part of the CWM's oral history program. Their accounts are now accessible to the public at the museum's Military History Research Centre.⁵ Where appropriate, the exhibition team provided additional context to the photo essays, through maps, introductory

text to missions, events, and individuals, and by supplying basic statistics.

It is worth citing several examples of how the exhibition's content was approached. In the second section of the exhibition, which explores the first deployment of a Canadian battlegroup to Kandahar in 2002, most of the stories selected correspond to major operations conducted by the Canadian soldiers, and are told from the soldiers' perspectives. The largest photo essay deals with the first battalion-level helicopter air assault carried out by Canadian soldiers in March 2002 on the "Whale's Back" ridgeline, a suspected base of operations for Taliban and al-Qaeda fighters. Stephen Thorne's photographs captured the operation from the perspective of a recon platoon that found a series of bunkers on the ridgeline and called in American assault troops to destroy them. Quotations taken from oral history interviews and from Stephen Thorne's reports highlight that though Canadian soldiers encountered little opposition, many expected to be shot at as soon as they landed. The photo essay reinforces one of the major themes of the

exhibition: Afghanistan was a combat mission from the beginning, presenting major risks to Canadian soldiers.

Another display addressing the “friendly fire” bombing on 17 April 2002 highlights the unexpected threats faced by Canadians on a daily basis. Pritchard’s footage selected for this display shows in graphic detail how Canadian and American medics at Kandahar airfield reacted to the accident, scrambling to save the life and limb of Sergeant Lorne Ford, grievously wounded in the bombing, and Ford’s own recollection of events.

The exhibition’s storyline then follows the journalists as they documented the activities of the Royal Canadian Regiment in Kabul in 2003-2004. Large prints of Stephen Thorne’s photographs emphasize the multinational character of the International Security Assistance Force. The photographs also illustrate the change in the Canadian operating environment from the rural isolation of Kandahar to the bustling, crowded streets of Afghanistan’s capital. Stories

selected for this section reflect the Canadians’ goals in Kabul – to protect the fledgling Afghan government from its enemies, and to prevent outbreaks of violence in the capital. They are also deeply moving. One of the photo essays, dealing with the aftermath of a mine-strike against a Canadian patrol that killed two Canadian soldiers, focuses on Master-Corporal Dan Matthews. Matthews, the only soldier unharmed in the blast, struggled with survivor’s guilt. This photo essay is accompanied by film footage of a raid in January 2004 against a compound housing a suspected terrorist commander, allegedly responsible for coordinating the attack against Canadian soldiers. These two displays, developed in consultation with the journalists, are simultaneously highly emotional and informative, demonstrating that threats existed even in the relative stability of Kabul in 2003.⁶ The details related in each display were checked against the available primary research, through the Canadian Forces Board of Inquiry’s reports about the incidents, and through consultation with the Department of National Defence’s Directorate of History and Heritage.⁷

Canadian soldiers secure their landing site on the “Whale’s Back” ridgeline as part of Operation Harpoon, March 2002.



Credit: Stephen Thorne/CP

Credit: Stephen Thorne/CP



a school that was burned by the Taliban in 2004. Visitors should walk away from this section with a better understanding of some of the progress made in Afghanistan, rarely seen in the news media over the past five years, and also with a comprehension of the challenges that remain.⁸

The penultimate section of the exhibition, dealing with current counterinsurgency mission, had to reflect the heavy fighting between Canadian

Left: Master-Corporal Dan Matthews grieves at a ceremony held for Sergeant Rob Short and Corporal Robbie Beerenfenger, killed by a minestrike on 2 October 2003.

Below: A Canadian and German soldier with the International Security Assistance Force patrol Kabul, October 2003.

A large proportion of Stephen Thorne's material from his trips to Kabul focus on the reconstruction that took place under the umbrella of security provided by the ISAF in the capital. In addition, Afghan reconstruction carried out by Afghans themselves is an important theme of the exhibition because it is one of the principal elements of the conflict. The photo essays selected for display represent many of the key challenges facing Afghans as they rebuild their country after 30 years of war, from impoverished workers toiling in a largely defunct factory, doctors struggling with meager resources to curb child mortality in a Kabul hospital, to local and international efforts to rebuild a civil society through democratic elections. Thorne's photographs and Pritchard's footage offer a window into daily Afghan life as it is affected by conflict, and where Canadian soldiers have attempted to assist. Education statistics showing a meteoric rise in numbers of students in Afghanistan over five years are offset by presenting examples of burnt school textbooks in the exhibition, which had been gathered by Thorne when the patrol he accompanied visited



Credit: Stephen Thorne/CP

soldiers and a resurgent Taliban in Kandahar and Helmand provinces. This was a challenge to present because, although Pritchard's footage captured the Canadian Provincial Reconstruction Team's activities up to September 2005, the material made available by the journalists did not cover current combat operations. The CWM had to seek out alternative means to display the most contemporary history of the conflict. In this section, the museum relied on the material history of several prominent artifacts to portray the threats posed to Canadian soldiers



Workers in Kabul returned to work at the damaged Jangalak Factory complex to rebuild their livelihoods, April 2004.

by Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) and suicide bombings, which have caused the most casualties to date. These included the wreckage of a Canadian G-Wagon destroyed on 12 December 2005, and the personal effects of Master-Corporal Paul Franklin, whose legs were severed in a

suicide bombing in January 2006, which killed Canadian diplomat Glyn Berry. Photographs and film of major combat operations in the summer of 2006 were obtained through the Department of National Defence, and contextualized using quotations from Canadian soldiers' testimony

A Canadian armoured Mercedes Gelendewagen, destroyed by an Improvised Explosive Device in December 2005, is one of the centerpieces of the exhibition.





Department of National Defence IS2006-0344

Canadian soldiers sweeping a compound in the Zhari district as part of coalition counterinsurgency operations, July 2006.

about their combat experience gathered from media reports and other sources.⁹

A visual montage of all the Canadian soldiers killed to date in Afghanistan forms part of the exhibition's conclusion. The exhibition team contacted Canadian families through the Department of National Defence to obtain their personal family photographs. Displayed prominently at the end of the exhibition, these photographs portray these soldiers as they are remembered, as spouses, siblings, children, hunters, athletes, and hobbyists. This montage was intended to show soldiers as ordinary Canadians with manifold interests and relationships, not just men and women in uniform. Wars are fought, won, and lost by individuals, whose ordinary lives extend far beyond their military occupation. Their service, and their sacrifices, in places like Afghanistan ripple back and touch a much wider group of people, including families, friends, and co-workers. This display highlights the important personal dimension of how this war, like others in the past, has affected Canadian society. The

Museum continues to update the display by including photographs of soldiers who have died since the exhibition opened.

The exhibition ends not with a period but an ellipsis, acknowledging, as in the introductory text, that Canadians went to Afghanistan in 2002 and are still there. As elsewhere in the exhibition, visitors are invited to share their opinions about what they believe are the consequences are of having gone to Afghanistan, of staying in there, or possibly withdrawing from the country completely. This feature was included to recognize that debate surrounding the mission and our goals is ongoing, and to facilitate the discussion of Canadian military affairs after visitors had the opportunity to view this exhibition.

While it is difficult to assess the success of *Afghanistan: A Glimpse of War* as an effective means of exhibiting the most recent and significant chapter in Canadian military history, a few early conclusions may be drawn. The first is that the exhibition has been well attended to date. In the first two-and-a-half months,

36,085 visitors have toured the exhibition. This represents approximately 40 percent of the museum's total visitorship over the same period. Personal observation of visitors reveals that many of the displays, and in particular the destroyed G-Wagon, footage of Canadian soldiers attempting to help a badly burned Afghan boy, and the visual montage of personal photographs of soldiers killed in Afghanistan, elicit a very emotional response. Several of the soldiers featured in the displays, or participants in the events presented, have toured the exhibition, and have informed CWM staff or the journalists that the exhibition faithfully reproduced their own personal experience in Afghanistan.

Media reviews of the exhibition suggest that the Afghanistan exhibition has effectively presented the history of a contemporary and controversial conflict through the eyes of those who have lived it. Val Ross of *The Globe & Mail* remarked: "Fundamentally, this is a show about Canadians: what we have done and endured since our troops officially arrived," adding that it is difficult to look away at some points.¹⁰ Paul Gessel of the *Ottawa Citizen* noted that visitors bond instantly with the Canadian soldiers' personal stories on display, but that the exhibition as a whole was not political in its tone or presentation.¹¹ Both of these reviews seem to confirm that the museum has succeeded in its aim to inform visitors about the nature of the war through novel means, rather than presenting an early verdict on Canadian participation in the conflict.

However, there is much we have yet to determine about how successful the exhibition has been at portraying contemporary history. One question is whether the exhibition will need to be updated to reflect current events in Afghanistan. The intensity and lethality of operations changed over the course of the exhibition's development, and it is likely to do so again over the next year. To respond to this challenge, the exhibition team included an interactive station where visitors may read recent news about Canadian involvement in Afghanistan, updated daily with clippings provided by major newspapers. The exhibition was designed with other possible updates in mind. Space has been reserved on the walls to include more personal stories reflecting major events in Afghanistan, if the materials become available. The visual montage of soldiers killed

in Afghanistan has been updated to include the most recent Canadian fatalities.

Further study is needed to determine the effectiveness of providing visitors space to post their comments. The feedback stations were included to let visitors share their interpretations of their own history, and to challenge visitors with questions about what they think about Canada's involvement in Afghanistan, past and present. The Canadian War Museum retains and catalogues all visitor feedback on a daily basis, and initial response to the feedback stations has been overwhelmingly positive. Visitors posted over 900 comments in the first three weeks of the exhibition's display, many expressing widely divergent views.¹² A comprehensive review of the public's commentary will be needed once the exhibition has closed to see the extent to which these stations were seen by visitors as a forum for debate, personal reflection, or criticism by the public.

In developing *Afghanistan: A Glimpse of War*, the Canadian War Museum attempted to explore an ongoing conflict that has involved over 10,000 Canadians over the past five years. As Canada's national museum of military history, the CWM has an interest and a responsibility to present to the public Canadian military history from its earliest manifestations to the present day. Given the limitations of the available documentary evidence the CWM took advantage of the unique collection of photographic and film evidence made available by Garth Pritchard and Stephen Thorne to produce an exhibition that puts the human experience of conflict to the fore.

These personal stories, based on powerful and rare eye-witness accounts by and about Canadians in the field, provide visitors to the exhibit with a glimpse into the conflict as viewed by contemporary journalists and participants. Although checked thoroughly by museum staff against the existing documentary and published accounts of the conflict, this still constitutes only a glimpse of war. However, the exhibit depicts the mission in Afghanistan from many hitherto unseen and unheard perspectives, displaying stories of human interest and national importance about Canadians preparing for war, embarking on operations, assisting reconstruction efforts, and dealing with loss in Kandahar and at home.

As such it makes possible comprehension of the origins and nature of the conflict and the beginnings of an informed discussion about the role that Canadians have played in it.

Notes

1. It is altogether likely, however, that many American sources especially pertaining to diplomacy before the outbreak of the conflict may well be open long before documents from Canadian departments are transferred to Library and Archives Canada, let alone declassified. In 2003, for example, George Washington University's online National Security Archive published an edited collection of documents relating to the rise of the Taliban, one of seven in the archive's September 11th series. Sajit Gandhi, ed. The September 11 Sourcebooks Volume VII: The Taliban File. <www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB97/index.htm> (viewed 8 May 2007). No comparable sourcebook has been released to the Canadian public.
2. Among the most acclaimed sources: Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001* (New York 2004); Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban* (Yale 2001). The pre-eminent expert on Afghan political science is Barnett Rubin, whose conference papers and reports outline some of the more recent events and challenges facing Afghanistan. See his "Saving Afghanistan," *Foreign Affairs* (January/February 2007). There are fewer works about Canada's involvement in the war on terror. Richard Gimblett's *Operation Apollo: The Golden Age of the Canadian Navy in the War Against Terrorism* (Ottawa, 2004), is a thorough examination of the early Canadian naval commitment to operations in the Arabian Gulf in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 to 2004. Sean Maloney has provided a summary of his personal experience in Afghanistan: *Enduring the Freedom: A Rogue Historian in Afghanistan* (Potomac Books, 2005).
3. For more details about one Canadian's response to 9/11, see Wayne Thibodeau, "Island's 9/11 pies in national exhibit," *The Charlottetown Guardian*, 3 March 2007.
4. Some of these comments are very personal. In response to the first question: "How did 9/11 affect you, your family, or your friends?" one visitor posted the following on 18 February 2007: "My dad was down by the sites, setting up triages & pulling in people off the streets to help them. He did not come home until 10:00. That night we thought we'd lost him." Curators and historians in the United States grappled with how to treat the emotional and sensitive nature of contemporary history when collecting artifacts and developing exhibitions about the 9/11 terrorist attacks, in some cases as soon as a year after the event. The Smithsonian National Museum of American History dedicated one component of "September 11: Bearing Witness to History" entirely to visitor experiences and recollections. Vanessa Van Orden, "Exhibiting Tragedy: Museums and the Representation of September 11," *Journal of Museum Education* (Spring 2006), p. 55.
5. Seven soldiers whose stories are featured in the exhibition were interviewed extensively. Several had been to Afghanistan more than once, and their accounts are revealing. Interview transcripts and audio cassettes are held in the George Metcalfe Archival Collection, Canadian War Museum.
6. Canada's second deployment to Afghanistan, in Kabul, was regarded at the time in the press as more along the lines of a peacekeeping mission given the relative quiet in the capital in 2003 and 2004, now considered the high-water mark of stability for Afghanistan in the aftermath of the Taliban. In press circles and the Canadian Army's public affairs division, strict operational security surrounding many of the raids conducted by soldiers in Kabul was held responsible for the press blackout, which may have led to the gap between the public perception of events in Afghanistan and the situation on the ground. Major J. Janzen, "OP ATHENA Roto 0 – Embedded Media," *Canadian Army Journal* 7 (Fall/Winter 2004), p. 50, and Stephen Thorne, "The Enemy Within: Generals deal blow to embed program." *Canadian War Correspondents Association Newsletter* (Fall 2004), p. 1.
7. Canada. Department of National Defence. Jowz Valley Mine Strike Board of Inquiry. <www.vcds.forces.gc.ca/boi_jowz/pubs/report/t-of-c_e.html> (Viewed 1 May 2006). See also Major K.A. Cameron, "'Mine Strike—Mine Strike—Mine Strike' Countermining Operations in the Jowz Valley, Afghanistan," *Canadian Army Journal* 7 (Fall/Winter 2004), pp. 52-67.
8. Some of the comments posted in this section demonstrate an understanding of these problems, while others expressed appreciation with learning something new about aspects of the reconstruction process. On 3 March 2007 a visitor wrote, "Don't neglect to give us news of progress – like we see in this museum." Another, on 24 February, cited statistics posted next to a vignette about education: "You must be doing something right. Students has [sic] increased from 775,000 to 5,000,000 in 2005. Keep it up!"
9. One of the quotations on display was taken from a widely e-mailed Royal Canadian Horse Artillery forward observation officer's account of three weeks of frantic operations entitled "The Battle of Panjwaii and Beyond." By contacting the RCHA Association, the author was identified – he was sent to Afghanistan to replace Captain Nichola Goddard who had been killed in combat on 17 May 2006.
10. Val Ross, "The Afghan War, through our eyes." *The Globe & Mail*, 19 February 2007.
11. Paul Gessell, "'War, as we all know, is hell,' and this glimpse proves it," *Ottawa Citizen*, 9 February 2007, p. A1. See also Bruce Cheadle, "New museum on Afghanistan war attempts to skirt political minefield," *Canadian Press*, 8 February 2007.
12. In response to the question: What do you think of Canada's response to 9/11?, responses range from "This country is doing the best thing. There is no easy answer;" to "Let the US fight its own war!"

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