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CANADIAN WAR MUSEUM

The Loss of a Canadian Chinook in Afghanistan

The Pilot's Recollection of 5 August 2010

CRAIG LESLIE MANTLE

Abstract: A Canadian Chinook received heavy enemy fire on 5 August 2010 near Ma'sum Ghar. Relying on his experience, training, and ability, Captain William Todd Fielding, the pilot, safely landed the burning helicopter, thereby saving everyone on board. His recollection of the event, in his own words, offers a first-person account of what could easily have become Canada's worst day in Afghanistan. For his actions, he was awarded the Medal of Military Valour.

Résumé: Le 5 août 2010, un Chinook des Forces canadiennes a subi un tir ennemi soutenu près de Ma'sum Ghar. Fort de son expérience, de sa formation et de son habileté, le pilote, le capitaine William Todd Fielding, est parvenu à atterrir l'hélicoptère en feu, sauvant ainsi la vie de toutes les personnes à bord. Son récit des événements nous fournit un compte rendu très personnel d'un incident qui aurait pu constituer la pire journée du Canada en Afghanistan. Son action lui a valu la Médaille de la vaillance militaire.

THE CANADIAN HELICOPTER FORCE (Afghanistan) (CHF(A)) played an essential role in Canada's war in Southwest Asia. Consisting of six CH-147D Chinooks purchased from the US Army to ferry troops and supplies throughout southern Afghanistan and eight modified CH-146 Griffons to provide escort protection and occasional fire support to troops on the ground, the CHF(A) helped



Before: Undoubtedly the last photograph taken of Blowtorch 61, snapped about five minutes prior to take off. [Courtesy of Capt. W.T. Fielding]

alleviate some of the threat posed to Canadian soldiers in and around Kandahar Province. Tabled in early 2008 and otherwise known as the Manley Report, the *Independent Panel on Canada's Future Role in Afghanistan* made the acquisition of helicopters a condition of Canada's continued involvement in combat, so deadly had insurgent attacks become.¹ The panel's recommendation, to be sure, was in no way unreasonable. Between the start of the mission in 2001 and the end of 2008, ninety-three Canadian soldiers were killed in action; of this number, fully sixty-five, or roughly 70 percent of the total, were caused by improvised explosive devices (IEDs), roadside bombs or suicide bombers in one form or another.² According to now-Colonel Robert Walker, IEDs caused all of the eighteen fatal casualties sustained by his battle group, which was based on the 2nd

¹ The report was named after its chair, The Honourable John Manley, PC, and now OC. Canada, *Independent Panel on Canada's Future Role in Afghanistan* (Ottawa: 2008), 27, 35, and 38.

² As calculated using *National Post*, "Timeline: Death toll in Afghanistan," available online, last accessed 5 December 2014. See also Canada, DND, "Canadian Forces' Casualty Statistics (Afghanistan)," Fact Sheet, Project number FS 12.002, 10 June 2013. Canadian casualties for the entire mission in Afghanistan, 2001–2014, totalled 158 military personnel, one diplomat, one journalist, and two civilian aid workers.

Battalion, The Royal Canadian Regiment, between February and August 2007.³ Although the helicopters did not completely negate the threat posed by insurgents and their asymmetric tactics—Canadian soldiers continued to perish as a result of these weapons right up until the end of the combat mission—their use substantially minimised the number of required road convoys, something that in turn undoubtedly saved many lives but which is naturally impossible to prove. In the words of Lieutenant-Colonel John Conrad, whose National Support Element supplied Task Force Orion, the Canadian battle group in Kandahar in 2006, helicopters were “the safest and most sensible way to move about in southern Afghanistan.”⁴ Over the course of approximately thirty-one months, from January 2009 when the helicopters made their first operational flights to July 2011 when flying operations (and Canada’s combat mission) ceased, the Chinooks moved slightly more than seven million pounds of cargo and just under 90,000 passengers; the Griffons, whose primary role was not transport, nevertheless moved more than 20,000 pounds of cargo and more than 2,000 passengers.⁵

Although the CHF(A) helped minimise the threat to ground forces, movement by air presented its own unique risks and challenges, not the least of which were armed insurgents on the ground. Apparently using a mix of both small and large calibre weapons, the Taliban shot down a Canadian Chinook on 5 August 2010. The helicopter—tail number 147202, call sign Blowtorch 61 (pronounced “six one”)—took a number of rounds in one of its fuel tanks that, in turn, started an intense fire and caused considerable immediate damage to the flight controls. With time evaporating as quickly as the fuel was burning, the pilot, Captain William Todd Fielding, gently landed the stricken helicopter on *terra firma*, allowing everyone on board to make a safe and hasty exit. For his actions that day, he received the Medal of Military Valour (MMV), the third highest military valour decoration

³ *Canadian War Museum [CWM]*, George Metcalf Archival Collection, oral history interview with Colonel Robert Daren Keith Walker, 31D15 Walker.

⁴ Lieutenant-Colonel John Conrad, *What the Thunder Said: Reflections of a Canadian Officer in Kandahar* (Kingston and Toronto: Canadian Defence Academy Press and Dundurn Press, 2009), 20. For additional comments pertaining to the value of the Chinooks in Afghanistan, see *CWM*, George Metcalf Archival Collection, oral history interview with Major Darryl Adams, 31D15 Adams.

⁵ Canada, DND, “Joint Task Force Afghanistan Air Wing Closeout Ceremony,” CEFCOM NR 11.011, 18 August 2011.

in the Canadian Honours System, ranking behind the Victoria Cross and the Star of Military Valour. His citation reads:

On August 5, 2010, Captain Fielding's Chinook helicopter was struck by enemy fire, in Panjwayi, Afghanistan, causing the fuel tank to explode and rendering the aircraft nearly inoperable. With the helicopter in flames and the cockpit rapidly filling with smoke, Captain Fielding made the time-critical decision to land in enemy territory rather than fly to a friendly landing zone. His outstanding courage and devotion to duty allowed him to execute an emergency landing and then lead the evacuation of the burning aircraft. His actions no doubt saved the lives of all crew and passengers that day.⁶

Blowtorch 61 is now the latest Canadian aircraft to be lost due to hostile fire. Until Afghanistan, Buffalo 115461 held that dubious honour. In August 1974, Syrian surface-to-air missiles destroyed this de Havilland DHC-5 (CC-115) that was flying for the United Nations Emergency Force II, a peacekeeping mission that monitored the ceasefire between Israel and Egypt following the end of the Yom Kippur War. This incident, in which all nine crew and passengers were killed, stands as the greatest single loss of life in Canada's long history of peacekeeping.

With six crew members, thirteen Canadian soldiers and two US civilians on board Blowtorch 61, 5 August 2010 could very well have become Canada's worst day in Afghanistan in a mere matter of seconds. An eerie coincidence illustrates just how catastrophically it all could have ended: exactly one year later, on 6 August 2011, a US Chinook was shot down in Afghanistan, in the Tangi Valley of Wardak Province, killing all thirty-eight on board.⁷ Other incidents claimed additional lives too. A Canadian Griffon, for instance, crashed on 6

⁶ *Canada Gazette*, Part I, Vol. 146, No. 6 (11 February 2012), 178. See also *Canadian Military Journal*, "Valour," Vol. 12, No. 2 (Spring 2012), 6. Many newspapers devoted attention to Fielding and his actions. For some representative examples taken from online editions, see "Soldiers' and pilot's valour recognized for actions in Afghanistan," *Toronto Star*, 26 January 2012; "Praising Capt. Will Fielding for his courage under fire," *Niagara Falls Review*, 9 March 2011; and "Borden Air Force member honoured as a 'hero,'" *Barrie Examiner*, 25 February 2011, all last accessed on 4 December 2014.

⁷ Thirty Americans; eight Afghans. Ray Rivera, Alissa J. Rubin and Thom Shanker, "Deadliest Day of Afghan War for U.S. Forces," *The New York Times*, 7 August 2011, A1.

July 2009 after clipping a security wall at a forward operating base (FOB) in Zabul Province, killing two Canadian non-commissioned members and one British officer. Accidents were equally as deadly. On 2 September 2006, a Royal Air Force Nimrod reconnaissance aircraft crashed in Helmand Province, killing all fourteen on board. The proximal cause of the incident, so the official inquiry concluded, was a fire during mid-air refuelling, but the distal cause was a culture within the air force at the time that prioritised budgetary savings over air worthiness, coupled with systemic failings on the part of two companies that were responsible for an earlier safety review of the Nimrod fleet.⁸ Flying in Afghanistan did not come without risks.



Over the past year-and-a-half, the Canadian War Museum's oral history program has continued to collect powerful and emotive stories from Canadian veterans—principally relating to the war in Afghanistan—in support of the upcoming redevelopment of the last portion of its permanent gallery, *A Violent Peace: The Cold War, Peacekeeping, and Recent Conflicts, 1945 to the Present*. Captain Fielding described what happened on 5 August 2010 in an interview for the museum, for this purpose.⁹ His account of the event, from start to finish and in his own words, is presented here.¹⁰ He recalls:

On 5 August 2010, I was scheduled to fly a mission called 'Maholic,' a phrase we used for supply runs between different forward operating

⁸ Richard Norton-Taylor, "RAF Nimrod air crash investigation delivers devastating verdict," *The Guardian*, 28 October 2009, online edition, last accessed 5 December 2014. For the official report, see Charles Haddon-Cave, QC, *The Nimrod Review: An independent review into the broader issues surrounding the loss of the RAF Nimrod MR2 Aircraft XV230 in Afghanistan in 2006* (London: The Stationery Office, October 2009).

⁹ The full, unedited interview can be found at CWM, George Metcalf Archival Collection, oral history interview with Captain William Todd Fielding, 31D15 Fielding.

¹⁰ The following narrative has been approached and edited in the same manner as the chapters that appear in Craig Leslie Mantle *et al.*, eds., *In Their Own Words: Canadian Stories of Valour and Bravery from Afghanistan, 2001–2007* (Kingston: CDA Press, 2013), that is, with only minor changes being made to the text in the interest of clarity and flow; Captain Fielding had two opportunities to review and comment on this article before it was submitted to *Canadian Military History* for publication.

bases, moving different troops and equipment around. Today's mission would consist of one Chinook, call sign Blowtorch 61, and two Griffon helicopters, call signs Shakedown 30 and Shakedown 31. I was, being the aircraft captain on the Chinook, the AMC, or airborne mission commander, so I was in charge of that three-ship element. The aircraft captain on one of the supporting aircraft was actually the air wing commander, Colonel Christian Drouin, who would be flying as one of the pilots, which made it unique because he tried to fly when he could and it was always nice having him 'on board' because he's a very experienced and seasoned pilot.¹¹

Weather that day was typical, low forties Celsius, light winds and very little cloud cover. We were launching at approximately nine-thirty in the morning, and it was just about a four- to five-hour mission, which was pretty standard, with a couple of refueling stops in the middle. We also had a passenger that day. It was Captain C.F. Campbell who was a flight surgeon from 408 Squadron, and he was in theatre on a visit prior to actually deploying, where he came into theatre for two weeks just to get a sense of what was going on, and lo and behold, he happened to be on our trip that day. And he would be flying in the jump seat, which is a seat that drops down between and just behind the pilot and co-pilot's seat, so he was upfront in the cockpit, just a few feet behind us, so he could see what was going on. We started the trip flying a slung load ... taking a generator, it was about 10,000 pounds, up to a FOB in the northeast. It's a bit of a longer flight. We dropped that off, and then we returned for more troops and equipment, back to Kandahar [Airfield, KAF]. And then from there we proceeded to fly out to multiple FOBs and back. During one of the refueling stops, we were told our mission had changed, we were going to be transporting a detainee, or POW [prisoner of war] if you will, from one of the FOBs to Kandahar. So we altered our mission and who was on board, because we didn't want to land and have troops on board when there was a detainee being brought on board with escort personnel. ... It always seems to take forever when you're on the ground because the escort personnel have to sign paperwork to transfer these detainees. We couldn't get off the ground soon enough, we were getting very antsy, I always remember that. And we finally got him on board, and got him back to Kandahar, and proceeded with the rest of our mission.

¹¹ Christian Drouin is now a brigadier-general, OMM, MSC, CD.

The latter stages of the mission involved landing at FOB Ma'sum Ghar, which is on the side of a ghar, or small mountain if you will, where we dropped off some personnel, picked up some personnel. ... And it was in the volatile Panjwayi District, which is near what we coined the 'Green Zone,' which is where the majority of the insurgents are believed to have their strongholds. And while *en route* to the FOB ... I lowered my head to conduct a pre-landing check a few kilometres back from the FOB to set-up for arrival, and then I heard a very large 'Bang!' followed by an explosion on the aircraft. The whole aircraft shuddered. Now, for something to hit a Chinook and cause it to shudder, being a twenty tonne helicopter with all our weight in it, it had to be something significant. ... Small arms, you could get hit with bullets in the aircraft, you wouldn't even know it happened. It's almost like a bug hitting your car. ... At that point I didn't know if something had hit us or if we had hit something, because we were flying low-level. I immediately looked up. The aircraft had shifted its flight path to the right—something had struck us on the left side, which was very obvious, shifted us right and caused us to yaw left. So it had hit, I knew at that point, the back rear side of the helicopter. A wall of smoke and shrapnel went across the windscreen. I could see bits of metal as we flew through them and it settled. We flew through our own shrapnel. The aircraft immediately began filling with smoke. The airflow in the Chinook, with the ramp and the door guns, comes in the tail and goes out the pilots' front windows. Because we fly windows down, there's no air conditioning of course, all the smoke was being directed up to the cockpit.

I immediately took control of the aircraft. It's based on experience, because I had a lot more experience than my co-pilot [Captain A.J.W. Mramor] did. Instinctively I took control of the aircraft which, given the situation, is usually the right thing to do and have your co-pilot back you up. So, something we normally brief, on missions, is, pending the experience of the crew, if the aircraft captain has a lot more experience than the co-pilot or first officer, he would assume control of the aircraft.

I'll never forget the blood-curdling screams. I could hear lots of screaming coming from the back of the aircraft, as well as on the intercom system through our helmets—that's how we communicate in the aircraft. I'll never forget that day ... just constant screaming and chaos, the aircraft filling with smoke up front in the cockpit. The flight controls were not functioning normally; the cyclic, which is the stick between our legs

that we control the rotor disks with, was shaking violently. The controls were feeling sluggish. So as I gave an input to keep the aircraft upright, it was taking a long time for that input to make it to the control so that we could get that sense [of movement]. Grasping what was going on, it was very obvious that we were on fire, given all the black smoke in the cockpit. The caution panel in the cockpit lit up. I had low fuel indications and master cautions from the left side. I knew that whatever hit us took out our auxiliary main fuel tanks on the left side. We didn't have a lot of fuel, though it wasn't a big concern at the time and the fuel itself may have been igniting the fire at that point.

We were on fire. There was chaos. I suspected injury in the back. I suppose there would have been eighteen personnel in the back, including our crew and our door gunners. ... So I knew there was likely injury in the back, but I didn't know to what extent at that point. All I knew was, as the aircraft captain, I had to get that aircraft on the ground. We couldn't fly anywhere while we were on fire because we likely wouldn't make it. I knew we were probably about a twenty- to twenty-five-minute flight from Kandahar Airfield, so that wasn't an option. Going back to the FOB we were at really wasn't an option either. This was a decision. I knew before things got out of hand I had to land, immediately. So I began scanning, looking for a place to land. I was having difficulty seeing through the black smoke, it was so thick in the cockpit. I was peeking my head out my side window as best as I could, looking for an area to land. Unfortunately, it wasn't a desert area, like it would have been nice to have, where there are lots of good places to land; it was fairly built-up. And built-up there means lots of mud huts, lots of vegetation and whatnot. And it's always in pockets and we were over one of those pockets.

So I was looking for the best location I could for us to land. I looked over at the FOB that we were trying to go to, which was a couple of miles away still. I wasn't thinking about making the FOB because you have to be very careful going in and out of those, because the landing areas are very small. But all around the FOB—it was on the side of a ghar—was open territory. Initially I thought, 'Well, I should probably try to go there because it is fairly open.' However I quickly decided that I'm not going to try to extend the flight an extra couple of miles, because that extra two minutes may prove to be an unwise decision. By scanning around I was able to find what looked like an open farmer's

field, and it was probably six or seven hundred metres away to my one o'clock position. So I started turning and decelerating the aircraft to set-up for that, for that field. I would find out later that it was a good decision that we didn't go for that area near the ghar because those were un-cleared minefields from the Afghanistan-Russia war, way back, so that could have proved fatal within itself.¹²

So I selected a field. I told my co-pilot, Captain Mramor, that I was going to be landing in the field at one o'clock. He probably didn't know which field I was talking about immediately, but he would learn it later as we set-down upon final. I started slowing the aircraft and descending from our 100 feet as best I could, to try and set-up for an approach in. I yelled to Adam [Captain Mramor], through all the chaos, to get a 'Mayday' call out, just to let the Griffons know that we had been hit and we were going down. And I could hear him vaguely doing it in the background. But I was experiencing tunnel vision and tunnel hearing at that time as I remember, and it was a bit surreal. So I knew there was chaos going on around me. It reminded me of movies I'd watched where you'd hear someone whispering to themselves when you can hear all the chaos in the background as they try to focus. And that's kind of what I was doing, was really trying to focus, you know, encompass all the training and all the experience I had to try to keep the aircraft upright because it wasn't flying properly and to try and get it down safely so that we didn't have what would have been the worst day in Canadian military history in Afghanistan ... if I had botched that landing and twenty-one people died!

I was concentrating on trying to get that aircraft down, controlling my airspeed and keeping the aircraft upright. ... And then as I started to set-up on final approach, I yelled to Captain Mramor, I actually yelled on the intercom system, 'Emergency landing! Emergency landing!' I just wanted everybody in the back who would hear on the intercom to know—especially our flight engineers and gunners, they would hear it on the intercom—that we're landing, we're going down, so that they would do what's required, whether it's get in a brace position or get on the floor. Once again, not being in the back, I didn't know what was going on, but at least they could brace themselves for what could be an impact.

¹² Soviet forces occupied Afghanistan for a decade, from late 1979 until the late 1980s.

I remember Captain Mramor said to me, ‘You’re going to land in *that* field?’ Because it wasn’t a perfect field. And my response to him was, ‘Dude, we’re on fire. We have to land now.’ You know, there weren’t a lot of good choices around, it was the most favourable choice in my mind. What the field was was a plowed farmer’s field, so there were rows of dirt that were about two feet high, and we were landing parallel to those rows of dirt. I was going to try and put the aircraft down in between them. Some farmer had probably taken whatever type of equipment he had and dug little trenches and patted them in with dirt. It was like little rows of dirt. The field looked like it was probably about 100 or 150 yards long, so it was a decent size. But I also noticed as we were coming in to land that, at the end of the field, the rows of dirt that were paralleling turned perpendicular. So I really wanted to get that aircraft stopped before they turned perpendicular and we went over them.

Going down, I thought, ‘Boy, I can’t believe this is happening because once we get this aircraft down on the ground—if and when we get it down on the ground and stopped—the day is far from over because of where we are. We are in enemy territory in a volatile district in Afghanistan, and things are going to get more interesting before they are going to get more boring.’ So that was going through my mind on the way down. I remember that distinctively while I was dealing with the tunnel hearing and the tunnel vision. I had greyed out a little bit. I was really focusing straight ahead.

I brought the aircraft in. Captain Mramor was backing me up at the controls. Surprisingly, we touched down at what I estimated at the time at fifteen to twenty knots, so probably about twenty-five miles an hour, could have been a bit faster. The rear wheels touched down first. And this is where it’s nice having a wheeled aircraft versus a skidded aircraft like the Griffon ... it allowed us to land and keep moving as we tried to bring the aircraft to a stop, which is a lot more comfortable than if you have skis or skids on an aircraft. So, we touched down in what seemed like it was a fairly smooth landing actually and slowly lowered the collective [power], got the front of the aircraft down, touched that down, again very smooth. ... I just yelled out, ‘Emergency shutdown! Emergency shutdown!’ for Captain Mramor, which was his indication to get the fire handles pulled, which cut fuel to the engines, and to get the engine throttles to the off position. In other words, it’s like shutting

it off. It's like if you slam the brakes in a car and shut it off as quick as you can, that's what we were trying to do with the aircraft. We got the rotor blades stopped as quick as we could too.

So I got the aircraft down on the ground, immediately applied the brakes as best I could while he did his emergency shutdown. We did get the aircraft to a near stop, but lo and behold, we hit those perpendicular dirt mounds. I remember the aircraft lurching up back into the air, like going over a speed bump too fast. I believe that's when Captain Mramor and I hit our heads on the canopy above us, which was later to cause some injury. The aircraft, though, did come back down and kind of buried in the dirt at that point and came to a stop. And at that point the rotor blades were slowly coming to a stop because of the emergency shutdown. And at that point it was, you know, you didn't have to tell people what to do, however I did yell on the intercom, 'This is an emergency egress!' or 'Everybody out!' ... You don't have to tell people that in a crisis situation! If there's a fire in the building, everybody knows to run and get away. I said it instinctively, however I don't think it was necessary. At that point it was more or less every person for themselves, to try and get out of the aircraft in as orderly a fashion as possible.

For myself, it meant getting out my emergency exit, which was the door on my right side. ... So I remember pulling my emergency handle. The way it works on a Chinook, if you can picture it, is if you took a piece of metal or a door, and you bent it ever so slightly, and pushed it in place somewhere, you would know that if you pull that handle, it would want to release that tension and pop off. So that's what I was expecting. We'd never done egress drills on the Chinook before because of that design. In a Griffon, we would do them, because I could pull a handle and actually hold the door and drop it off. In the Chinook, you never did it because, in theory, you pull that handle, you're releasing it; it's almost like releasing an elastic band, you're going to shoot the door out the side, because it's under tension, it's squeezed into that airframe.

So I pulled the handle, nothing happened. ... I hit it with my elbow, kind of forced my way into it, and nothing happened again. I hit it with my shoulder, the door didn't come off. I thought, 'You've got to be kidding me.' ... I remember looking at it for a split second. We have armour plating on the sides of our seats as well, ballistic armour plating



After: Blowtorch 61 reduced to a mere stain on the sand. Only the transmissions and parts of the rotor blades could later be positively identified. Canadian and Afghan soldiers look on as the Chinook continues to smoulder. [Courtesy of Capt. W.T. Fielding]

to prevent rounds from hitting us, and looking at the space between the armour plating and the room of the door, I thought, ‘That’s going to be a very tight fit anyway if I do get the door off.’ I always wondered how I’d fit through there. Adrenaline would normally carry you, but we were flying with [a lot of personal equipment on]. I was pretty freaking heavy. We were about ninety pounds of equipment when we flew. And I’m thinking, in a split second, ‘I’m not sure I’d fit through there anyway. I’m not going to force this issue. I’m going back through the middle. I’m going to go out through the fuselage of the aircraft [which is how we enter and exit the aircraft under normal circumstances].’

Captain Mramor on my other side was able to get his exit off, and he, I later was told by him, basically looked out and saw nobody and thought, ‘Well, I’m not going to go out there and be by myself on the left-side of the aircraft, because obviously everybody is going the other way.’ So he looked over to me and saw me climbing through the centre console to get out, because the doctor, Doctor Campbell, had already left; he had been grabbed by the guys in the back and brought through, which vacated the way for Captain Mramor, who would follow me, to

climb through the centre. So I climbed over the jump seat, I turned, and Captain Mramor handed me my C8 assault rifle.

That was the first time that I could get a sense of what was happening at the back of the aircraft. The whole back was engulfed in flames, it was all black, it looked like at least a third of the back of the aircraft was on fire, and it looked like it was moving forward quickly. All the troops were rushing out the door as fast as they could, in a somewhat orderly fashion. It kind of reminded me of the movie *Titanic* ... 'it's time to abandon ship, let's get everybody off, and as the crew we're letting everybody go out in front of us.' There was no pandemonium. Everybody was going in a fairly orderly fashion, albeit quickly. They were sliding underneath the mount of the door gun to get out of the aircraft. We waited for everybody to get off. I looked in the back because I could see where my 'go bag' was, my Survival, Evasion, Resistance, Escape bag in the back, which had my extra ammunition, my extra ballistic plating, and my bottles of water, and a few rations that I had in there that I would like to have on the ground. Seeing that it was fairly close to the fire, for a split second I thought, 'Do I run back there and grab it?' And I remember looking at our door gunner, Master Corporal A. Gorrie, and I looked at my bag, and I looked back at him. He would later tell me that he thought that I was looking at him saying [with my eyes], 'Go get my bag for me.' And he was thinking, 'You're crazy!' When I found this out later, I said, 'Oh no, that's not, that wasn't it at all. I was just looking, you know, with the adrenaline going, I was just trying to take account of the situation.' I just happened to look at him, and he thought I was indicating, 'Yeah, you go get my bag for me,' because he was standing further back in the aircraft; the fire was only about twenty feet behind him.

What else was going through my mind? 'I hope we get off this aircraft before it explodes,' because I knew we still had a lot of fuel on board. And my fear was that it would explode and half of us would die in that aircraft. So, you know, impatiently, I waited for everybody to get off the aircraft, and at the very end it was myself, and Master Corporal Gorrie, and Captain Mramor behind me. Master Corporal Gorrie motioned for myself and Captain Mramor to get out because he was trying to push people with his arm to get under that door mount. At that point, I just remember flying underneath the door mount and landing on the ground. I turned and looked. Captain Mramor and Master Corporal Gorrie had

gotten off the aircraft as well, which was good. Right across from us, about forty yards away, there was a mud wall. My sense of direction is pretty good, and I was pretty sure that whatever brought us down—because at that point, I figured we had been shot down, something had brought us down—was on the other side of that mud wall, somewhere in the distance. How far I didn't know. So as fast as I could run, I ran to that mud wall, because I could see all the other troops had lined themselves along the wall, to the right of me, just to basically hunker down.

It looked like it was about four feet high. The mud in Afghanistan is like concrete. Army personnel had told me you could shoot rounds into it and even heavy rounds, like howitzer rounds, won't go through. They build their houses out of this. They're very strong structures. Anyhow, I just ran as fast as I could sprint, adrenaline going, and took up a position; I just basically ran right into the mud wall and hunkered down like everybody else had. I caught my breath. I realised that we were in a really bad situation now! I looked back, I looked across, took account of what was going on, and everybody was spread out along the mud wall; I looked back at the aircraft and we were only forty or fifty yards away from it and the fire was almost up towards the cockpit at that point, it was spreading so rapidly. And all I could think about is, 'If that helicopter explodes, and that shrapnel goes everywhere, it's going to go into us, into the mud wall. So we're in a bad place.'

However, at the same time, I knew there were bad people on the other side of that mud wall, so it was a lose-lose [situation] at that point. Though I was pretty sure the aircraft would explode, I wasn't sure what was on the other side of the mud wall. I remember saying to Corporal C. Hinds, who was beside me, who was one of our door gunners, 'I think we're in a bad place here!' You know, yelling to him in the chaos. And he said, 'Yeah I think we are too.' I said, 'I think that aircraft might explode,' or he had said it to me. He took the words right out of my mouth. ... And then instinctively, I just started screaming, and he did as well, 'Everybody through the mud wall! The aircraft may explode! Get through the mud wall!' There was a low point in the mud wall about ten feet from me that was maybe two feet high, so it was almost like a little entrance through the mud wall. ... So all the troops started running and funneling through the low point in the mud wall. I followed suit at some point, and on the other side of the mud wall there was a ditch, it

was probably two, two-and-a-half feet deep, and it kind of paralleled the mud wall, it was like a gutter, so to speak. So I ran off to my left and found an open spot and got down in that ditch to try to find some type of cover.

And it was less than ideal. I couldn't hunker down enough in the gutter, I was still sticking up well above it. I was lying down in the prone position with my rifle. At that point, I had chambered a round and put the safety catch on, and so I was looking down my scope, looking down range. ... In all the weapons training we had done, we had always wore the Kevlar helmet that we fly with in our 'go bag.' So in other words, whenever you get somewhere on the ground, you want to put that Kevlar helmet on, the standard issue for the Canadian military, what the army has. We're wearing flying helmets at that point. And, of course, I'm thinking, 'My helmet's in my "go bag," which is, well, engulfed in flames, so I'm going to leave my flying helmet on.' But of course, with the flying helmet on, it covers your cheeks. I couldn't actually look through my scope, because you rest the side of your face on the butt of your rifle.

So I had decided to keep my flying helmet on. I noticed Master Corporal Gorrie had thrown his off, and in discussion later, he had apparently decided, 'Well, it's not going to offer me much protection anyway, you know. It doesn't have ballistic protection. So I threw it off right away.' My train of thought at the time was, 'Well, I wasn't concerned about the ballistic protection. It would offer some shrapnel protection, and it gave me that sense of comfort; it's like having that little blanket as a kid, it is something that's wrapped around you and giving you that little comfort zone.' And I kind of saw it as that. As a pilot, I fly with it all the time and I did think, though, 'If rounds are flying around me, it would give me some kind of comfort.' So I elected to keep it on. I couldn't see anything. Adrenaline's going. Heartbeat was probably 200 beats per minute at that point looking down range. I couldn't see anything target-wise. I saw some movement, a pick-up truck with some personnel that looked pretty shady that was moving up the flank. Some of our soldiers took aim at them. I know, as I found out later, that we did have rounds coming and hitting the walls around us, but I couldn't get a bead on where it was coming from.

My first reaction now is, ‘I need to get my emergency radio, our PRCs, our personal emergency radios [up and running].’ So I pulled my radio out, pulled my antenna on it so I could get a call going, because I knew the Griffons were above or around us somewhere, our escorts. I wasn’t sure where they were at that point, I couldn’t hear them or see them. I was really focusing down range on what threat could be out there. And I could only get static on every frequency. So I was calling frantically on every frequency, ‘Mayday! Mayday! It’s Blowtorch 61’ and I couldn’t get a response. I was only listening to static on the radio, and I thought, ‘Ah, this thing’s not working. I’m not going to mess with it too much.’ I knew somebody knew where we were because our escort aircraft were airborne, so I elected just to put the radio away. I knew other individuals had the same response with the radio, it wasn’t working properly for them either.

At some point there, with the rounds coming in ... I do distinctly remember thinking, ‘I probably won’t see my kids again.’ I was just waiting for the ping or that snap in my helmet, of a round hitting me and ending everything. So it was a bit of a sad moment, albeit quick; just a thought, that this could be the end. For the first time in my career, I’m faced with the biggest threat. I was just lying there in the ditch thinking, ‘I think I’d rather be in that burning helicopter flying again,’ because as a pilot, that’s *my* comfort zone. At least being in an aircraft—it’s not great being on fire—I’ll probably be more comfortable than being on the ground. I’m not an infanteer. We do have some training with weapons and tactics on the ground, but this is the first ground threat that I really faced. And the army personnel we were with were probably comfortable now because they were on the ground, and getting away from that burning aircraft, but I know as a pilot, I was more comfortable in that aircraft.

I remember looking up, and I remember hearing lots of rounds going off. What it was, it was behind us, it was rounds cooking-off in the aircraft because we had so many rounds on board for the door guns. We started hearing rounds go off. And in retrospect, we think that that probably helped keep the insurgents at bay, because so many rounds were going off it sounded like machine guns. Probably had them spooked, about who’s around and who’s doing all this firing.

I did take note of a major, his name was C. Lillington. He was walking around and yelling, barking commands to the army troops. I kind of liked that because there was a sense that this was his element and he was taking control on the ground. My job was more or less done, other than the well-being of everybody there. As the aircraft captain, I wanted to make sure everybody was okay and that we were doing the right thing. I couldn't hear him, but he was yelling things and moving around the mud wall, and I thought, 'Who's this guy walking around?' I couldn't get any lower in the ditch and my helmet was still sticking up. It kind of reminded me of a scene in *Apocalypse Now*, where Robert Duvall [who played the yellow-scarfed and napalm-loving Lieutenant-Colonel Bill Kilgore] is walking around, and when the beach is under attack, he's yelling commands and calling in air strikes and everybody's hunkered down. I briefly thought of that. I thought, 'Wow, this is just like *Apocalypse Now*.'

At some point, and I didn't have a good appreciation for time at that point, too many rounds were coming in around us so we were being definitely engaged, and the decision was made to move. And it may have been his decision [Lillington's] that we needed to get out of here. We knew we weren't far from the FOB, so it was time to move. I believe he had yelled out, 'Move to the east!' ... I turned and saw troops starting to move, so I started leopard-crawling into the ditch. And it was extremely uncomfortable, I remember, because it was full of rocks and ... prickly bushes. I remember them pinching through my flight suit, and my gloves took a beating, they were getting torn up as I was dragging myself, trying to stay low in the ditch, and going over the rocks and the dirt. And it was hard-packed, very dry. I did that for a while, and at some point I could see where we were going, and I thought this is going way too slowly. I elected just to stand up and run. And I remember Captain Mramor telling me, as he was in front of me to my left, so when we're crawling he was in front of me, and he said, 'I saw you run by and thought, "Yeah, enough of this, this leopard-crawling."' So he got up and ran, followed suit with me, as fast as we could run, and then we dove in another ditch. We crossed a road and jumped into a ditch, and took up position there.

It was at that point I really noticed, it was a little bit earlier I guess, that the doctor was beside me, Dr. Campbell, and he didn't have a weapon because he doesn't fly with a weapon. And I had two weapons,

and I wasn't going to offer him one of my weapons, other than the fact that I said, 'Stay with me.' So when I ran, he ran as well. And I basically kind of used my hand and kind of pushed him down to stay low, and I got on one knee at that point, because it was kind of a protection instinct, where 'I'm going to look after you.' And I had my rifle on my shoulder looking down range again as other troops came across the road. I just wanted him to stay low because he really couldn't defend himself *per se*. And I knew my nine millimetre pistol probably wasn't going to help him because [the enemy would be too far away for it to be effective.] I remember yelling to him, 'Just stay here, stay low, stay with me.' And so he was down, and the rest of the troops started coming across the road. I found out later that a lot of rounds had been coming into the mud walls around us and stuff because I still had that tunnel vision, tunnel hearing, and the adrenaline was going at a rocket pace, so I didn't notice. I heard somebody yelling, 'We're going to go to the FOB. Get in a patrol formation.' My mind is scrambling trying to remember what the patrol formation was. ... I really didn't want to look down that road because it made me nervous to look and see if something was coming down it, however, that would be the direction we'd be going, knowing we were only about a half-hour to an hour away from our FOB.

I lost an appreciation of time once again. I'm not sure how long we were there with everybody crossing the road. The next thing I remember, shortly thereafter, was a vehicle coming down the road. This big military vehicle had showed up, and I thought, 'Oh, now we're really in trouble.' And I wasn't appreciating who it could be. All I knew was that somebody was here other than us and I didn't like it. And, of course, it turns out it was one of our Canadian vehicles, it was a LAV, a light armoured vehicle. And another one showed up, and another one showed up, and I got an appreciation for who it was as I saw the troops on board. 'Thank goodness the cavalry is here!' Like, there's some support there. I was still very confused. It was a crazy situation, making sure the doctor was down beside me and stuff.

These vehicles looked like they started to set up a perimeter around us, out from where the threat was in the fields. Eventually I noticed the first vehicle, it was off to my left. The hatch opened and I saw a few troops off to my left running to get in that vehicle. And then somebody had come along at one point and yelled, 'Who are the pilots?' And

Captain Mramor and myself were there, and then others said, 'Hey, that's them there.' We had the different helmets on obviously. And then another vehicle about thirty to forty yards away, its hatch had opened ... and I can't remember who it was, said, 'You and you, run, you guys go and get in that vehicle.' So I remember running for the vehicle. I grabbed the doctor and we all ran over, and other troops had run over too, and we all climbed in the back of that vehicle. So now we were inside this TLAV [tracked light armoured vehicle], as I would find out.¹³

So we were out of the immediate threat, at least I saw we had this metal around us. I know when we got in the vehicle Captain Mramor was very happy, saying, 'We made it! We made it!' And a couple other individuals, they had smiles on their faces. But I wasn't sharing that enthusiasm at that time because I thought, 'Well, we're in this vehicle which is reassuring, however we're far from out of the threat.' And over the course of time, I could hear pinging off the side, which I suspected were rounds hitting it and whatnot, so the threat was still very real.

We were in the vehicle and basically waiting, and that's when I gained an appreciation of what had just happened. My gloves were destroyed. I had a spare set of gloves on me. I always keep a spare set, for times when I spill fuel on them or whatnot, in my lower pant leg, so I switched gloves. My hands were a little bit raw too from crawling, because I had holes in my gloves. I was just trying to gain my breath, and that's the first time I realised how dehydrated I was. I could barely talk, or swallow, my mouth was so dry. Because for that time, whether it was ten minutes or twenty-five minutes, I didn't know, my adrenaline was going so fast, just with everything that was going on, just in the time we were engaged in the air to actually being in the vehicle. And I could barely swallow. I was just exasperated.

This vehicle was probably meant to carry four or five troops, and there was probably ten of us in there. I don't know how many people there was, but it was very uncomfortable. But at that point, it was just 'pile in,' it wasn't about comfort. And I remember asking, there was a crewman there and he was sticking out the top, and I said, 'Hey, is there anything to drink in here? Do you have any water or anything?' And he said, 'All we have is *Red Bull*.' And I thought, 'That's probably the

¹³ M113A3.

worst thing I could drink right now, however anything wet in my mouth would help,' so I said, 'I'll take one.' So I drank a *Red Bull*, which was probably even worse for my heart rate, however just that sensation of wet in my mouth was great.

Then I remember starting to sit there, and thinking, 'What is going on? Are we getting out of here?' And once again, time appreciation is very difficult. And I didn't want to bother him. Yes, I'm the aircraft captain and whatnot, but I'm out of my element now, and I'm not going to start barking orders. And I was being patient. But then I started getting a bit antsy, and I thought, 'What is going on? You know, we've got to get out of here!' So I remember popping up through the hatch, looking around, and I started snapping some photos by my second or third time I popped up. ... 'Where's our evacuation? Where are the Blackhawks, you know, the American Blackhawks, they have combat search and rescue. Are they coming to pick us up? When are we going to get out of here?'

And it wasn't happening! I could see Griffons flying around. I thought I saw a Blackhawk flying around. There were troops moving around on the ground. I could see the helicopter burning, there wasn't a lot left of it, clear as day. I got back down thinking, 'I'm going to get shot up here.' Back in the vehicle, another five, ten minutes. 'Okay, I'm getting antsy again, I've got to get back up.' My adrenaline is still going. I remember shaking, and you know, even hours later, I was still shaking, the adrenaline hadn't settled yet. I must have gone up and down through that hatch about six times. And the ramp in the back had opened at one point and a couple of soldiers had come over. They were taking account of who was on board, and who was here, probably trying to determine who was alive, who wasn't, and even I didn't know at that point. I knew it was a lot of guys, but had somebody suffered critical injuries? I wasn't too sure. The first goal was to get everybody out of harm's way before taking account of what our injuries were and administering first aid or whatever. Everybody seemed pretty mobile, so I was confident that everybody got out of the aircraft. That made me feel like we did our job, we got it on the ground, people got out, but it was a bit chaotic after that.

So he had taken account of who was there, and asked names and whatnot, then he was gone. The ramp came up at that point. I believe, in my appreciation of time, we were probably there for an hour. And I

was getting very antsy. I thought, like, 'What are we doing here? This is ridiculous. We've got to get out of here. Where are our helicopters?' But nobody had information. But I remember, eventually at one point, someone saying, 'We're going back to Ma'sum Ghar.' And I thought, 'What?' And that caused my adrenaline to spike again. Because I thought, 'If we're going back to a FOB, that means we're going in this vehicle, which means we're on the roads.' And now I thought about those 140 some-odd Canadians who had lost their lives and, you know, how many had been accounted for by IEDs, and that made me very nervous. I thought, 'We just survived everything we'd gone through, so far, and we may not make it!' I remember the vehicle starting up, and it was good to get away from the rounds that were going off around us, that were hitting the vehicle. I thought, 'This is going to be nerve-wracking.'

So we were in that vehicle and told we were going to that FOB, so I got nervous again. Then I felt the vehicle start moving. Everybody was inside. I think there was one of the operators who was up through the hatch though. And that was a very nerve-wracking drive. I felt the vehicle come to a stop and then start accelerating again, and turning corners, and I was bracing myself, sitting there, waiting for a 'Kaboom!' because I was thinking about what I saw on the news and all the IEDs and whatnot. It seemed like probably about a fifteen- to twenty-minute drive, and then we came to a stop, and then the hatch went down, and everybody started getting out, and I thought, 'We're in the FOB.' So there was my first sense of relief in that whole incident. I kind of felt like, 'At least we're in a FOB. There's a lot of soldiers around us, fortified walls, lookouts.' I felt good. And we were in Ma'sum Ghar, the place we'd just taken off from.

That was the first time where I actually felt a bit of relief. But at the same time, I got very emotional. I remember thinking, 'I want to cry. I can't believe we just went through this.' I wanted to go to a corner somewhere. (I never really shared that with a lot of people.) ... There was a couple of hugs with the few crew members who were there, because it was multiple vehicles out there and they came in over time. Ten minutes later another vehicle came in and a couple more crew members got out. But I remember thinking at that point, 'I just can't believe what we went through, and that we actually survived it.' And it became emotional for me. Looking and seeing a little open area off to the side of the camp, I thought I just wanted to go over there and

cry just to accept what had happened. And I didn't, you know, bravado and whatever, but I know I was very emotional at the time. I was still shaking ... the adrenaline was still going. And I don't know if it had been an hour or two hours or two-and-a-half at that point, once again you lose track of time. I wasn't looking at my watch.

Things started winding down at that point. They had very quickly established a triage so they could get everybody in and take a look at everybody just to see how everybody's well-being was. I remember we had to drop all our bags and they were calling us in, 'You, you and you, come inside.' I remember sitting on a gurney and someone coming over and asking us some questions, blood pressure and everything, 'Does anything hurt?' I remember saying, 'Yeah, my back's really sore, my neck hurts, my jaw hurts.' I felt like one of my teeth was broken. My knee was hurting me a lot and I was shaking, obviously. And those were the major things I was feeling at the time. And as my adrenaline started going down, I could start feeling the pain a bit more. They just asked us some questions, and we were in there for about twenty minutes. They asked 'What happened?' and whatnot. They gave me a bottle of ibuprofen, and I asked, 'What's that for?' And they said, 'You're going to need it in the next few days, because as your adrenaline settles, your muscles have all tensed so much that everything is going to be very achy.' And they were right. Going into the next day and the day after, the body was fairly achy just from everything that had tensed up at different times.

I left the tent and sat down, once again getting very impatient. 'When are we getting out of here?' I just wanted to get back to Kandahar with the personnel I knew and my boss and the troops around us. I took a phone call there. I was told, 'Hey, the commanding officer called, he wants you to call him.' So I went into another tent, was pointed to a phone, given a number, called, and gave a quick assessment of what had happened to my commanding officer at the time who was back at Kandahar Airfield in the operations centre. He said that a Chinook would be coming to get us. That made me nervous again! I said, 'Okay boss.' I didn't know how I could get into an aircraft and fly again given what had happened. It was the first time I thought this, that I didn't want to get in a Chinook right now. It made me a bit nervous, but I didn't want to stay in the FOB either, because the FOB's in a bad area too, it's in the 'Green Zone.'

I had a little bit to eat, though I wasn't hungry at all. I think I had a piece of bread. ... I talked with a bit of the crew about what happened and took a few pictures and whatnot. And over the course of the next couple of hours, I believe we just tried to relax as much as we could. We were told the Chinook was inbound. About ten or fifteen minutes later, a Chinook landed. We were all gathering our gear, then we went and got on that Chinook. I saw the escorts flying around. I sat down. And the Chinook took off, started heading airborne, climbing up, getting some altitude. I still had my flying helmet on and whatnot, and somebody came back, one of the crew members, and yelled that the pilot wants to talk to you. So I plugged in the intercom and he said, 'Hey, it's Major McKenna [Chris, Officer Commanding Chinook Flight, CHF(A)]. How's it going man?' And I said, 'Good boss.' He was my supervisor, and he said, 'I'm glad you guys are alright. What's the extent, what's going on injury-wise? What's the extent?' Listening to a doctor and a warrant officer talk in triage, one of them thought there were three cat c [category C] injuries, which is non-critical, minor injuries. One thought there was eight cat c injuries, and then someone else said they thought everybody has a cat c injury, you know, all twenty-one on board. So I said, 'Well Maj, you know, I'm not 100 percent sure.' He said, 'Well as far as I'm concerned then, you guys are all going to the hospital to get checked out.' I said, 'Okay.' And I said, 'If you don't mind Maj, can you drop me off at the Air Wing?'¹⁴ I just wanted to be back with my element, that's where my comfort zone was, because I felt okay, more or less. He said, 'No, sorry dude. I got to send you over to Role Three [the hospital at KAF].' So we headed back to the base. Again it was nerve-wracking, having just been in a Chinook and flying and been shot down as I could best piece it together at that point. We got back to the airfield and just basically started making our way through the medical system. And it was a bit chaotic to say the least. I won't get into much detail, but it was far from a well-oiled machine.

¹⁴ The Joint Task Force Afghanistan Air Wing, Canada's air assets deployed in theatre, consisting of helicopters (CH-147D Chinook and CH-146 Griffon), tactical transport aircraft (CC-130 Hercules), unmanned aerial vehicles (CU-170 Heron), and leased / chartered Mi-8 transport helicopters.

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When I think back, it really didn't matter what had brought us down or what had hit us. I didn't want to get into too many discussions or debates about this. It didn't really matter. Because as a pilot, I can't concentrate on what just happened. What's going to happen next? [is where I have to be mentally]. And that's something that we're trained to do ... don't worry about the past, but you've got to worry about the future. Instead of focusing and worrying about why the aircraft wasn't functioning or what had happened—did we hit something? did something hit us?—it was a matter of, 'Okay. I need to get this aircraft on the ground and save some lives so we can all walk away from this, or things are going to get worse before better.' In a nutshell, that's about it.

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Captain William Todd Fielding was invested with his Medal of Military Valour by His Excellency the Right Honourable David Johnston, Governor General and Commander-in-Chief of Canada, at Rideau Hall on 26 January 2012.

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The Canadian War Museum is currently planning an upgrade to the latter portion of *Gallery 4: A Violent Peace: The Cold War, Peacekeeping, and Recent Conflicts, 1945 to the Present*. The section that deals with recent deployments—the Persian Gulf, Somalia, Rwanda, Yugoslavia and Afghanistan—will receive particular attention. Captain Fielding's story is being considered for inclusion in the museum's permanent exhibition as part of this improvement.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

When this article was written, **Dr. Craig Leslie Mantle** was the post-1945 historian at the Canadian War Museum. He is the principal editor of *In Their Own Words: Canadian Stories of Valour and Bravery from Afghanistan, 2001-2007* (Kingston: CDA Press, 2013), a collection of first-person accounts by twenty-three Canadian soldiers who earned a military valour or bravery decoration for their actions in Southwest Asia.