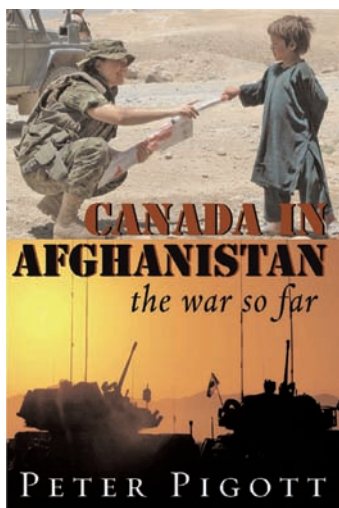


CANADA IN AFGHANISTAN: THE WAR SO FAR

PIGOTT, Peter. Dundurn Press, Toronto, Ontario, 2007, hardcover, 240 pages, \$35.00, ISBN: 978-1550026740

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When aviation author and retired diplomat Peter Pigott set out to write this work in late 2006, Canadians were in the midst of a national debate over the role of their armed forces in an intensifying counter-insurgency war in southern Afghanistan. Most Canadians, who had not paid attention to the development of the Afghanistan mission during its first four years, were bewildered to discover that their soldiers were suddenly fighting Taliban militants in some of the Canadian Army's most pitched ground battles since the Korean War. Pigott's "unabashedly ambitious" goal for this book was to provide for his fellow Canadians a primer on the history of the conflict in Afghanistan and Canada's role in the military, diplomatic, and development aspects of the mission.

The first part of Pigott's work provides a condensed overview of Afghanistan's recent past, from the Soviet invasion to the intervention of multinational coalition following the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001. He has done a good job of synthesizing findings from popular works then available about Afghanistan and the Taliban into an accessible account which explains the international impact of the Afghanistan conflict. However, the author has peppered this historical summary with romantic and overly simplistic portrayals of Afghan culture as depicted by Rudyard Kipling, Eric Newby, and, more troubling, popular novelists like Ken Follett. As a result, his history reads as part *realpolitik* and part romantic travel memoir.

Unfortunately, his historical section is the best part of *Canada in Afghanistan*. In reading his subsequent chapters, the book's most serious problems emerge. While the author expresses the general desire to explain the Afghanistan mission, there is no central argument. As a result no internal logic articulates the book's organization, structure, or content. The author flits between diplomacy, development, and defence issues. For instance, in six pages in his second chapter, the author mentions the death of Canadian diplomat Glyn Berry, Canadian soldiers arriving in Kandahar, the first prime ministerial visit to Kandahar, and the May 2006 parliamentary extension of the mission to 2009, among other topics. Also mentioned in these pages, for some reason, is the first despatch of Canadians to the South African War over a century ago, with little effort by the author to explain its connection to the nature in which Canadians are deployed today.

Equally troubling, Pigott relies overly on eye-witness and newspaper stories for his content but does not provide an objective analysis. His chapters are filled with seemingly unconnected compilations of lengthy eye-witness accounts. The most glaring example of this is an unusually long 22-page transcript from a member of the Canadian Provincial Reconstruction Team's (PRT) Civil-Military Cooperation Detachment. An informed reader could discern from this account that the death of Glyn Berry effectively paralyzed the delivery of aid from the Canadian International Development Agency and that the PRT was, at points, forced to reinforce the Canadian battle group operating in Zhari-Panjwai. Outside these 22 pages, Pigott does not comment on or even mention these developments, nor does he evaluate what this operational pause meant for the mission. Throughout the book, Pigott shares enough information about facets of Canada's role in the mission to whet the reader's appetite, but provides little analysis to explain what it all meant in 2007.

In his introduction, Pigott mentioned the risk of embarrassment or rebuttal that faces the authors of contemporary history, but much of his work replicates or synthesizes what was already on public record in 2006. The author's own voice, experiences and opinions are missing from this text, and would have been valuable additions. The "Final Word" offered in his conclusion is not even his own. Pigott instead refers readers to the recommendations from the International Crisis Group's November 2006 report.

This work is not unworthy of examination, either by historians or the general audience for which it was intended. The personal accounts from Canadian soldiers provide interesting perspective on diverse issues such as the state of Canada's equipment, and the tempo of daily operations in Kandahar Airfield's (KAF) Hospital. Pigott obtained these accounts by interviewing Canadians working inside the wire at the PRT and KAF during his visit to Afghanistan in the summer of 2006. Pigott also exploited the public record to the utmost in assembling this book; if his bibliography were complete, it would be useful as a listing of many of the contemporary articles, government reports and news releases available to the public.

That said, this book was already dated by the time it hit the shelves in early 2007, and it has since been replaced by better works written by Canadian historians and journalists. These works have been better able to satisfy the goals Pigott set forth, interpreting the military, diplomatic and human aspects of the Afghanistan mission in greater detail and depth to a Canadian public still anxious for information about the conflict.