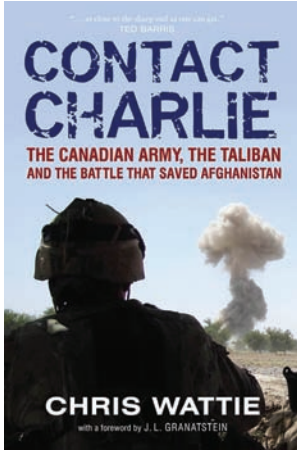


## CONTACT CHARLIE: THE CANADIAN ARMY, THE TALIBAN AND THE BATTLE THAT SAVED AFGHANISTAN

WATTIE, Chris. Toronto: Key Porter Books, 2008, hardcover, 304 pages, \$32.95, ISBN- 13: 978-1554700844

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It is rare that a book about the Canadian military comes along that grabs your attention from the opening paragraph and holds it right to the last page. This is the case with the recently released best seller *Contact Charlie: The Canadian Army, the Taliban and the Battle That Saved Afghanistan*.

Written by former *National Post* reporter Chris Wattie, the book traces Charlie Company of 1 PPCLI during its tour in Afghanistan during the summer of 2006. This tour is most notable for having received the most decorations for bravery of any other unit since the Korean War. And, if the title of the book is to be believed, this tour also had a profound impact upon the Taliban's plans for the Canadian Army and the Kandahar region.

Histories of events, like Canada's participation in Afghanistan, take many forms. On one extreme, there are the official histories that do not appear until many years after the events, when all sides of the story can be examined in minute detail and a balanced, or at least a reasonably balanced, view of the events can be recounted. On the other extreme, there are those that are released shortly after the event, and take the form of a diary that represents one individual's view of the events as they occurred. *Contact Charlie* fits squarely between these two. As a battlefield narrative, it is a slice of the bigger picture and is written with the intent to capture the essence of Task Force Orion, Charlie Company's tour, with emphasis on particular events and battles as told through the eyes of the soldiers themselves. As such, it serves as an important contribution to understanding the nature and fabric of the Canadian soldier's role in Afghanistan. But, as an unofficial history, this approach has attracted some criticism for not being academic enough. While it is true that the book is not footnoted, nor follows certain accepted academic historical practices, it cannot be denied that Wattie has done his homework and produced a chronological history of one unit in battle (with maps!); something not seen many decades.

*Contact Charlie* is liberally peppered with anecdotes and quotes from the participants, gleaned from interviews conducted shortly after the events while their memories were fresh. There is much humour, as in the case of two sergeants arguing in the heat of battle over who forgot to pull the pin when only one of grenades that they each just threw went off. There is also the desperation of having to expose oneself to enemy fire just to get a weapon to function correctly. And too, there is much sadness, such as the description of the death of Sergeant Vaughn Ingram.

Wattie is better qualified than most reporters to write this book. He was raised in a military family and went to Royal Roads Military College before beginning his career in journalism. When he joined the *National Post* he was assigned to the military affairs desk. It was then that he decided to join the Governor General's Horse Guards as an officer to enhance his understanding of military affairs. He was surprised as anyone when, like the proverbial Mikey from the TV commercial, he found that he liked it, and decided to stay.

In addition to his military background (and the fact that he actually knows how to wear the kit), as a reporter Wattie spent a total of six months in Afghanistan embedded with the

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army. First in Kabul with the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in 2003, and then in January 2006 he traveled to Kandahar with the first troop of the Canadian battle group deployed to Southern Afghanistan, where he remained embedded for eight weeks. This experience lends verisimilitude to his claims that the current reporting from Afghanistan is somewhat lacking, and this book is his attempt to rectify some of this situation.

Wattie's understanding of the military mindset serves him well for he has written a book that bridges the gap between the military and civilian worlds, and brings alive the inner workings of the military to the uninitiated. Though it gets off to a bit of a slow start with frequent sentence breaks to explain terms and situations (something the military reader may find annoying), he hits his stride quickly and the book takes off at a rollicking pace. His description of the battle sequences puts the reader right in the middle of the action. Indeed, his style is engaging and the book is written like a good set of military orders in that he gives us the situation, describes the mission, then follows up with execution and command elements. The opening chapter is particularly useful for the reader in helping them understand the mindset of the Taliban. Though Wattie openly admits that the scenario he builds is based upon speculation, the knowledgeable reader will acknowledge that he is not far off the mark.

But there is much more to *Contact Charlie* than a simple battlefield narrative. For the military audience, it is replete with examples of the need for, and the application of, basic soldering skills. Too, it serves as affirmation that sometimes battle *really* is just like training! Just as important, there are examples of the problems (sometimes mind boggling) encountered by higher command. For the civilian reader, the intensity of the writing is a rare window into the life of the Canadian soldier on the front lines of one of the toughest environments in the world, and one that will dispel any illusions about what our soldiers are actually doing in Afghanistan.

To date, there have been few books that tell the story of the Afghan conflict from the Canadian perspective, and none in the Canadian media—that I'm aware of—that take you onto the front line through an entire tour.

Wattie has done an excellent job of capturing the essence of the Charlie Company experience, and in this reviewer's opinion, will be an important reference for future historians when the time comes to write the official history of Canada's participation in Afghanistan. For the time being, however, anyone interested in the events of Afghanistan, or what it's like to be on the front lines, would do well to have a copy of this book on their shelf, if for no other reason than it's a good read.