From the media coverage one might think that the Afghan mission is a national disaster. One could even be led to the view that the Canadian military has never sustained casualties on this level before. Both assumptions are very wrong! To understand this, we need to put the Afghan operation into a clearer perspective.

First, the mission itself. It is not a war fought under traditional criteria; the world has entered a new era where many of the previous concepts of the use of military force are no longer relevant. Afghanistan is not even a war that conforms to the principles of international humanitarian law. How can it when one of the belligerents is not a state or even a coherent national grouping? How can one reconcile the ruthless disdain for human life of suicide bombers with any concept of international law? Yet, those opposing the terrorists are expected to counter such barbarism within the framework of the law. This is tantamount to requiring the NATO forces to fight with one hand behind their backs. It is not surprising that there are casualties.

To claim, as some do, that “one man’s terrorist is another’s freedom fighter” is specious at best. Attempting to remove a government by violence and trying to destabilize a society by fear and intimidation are unacceptable actions. This is not just Western democracy imposing its will on the rest of the world, it is a basic principle of the international system in which we all live born out of centuries of destructive warfare and now enshrined in the UN Charter.
To this, add the basic principles of individual and collective rights and freedoms and the case against terrorism, as we are seeing in the Middle East and elsewhere, is hard to refute. The overarching question, as we are finding out, is “What to do about it?”

Some countries have the capability to address terrorism within their own borders and some have classified such actions as criminal acts and are dealing with them accordingly. Other countries, such as Afghanistan, do not have that capability and thus require the help of others to restore order and a concept of human decency. In some instances, intervention is necessary for the common good – simply because some situations arise where local instability has the potential to spread with far broader implications.

Second, the conduct of the mission. The responsibility to protect those unable to protect themselves and the related decision by a state or group of states to intervene are inherently difficult and laden with risk. Public criticism is the natural companion to such actions especially when things go wrong, take longer to accomplish than expected, or when lives are lost. This is Afghanistan.

When the Canadian government made the commitment to help Afghanistan – at the request of both the United Nations and NATO – it was understood that there would be casualties and this was made very clear to the Canadian people on repeated occasions by the Minister of National Defence and by the Chief of the Defence Staff. The problem is that there is no yardstick by which to measure success or failure. The so-called Taliban forces (who are really a multi-racial fedayeen sharing a common hatred of everything Western including the state of Israel) are not fighting by conventional means or even within the framework of international law. Their tactics, such as they are, are closer to those adopted in the twentieth century by guerillas and revolutionaries around the world, particularly in urban settings. We should not be surprised that efforts to counter them with tactics and weapons designed for open ground, highly mobile warfare are failing. This is a lesson being learned on a daily basis in Afghanistan and is now being accompanied by calls for more ‘boots on the ground.’

Until sufficient numbers of soldiers are put on the ground in Afghanistan and a new strategy for systematically clearing the fedayeen from towns and villages is implemented, the war is not going to be won. Even then, those towns and villages have to be kept secure and the fedayeen kept out. This will take time and unfortu-
nately, result in even more casualties. Those who call for Canadian and NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan do not understand the situation or the implication of such an action.

Third, are the casualties at an acceptable level? When governments commit forces to combat, the decision is made knowing that there will be casualties. For instance, when Mrs. Thatcher deployed the British military to the Falkland Islands in 1982 she established that 20 per cent was an acceptable casualty figure to regain control of the territory. We do not know what figure the Canadian government accepted in making the commitment to Afghanistan. And when Canada entered World War II, there was no ‘exit strategy’ other than the simple objective of defeating the German and Japanese aggressors. The war cost some 42,000 Canadian lives of which about 1,800 were lost at sea.

During the four years of the Korean conflict, 516 Canadian soldiers and sailors were killed. The number of people who lost their lives during UN-sponsored peacekeeping operations between 1956 and 1990 is over 100. And one could go on with statistics for operations in the Balkans and other ‘peace’ operations since the end of the Cold War.

To date, 42 Canadian soldiers have been killed in Afghanistan over a period of four years. That is an average of less than one a month. British and American losses over the same period are 40 and 339 respectively. By comparison, more than 2,700 people are killed on Canadian highways every year. And over 60 are killed per year while riding bicycles. Yet there is no comparable public outcry for the banishment of cars and bicycles in Canada.

The cover photo of this edition of the Canadian Naval Review shows the naval memorial to those members of the Canadian Forces who lost their lives at sea during the 40-year Cold War. These include the three sailors killed in Korea when HMCS Iroquois was hit by a North Korean shell, the crew of the Argus maritime patrol aircraft lost while on exercise in the Atlantic, the various naval aviators who were lost during carrier operations, the men killed during the 1969 fire aboard HMCS Kootenay, and all others who were lost at sea while on duty. In all, some 90 members of Canada’s maritime forces gave their lives during the Cold War.

The anchor, from Canada’s last aircraft carrier, HMCS Bonaventure, stands to remind us that military service at sea is not without risk. It is also a tribute to those who unselfishly gave their lives that Canada could remain free and not be intimidated by oppressive regimes.

The point about these statistics is simple: the military is not a risk-free occupation. Those who join do so knowing that they must accept a degree of risk and that they may be required to put their lives on the line under some circumstances. Those of us who have served in the military have done so under those expectations. And our families have invariably supported our service. Now, Canadian servicemen and women are being asked to accept the risks involved in bringing law and order to a troubled country, Afghanistan, which asked for our help.

Are the casualties acceptable? Although everyone would prefer that such operations be conducted without casualties, we must accept that casualties are a fact of military life and an unavoidable consequence of combat. That those lives have been given so that others can enjoy the same freedoms that we do is an acceptable price. Canadians have made such sacrifices many times before and without question. So why is Afghanistan different? 🌮

Peter T. Haydon