

Afghanistan war on Internet charts brave new media world for Canadians

By Bob Bergen

Viewers interested in seeing Canadian soldiers in the midst of pitched battles in Afghanistan have an amazing new resource available to them on the Internet: YouTube.com. What they will see there is raw, unedited sounds and sights of the insurgent war in southern Afghanistan that will provide Canadians with a far greater appreciation for Canadian soldiers, the dangers they face and their bravery.

Two firefights were captured by 41-year-old American freelance photographer Scott Kesterson of Portland, Oregon, who is ordinarily embedded with the U.S. Army.

In the first, on July 8, Kesterson was embedded with soldiers from Alpha Company, 2nd Platoon of the 1st Battalion Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry from Edmonton, Alta., when they engaged in a ferocious battle with Taliban insurgents in Panjawi, Kanadaha province.

In the second, Kesterson was with the same Patricia's a week later on July 15 in the village of Sangin, in Helmand Province when they were ambushed.

Kesterson uploaded his videos on YouTube.

They both should be required viewing for generations of Canadians who have no direct knowledge of the First and Second World Wars, Korea, the Persian Gulf war or the Kosovo air war in which Canadians fought, let alone modern warfare against insurgents.

Of the two battles, the July 15 ambush is likely the most dramatic. So far, more than 49,700 viewers have seen it, compared to the more than 20,700 for the July 8 firefight.

In the ambush video, the soldiers appear to be moving forward in an orderly fashion when all hell breaks loose. They come under fire from automatic weapons and rocket-propelled grenades.

With enemy fire raking them, the Patricia's immediately begin firing back and, more importantly, doing exactly the opposite of what an untrained person's sense of self preservation would ordinarily compel.

Instead of retreating from the danger, the Canadians advance toward it.

In the ensuing chaos, orders are barked out – interspersed liberally with the F-bomb word – the gunfire is cacophonous and a number of grenades are thrown.

The barrage the Canadians eventually lay down would be both fearsome and deadly on the receiving end.

All that's missing in this is the smell of cordite.

When the shooting stops and the haze clears, the out-of-breath Patricia's chests are heaving.

Still, a soldier lights up a smoke and the screen fades to black.

This is reality TV at its finest, but it's all on the Internet.

There is also much more to the videos than meets the eye.

The first thing to be considered is that Kesterson's footage is not completely unmanaged by the Canadian Forces.

Because he was embedded with them, he would have had to sign a ground rules agreement required of all journalists travelling with them.

Under those ground rules, there are 20 categories of specific information about Canadian operations which they cannot report.

For example, they can't report on troop strengths, equipment or critical supplies such as artillery, radars, trucks and water. They can't report on Rules of Engagement (that is to say directives setting out the circumstances when deadly force can and cannot be used); specific troop movements; tactical deployments; on-going engagements; special operations units; and the list goes on and on.

There are only 10 categories of information journalists can report. They can report approximate friendly force figures; non-sensitive past and present air and ground operations; dates, times and locations of completed missions; the types of ordinance fired, but only in general terms; and weather and climate conditions.

Make no mistake about it: the news and information Canadians receive about their soldiers' activities in Afghanistan is highly-managed by the Canadian Forces.

The second thing to be considered is how much management of the footage by commercial broadcasters themselves is removed.

Gone are the telegenic journalists wearing flak jackets emblazoned with the word “Press” reporting second hand on the combat action.

Gone are the news reports passed indirectly to viewers through “celebrity” anchors viewed simultaneously with the reporters on split screens.

Gone are the producers, editors and graphic artists who manage and package video segments into short snippets.

This all makes for a brave new media world because YouTube’s unvarnished, unfiltered work is all about an extended view of Canadian soldiers in combat and nothing more.

Moreover, unlike television news which usually has regimented time slots, the Internet is available any time anywhere there are computers and service providers’ access.

Even though the videos were shot more than a month ago and their news value is somewhat diluted, Kesterson’s videos are nonetheless remarkable.

To see them on the Internet, go to: www.YouTube.com

Go to the search window on the right and type in “Canada and Afghanistan”.

Clink on the appropriate links.

You haven’t seen anything involving Canadians in Afghanistan like it.

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Bergen’s column appears bi-weekly. Learn more about the CDFAI and its research on the Internet at www.cdfai.org