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MEDIA SUMMARY REPORT

Highlights: Death of Corporal Anthony Joseph Boneca on July 9, 2006

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SUMMARY

According to military and media accounts, Cpl. Anthony Joseph Boneca of the Lake Superior Scottish Regiment was killed during a firefight with Taliban insurgents approximately 25 kilometres west of Kandahar. The incident occurred at approximately 090830 Jul 06 Kandahar time (090000EDT Jul 06) while Canadian infantry were sweeping and clearing the village of Pashmul, in Zhari District, Kandahar Province in southwestern Afghanistan. Media reports indicate Cpl. Boneca was shot in the chest just above his bullet-proof vest by one of two Taliban gunmen from the roof of a compound as he was trying to enter the building. Cpl. Boneca was evacuated by helicopter to a military hospital at Kandahar Airfield, where he was pronounced dead.

The Soldier
Media reports indicate Corporal Anthony Joseph Boneca was a part-time soldier with the a reservist who joined Thunder Bay's Lake Superior Scottish Regiment (LSSR) out

of high school four years ago. Media reports that in 2006, Cpl. Boneca was an instructor for a high school co-op recruit training program at the Armouries in Thunder Bay. Media reports quoting family members indicate Cpl. Boneca had previously done tours that included guard duty in the United Arab Emirates, as well as several trips to Kabul before he arrived in southern Afghanistan in February 2006. Cpl. Boneca was serving with Task Force Afghanistan as part of the 1st Battalion Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry (1 PPCLI) Battle Group at the time of his death.

The Land

The village of Pashmul, in Zhari District, Kandahar Province, is located in southwestern Afghanistan approximately 25 kilometres west of Kandahar City. The Pashmul area is considered a major gathering point for Taliban, who have been recently ambushing convoys and attacking Afghan National Police outposts. Defeating the Taliban in Panjwei and Zhari Districts is seen as crucial to securing peace in Kandahar and the surrounding area. In addition to recent Canadian actions in the area, American forces reported capturing two Taliban suspects in the area in late May, and an American Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) had delivered medical and humanitarian aid in the area June 3-4, 2006.

The Battle

The unit Cpl. Boneca was working with was part of Operation Zahar (Pashtu for "Sword"). Operation Zahar was a joint Afghan National Army/Coalition security operation aimed at removing the Taliban threat west of Kandahar City, while strengthening the Afghan Government's authority in the area. Media reports indicate three companies of PPCLI troops, as well as engineers and other members of the Afghan National Army (ANA) 205th Corps and their American trainers, were involved in the engagement. A PPCLI company commander is quoted saying the operation was a, “division main effort,” suggesting it would receive priority in any calls for fire.

Although Canadian troops had engaged Taliban forces in the area at least five times in the past few months, previous skirmishes resulted in some Canadian injuries, but no major, protracted exchanges of fire. In contrast, one Canadian military spokesperson described this engagement as, “pretty intense, and there has been a number of firefights.” One theory for the heavier-than-usual fighting on the weekend is because Coalition forces had cut off usual escape routes, and were deployed in larger numbers than usual.

The force came under fire in maze-like grape orchards while carrying out a sweep of the village of Pashmul. One reporter called the repeated exchanges between Coalition and Taliban forces in the area, “a lethal cat-and-mouse game.” The reporter, monitoring radio traffic of the battle from Alpha and Bravo Companies while embedded with Charlie Company, reported that she’d heard indications of RPG attacks, small-arms fire, “women and children fleeing,” and a group of Canadians being “pinned down in a trench” coming under RPG fire, and harrassing fire from grape orchards in the area.

The Canadians and ANA reportedly assaulted the a mud-walled house (reportedly a mud-baked compound used to dry grapes) in Pashmul three times, but were forced to withdraw each time. Two Taliban were reportedly on the roof, probably located in a small hut on the roof with good coverage of the surrounding "low walls of the grape fields and adjacent small huts". Troops speaking to reporters also indicated tunnels had been dug between buildings and fighting positions.

Cpl. Boneca was reportedly shot at approximately 0830 local time (100001EDT Jul 06) as he headed up the stairs of one of three mud-walled compounds by one of two men on the roof. Media reports indicate Cpl. Boneca was shot in the neck just above the ceramic plate of his bullet-proof vest, "the bullet tearing downward through his body." After being shot, Cpl. Boneca was carried to a medical aid point by colleagues on a black rubber sheet, reportedly with an airway already inserted to assist breathing. On arrival to at the medical aid point, the medic reportedly said there were no vital signs. After evacuation via helicopter, Cpl. Boneca was pronounced dead in a military medical facility at Kandahar airfield.

After Boneca's death, on-site armoured vehicles and troops reportedly tried laying down suppressive fire, but it was not enough. Various other assets - including approximately 40 rounds of 155mm artillery from the Royal Canadian Horse Artillery, Predator UAVs, Apache AH-64 attack helicopters, A-10 Warthogs - then dropped other ordnance (including 500 lb bombs) on the compound. Troops on the scene reportedly tossed in grenades, and called in snipers to provide covering fire as well.

When an embedded reporter left the site at approximately 1500 local time (100600EDT Jul 06), one of the Taliban on the roof was reportedly wounded but still firing at Coalition troops.

Media reports indicate that the firefight Cpl. Boneca had been killed in was one of up to 23 engagements the three PPCLI companies participated in during the weekend. One account indicates that 17 of these engagements occurred in the first 12 hours of battle.

After-battle media reports indicate that an estimated insurgent force of between 60 and 100 was were involved in the firefight. The group was described as lightly armed, with some of them "no more than boys." Approximately 20 insurgents were reported killed, 20 seriously wounded and six captured and arrested. One of those captured was located in a tunnel complex underneath the compound.

Media accounts say three Canadians were injured in the weekend of fighting (one of them, Corporal Keith Mooney, was reportedly shot in the right side of his groin), and another four were treated for heatstroke.

Media reports of Canadians using restraint within their rules of engagement include the following (all from Christie Blatchford of the Globe & Mail, who was embedded with the troops):

- "At one point during the weekend, with the help of their invaluable interpreters, the soldiers made a forceful appeal for the Taliban to surrender; they were

invited to walk into the open and meet at the building the Canucks call "the white school" and be greeted peacefully. The allotted half-hour passed with no takers."

- "At another point, the soldiers spotted five Taliban walking along the edge of the tree line, had them clearly in their sights, and could have easily killed them. But Major Fletcher ordered his men to check their fire until he was assured that there were no ANA in the area; the men by the trees were wearing pants, not typical Afghan dress, and appeared relaxed. By the time all the attached ANA soldiers were accounted for, the men had disappeared into the forest."
- "The soldiers always do a "battle damage assessment," which at first I thought meant a tally of ground gained and lost, but in fact is the process by which the Canadians determine if they have taken action that saw, say, a farmer's wall damaged by a vehicle, and then arrange to fix the wall. This Canadian niceness does not extend to battles in which they are engaged by the Taliban, but still, as Major Fletcher said, it's an easy enough gesture to make."

The Return

Unconfirmed reports on a bulletin board indicate the commanding officer of the Lake Superior Scottish Regiment went to the family's home at approximately 090300EDT Jul 06 to inform them of Cpl. Boneca's death. A ramp ceremony took place in Kandahar on the morning of the morning of 10 Jul 06 to mark the departure of Cpl. Boneca's body, with approximately 1,000 in attendance. Cpl. Boneca's body arrived at CFB Trenton on July 12, 2004, and returned to Thunder Bay on July 14, 2006. A military funeral was held in Thunder Bay for July 17, 2006.

The Concerns?

Family, extended family and friends were quoted speculating about Cpl. Boneca's state of mind, motivation and expectations during his latest tour. Initial coverage focused on second hand reports of phone calls and e-mails suggesting Cpl. Boneca was tired, didn't want to be in theatre, didn't expect the tempo of operations in his latest tour, and would not return again. Initial reports suggested Cpl. Boneca was "demoralized", "down", "disillusioned", "miserable", "desperate to come home" and looking forward to returning home. After some time, media reports indicated relatives questioned Cpl. Boneca's training.

A web log posting dated 9 Jul 06 contains the following excerpt from an e-mail reportedly sent by Cpl. Boneca to a friend:

> *"I just returned from my amazing trip to Italy and Greece with Megan. It was so relaxing and fun we had the time of our life there. We travel all over Italy from Venice to Naples and saw so much and Greece was so relaxing we just sat on the beach all day for like a week. Wish I didn't have to go back to work. It's so hot here now you can barely handle it. I know you're all watching the news and know what's going on here but don't worry, I'll be ok. I hope you're all doing ok. Write me and tell me what's new with you. Time to go have some fun in sunny*

craphole Afghanistan. Take care all of you and I'll talk to you soon."

Comments posted to the web log suggest at least one reporter approached the web log author for more information.

The Toronto Star published quotes on July 10, 2006 indicating Cpl. Boneca may have wanted to leave so badly, “he even considered pretending to be suicidal, and asked an army priest if talk of suicide would get him discharged.” The same report also Boneca had complained of a long-range patrol that was supposed to last seven days, but ended up lasting three weeks, with food and water reportedly having to be rationed. Another issue highlighted in this report was that Boneca had “fractured an ankle” but was kept on a patrol for a week before being able to have the reported injury assessed. While other media outlets used some of this information, attributing it to the Toronto Star, no other sources appear to have been consulted by any media outlet to corroborate these statements.

Speaking at a media conference on July 10, 2006, Defence Minister Gordon O'Connor said, “he would be surprised to discover soldiers were being misled on what their operations would consist of,” adding, “These operations are well-planned, orders are given, they're all the way down the chain of command." O'Connor said reservists who travel to Afghanistan get the same training as other personnel, but that once they are in the region, they cannot choose to opt out.

On July 11, 2006, Cpl. Boneca’s father, Antonio Boneca, issued a statement through the Canadian Forces denying his son was ill-prepared for his tour of duty. Mr. Boneca is quoted saying his son "loved being in the army" and was aware of the situation he was facing. "In all my conversations with my son, there was never any mention of him not being well enough or fit enough to carry out his military duties," Boneca's father said. "He said it was difficult to cope with the weather, the sand, and the situation the young children endured (but) he was proud to make a difference in their lives and said he wished these children could live like we do in Canada."

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