



Friend

Alex Witt gives a personal tale of a

LOSING A FRIEND IN AN overseas war is incomparable. It's shocking because this sort of thing is supposed to only happen to other people's friends. It's angering because he didn't deserve to die. And it's oppressive because there's nothing to be done about it. It still doesn't really feel like he's never coming back. It's a feeling of smallness because he went willing to make a sacrifice we will likely never make.

A Facebook request from a national newspaper journalist who wants to contact friends of a friend who is serving in Afghanistan comes unexpectedly. So too does a picture of his fiancée, a childhood friend, weeping on the CBC website. The biggest shock comes after putting those two events together and realizing that you'll never speak with him again.

He's all over the news too: Pte Joel Vincent Wiebe, appearing distracted and stiff, months ago, halfheartedly posing for a camera. After it was taken, he joked, "That's my hero shot. They take it so they can give it to the media if I die."

Were this 1918, in an era without telecommunications, telegrams to this effect would've been devastating, but the fear of a civilian for a soldier's safety would have been substantial the entire time. It was also distinctly a time of war and an "all absorbing struggle," as W M Fleming called it in a 19 December editorial in the Gateway

Nowadays, our country is at war with a cadre of guerillas, but if it wasn't mentioned often in the media, we'd hardly know it. With the Internet keeping friends in touch from opposite sides of the world, there's a feeling of security in knowing what's going on—even if someone you know is serving a stint in Afghanistan. It was a relief to know that our men were so safe that they were spending their time suntanning. It was exciting to plan to meet up in Berlin in July to hear about the adventure in the desert. Joel wouldn't make it to that rendezvous.

So much was not to be. We live in a time of great individual opportunity, and major losses don't have a place in our way of thinking. Although it's difficult to generalize in our multicultural society, we don't see loss as destiny; death is wasted potential, nothing meaningful.

Joel proposed to Anna, down on one knee, four hours before he left for duty in February. This was a pleasant surprise for everyone. In the weeks before he was due to fly to Afghanistan, he had said that he didn't want to get engaged knowing he could come back as someone completely different. He was aware that war changes men. But he loved Anna, my childhood friend, and she loved him. He knew his absence would be hard on her, and he hoped to give her something to look forward to.

Joel was allowed to call back to Canada every ten days or so. He never wanted to talk about soldiering with his sweetheart, so when they did talk, they discussed their wedding, which was planned for February 2008.

Their romantic story struck the country as especially tragic. The Canadian media found Joel's death easy to focus on, as he was killed one day before his 23rd birthday, three days before going on leave, and a few months before his wedding. Amidst outpourings of sympathy for his fiancée and his family, it was easy for those who doubt the worth of Canada's mission in Afghanistan to raise questions about it, given the sacrifices our soldiers make. Our military may want recruits, but no one is calling on the masses for individual sacrifice in difficult times, not like generations previous to us. We're trying to live happy, safe lives. As Anna puts it, "There's a feeling that no one will hurt us; we're Canada."

This hasn't always been true. Canada's involvement in the

First and Second World Wars had massive public support in Anglophone Canada, despite the costs inflicted upon the nation. Hundreds of thousands of citizens were mobilized, and they died by the thousands. Canada underwent total war, and the nation went to extreme efforts in order to help win. Today, some accounts of Canadian involvement—particularly in the First World War—seem incredibly extreme and unbalanced. When soldiers died, thousands more ran to the colours to help with the fight. Sacrifices, some said, were for the greater good. Our efforts in the wars provided us with our mythos of nationhood, and survivors strove greatly to provide the sacrifices of the dead with a sense of meaning.

Our intervention in Afghanistan seems like something far different. With public support that is highly qualified and far from unanimous, it seems like it's more contentious than other wars we've fought. But Kristopher Porlier, a soldier and U of A student going to Afghanistan in January, disagrees.

"People always try to make Afghanistan out to be a new thing that Canada is engaged in," he says. "That we are in a 'quasi war.' I think that this makes it easier for us to accept [...] . As a soldier, I feel that there is little difference in why we are involved in this war as compared to those of the past. I find that people often forget why we are in Afghanistan."

Still, it's hard to deny that as long as our soldiers aren't substantially in harm's way, it's easy enough to bring them home. But once they start dying, the sending can no longer be undone. It's a real question as to whether their deaths are worth it. We're a generation that has been largely insulated from death in combat, and when it comes, it often challenges our perspective on life. When young Canadian soldiers die, bad beats good. Coping requires we reconcile this, somehow.

After all, we grew up in a generation which had not only never truly experienced war, but one which was raised on the story of victory in one of the greatest ideological battles our planet has ever seen. Since the end of the Cold War, victory has been a fact of life. For some years after, many thought the need for a military looked so primitive, so wasteful, so passé. Many wondered, "who needs to stand on guard anymore?"

I doubt Joel cared so much about the Zeitgeist. He knew, Anna says, that "extremists don't care who they hurt." Joel's awareness of Canada's role in Afghanistan changed as he developed in the Armed Forces. But he saw the effect of the Taliban's actions first hand. Once there, connected with real Afghans, he wanted to help them by protecting the development of their country.

For Joel, going there was his job, but it wasn't just about following orders: he believed in the mission.