



Troops need better mental-health care: Report

BY MIKE BLANCHFIELD, CANWEST NEWS SERVICE DECEMBER 17, 2008



Canadian soldiers take up firing positions in the battle-ravaged Taliban stronghold of Pashmul, Afghanistan earlier this month. A report issued Wednesday said Canada's military is not properly handling the mental-health needs of soldiers suffering from combat-related stress.

Photograph by: Ethan Baron/Canwest News Service, Canwest News Service

OTTAWA - As the rigours of combat in Afghanistan soar, the Canadian Forces is not meeting the mental-health needs of its members, many of whom are falling through the cracks, says a new report.

In her latest assessment, the Canadian Forces ombudsman says the Defence Department has failed to implement 18 of 31 recommendations from a six-year-old report on operational stress. That includes creating a database to actually track problems, as well as having a national co-coordinator to manage them.

"With the mission in Afghanistan, the level and intensity of combat operations have increased substantially," ombudsman Mary McFadyen said in her report released Wednesday.

"It has also become evident that the Canadian Forces and Canadian Forces members are strained almost to the breaking point," her report added. "The consequences for individuals who fall through the cracks are often devastating and long-lasting."

McFadyen's report is based on 360 interviews across the country.

The report recommends the creation of a database to monitor stress-related injuries, and a national co-

coordinator's post, as well as greater measures to ensure military families have access to the health care they need.

McFadyen said she was disappointed to find that almost half the recommendations made by her predecessor in 2002 were not acted upon.

"Maybe if they'd implemented our first set of recommendations back six years ago, these problems wouldn't be as severe as they are now," she told Canwest News Service.

Since then, Canadian Forces officials have ramped up the Afghanistan mission, which has placed additional strain on families and the military health-care system, she said.

"There are families back home suffering stress, and also caregivers - there's a big burnout issue with caregivers."

Former army captain Fred Doucette, whose recent book *Empty Casing* details his struggle with post-traumatic stress from his experiences in the 1990s in Bosnia, said the Canadian Forces has made progress, but still has a long way to go in treating mental illness.

"The key word is 'post.' You don't know when the symptoms are going to manifest," Doucette explained. "It could be after their family breaks up, it could be after they're addicted to alcohol, or they wake up in jail after a bar fight, charged with assault."

Doucette said the military health-care system is hitting many of the same roadblocks as the civilian system because of a shortage of trained mental-health specialists, especially in rural areas.

"If you get someone who is just into family therapy treating soldiers who have trauma related to war, they end up on a big learning curve and the soldier becomes a training aid," said Doucette.

"I don't think they were ready for the volume. Afghanistan was just the one that broke the camel's back."

Doucette lives in Gagetown, N.B., near the military base where the three latest Canadian soldiers to be killed in Afghanistan had lived with their families.

"There's a lot of people out there hurting," he said, referring to other bases that have been affected by Afghanistan, including Canadian Forces Base Petawawa, east of Ottawa, which was singled out in Wednesday's ombudsman's report as a case study.

The ombudsman found no psychiatric diagnosis or rehabilitative care was available at the remote rural base, forcing military personnel and their families to drive 160 kilometres to Ottawa.

The report noted that this was no different than for any civilian living in a small town, but the "important

difference” with Petawawa is that military families are forced to live there “to meet the operational requirements of the Canadian Forces.”

McFadyen noted in her report that former defence chief Rick Hillier seemed to support the view that the military had a “moral responsibility” to provide proper care to military families where they live and work.

“Unfortunately, the reality at CFB Petawawa does not reflect this statement,” she wrote.

A spokesman for Defence Minister Peter MacKay responded to the report Wednesday, saying: “We will continue to study the report in order to identify where further improvements can be made.”

© Copyright (c) Canwest News Service