



CARMAN POZZOBON IS RUNNING FOR CAPTAIN NICHOLA KATHLEEN SARAH GODDARD

In 2006, Capt. Nichola Goddard became Canada's first female soldier to die in combat. It was a death that shocked a nation. This is one of 15 Canadian stories we present as part the Citizen's Canada 150 coverage.

Nichola Goddard was attending Royal Military College and looking forward to a career in the Canadian Forces when a friend gave her advice: Don't tell the Forces you like camping.

That would be a quick way to be selected for the infantry, where camping meant hard, unforgiving days and nights out in all kinds of weather.

But Goddard was tougher than people realized. She had lived all over the world, from the tropics to northern Saskatchewan and Baffin Island. She was ambitious and athletic.

She told the recruiter she loved camping.

Goddard joined the infantry but later transferred to the artillery.

As a captain serving in Afghanistan, she was also the first female Canadian officer to be killed in combat.

It was 2006, and she was 26 years old. The story shocked people back home, at a time when deaths in Afghan combat were still a sad novelty. Goddard's death was the 16th among Canadians in Afghanistan, while by the end of Canada's mission there would be 158.

But her legacy is more than that.

"I think the major thing is that Nichola's service and death (unfortunately) highlighted to Canada and the world women's role" in the Forces, says Cindy Brown, a historian at the University of New Brunswick.

"Her contribution and story made it not abnormal to see a woman in combat or in a combat leadership role."





Goddard's biographer, Valerie Fortney, traces the young woman's unusual story back through her free-spirited family's roots.

Her parents, Tim and Sally, were living in Papua New Guinea when Nichola was born in 1980. Tim had been hired to start a school there. They stayed there for three years before moving to a fly-in Dene community in northern Saskatchewan, then eventually to Nova Scotia; Nichola had lived in 12 places by the time she was 15 years old.

"As her nomadic family made its way through various parts of Canada, she spoke Dene with the First Nations children of Black Lake, Saskatchewan, explored the natural wonders of Baffin Island and made lifelong friends from the Prairies to the East Coast," Fortney writes in her biography, *Sunray: The Death and Life of Captain Nichola Goddard*.

"The woman who as a child had dined on taro, caribou and seal had no trouble sitting down to a meal of goat soup with Afghan elders. Mentors both predictable and unorthodox shaped her world-view."

When she was accepted to Royal Military College, she told a friend it would be a great adventure.



Generations of Canadians grew to think of our armed forces as peacekeepers in the tradition of Cyprus and later the Balkans, whose duty was to prevent fighting. Afghanistan changed all that. Canada's role there was not like keeping Greek and Turkish Cypriots on opposite sides of a line. It had a constructive side, trying to help shattered communities rebuild. But there was also a bloody combat role.

Nichola Goddard transferred eventually to the artillery, and it was that role that took her to Afghanistan.

In Kandahar, she began as a gun sighting officer — in simple terms, the officer whose job it was to train big guns in the right direction. But soon, she was given a different role as a forward observation officer, or FOO, whose job was to give information to the artillery during combat.





The FOO rides in a Light Armoured Vehicle, a 17-tonne, eight-wheeled vehicle with a small crew that is the eyes of the artillery in a world where computers and drones can't do everything. The crew of four slept underneath the LAV for protection.

In May 2006, at the age of 26, Nichola Goddard was killed in action while performing this role.

The Calgary Herald later reported: "Supported by her team of three men, the well-regarded 26-year-old had just executed high explosive and illumination fire missions in support of Canadian troop manoeuvres against a known enemy — the first time a Canadian soldier had done so since the Korean War more than 50 years earlier.

"Yet that accomplishment would be overshadowed by a first that was better understandable to those in the civilian world.



"A chance ricochet of shrapnel, striking her in the back of the head and killing her instantly, put Capt. Goddard in the history books: she was the first combat-certified, female Canadian soldier to die in a combat role."

Looking back, her fellow soldiers all had stories about her leadership. Goddard wanted to avoid being singled out as a woman, or given special treatment. It frustrated her that after a series of sexual assaults inside the Kandahar base she had to accept that she couldn't walk anywhere alone at night.

And it was also a time when female soldiers had to put up with open resentment — either insults, or being shunned by other soldiers.





Members of her tight little team later told Valerie Fortney that Goddard had all great respect among those who knew her: She stood up for her soldiers as long as they did their jobs well.

“She really believed in what she was doing,” says UNB’s Brown. “One of the reasons why she joined in 1998 was that the recruiter who came to her (high) school was targeting the boys. That’s a message that resonates with me quite strongly, because I don’t like to be told what I can’t do.”

“Nichola was in one of the most dangerous jobs in the artillery and yet she did her job well and those who were working with her followed her and looked up to her leadership.”



She called her “representative of a young Canadian who is willing to sacrifice their life — I am deliberately not putting a gender pronoun there — in order to make a better world. I firmly believe that that is what she was trying to do.”

She says the young captain’s story “raises people’s awareness that women are in combat roles, they are in leadership positions, they are taking dangerous jobs in the Canadian Armed Forces. I would argue that every one of the 158 death notices that came home (during) Canada’s involvement in Afghanistan was as impactful. By highlighting women’s firsts all the time, we’re not actually making it normal for women to be involved.

“We can also look at Nichola Goddard as what the CAF can be if and when — and I think it’s well underway — it achieves full integration in the forces. Women bring a different mindset, a different mentality, a different set of skills with them. But they are also fully capable because you can’t get into the combat arms unless you pass the test to do it, no matter if you’re a man or a woman.

“I think that the issue of women’s integration, women in combat leadership roles, and the issues surrounding the sexual harassment issues are being raised because of people like Nichola. It ain’t perfect but, as I said, the CAF is leading the pack.”

Tim and Sally Goddard have since left their Calgary home and live in Prince Edward Island.

“After his daughter’s death he started going to Afghanistan to assist with training and certification of teachers,” Brown said. “Nichola helped in her way, and that was the way that he wanted to help.”

