

Canadian Afghan war veteran commits suicide after killing family

By Laurent Lafrance
11 January 2017

A tragedy that took place at the beginning of January in Upper Big Tracadie, a small and isolated town in northeastern Nova Scotia, has shed light on the consequences of the increasingly aggressive domestic and foreign policies of the Canadian ruling elite.

The Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) confirmed last Friday that 33-year-old Afghan war veteran Lionel Desmond shot himself after killing his mother, Brenda, 52; his wife, Shanna Desmond, 31; and their 10-year-old daughter, Aliyah. The murder-suicide has left the community, located some 200 miles from Halifax, in shock.

Relatives confirmed that Desmond suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) after he came back from Afghanistan, where he was deployed from January to August of 2007 as an infantry soldier in the Royal Canadian Regiment. He joined the armed forces in 2004 and was released 18 months ago.

This latest tragedy is an indictment of the entire ruling class and military apparatus that have used young men and women as cannon fodder to advance Canada's imperialist interests around the globe. When these youth come back home, usually traumatized by the cruelty of war and the atrocities inflicted on the civilian population—often with their own participation—they are left with inadequate health care and other vital services due to decades of budget cutting by all of the establishment political parties.

Desmond wrote on his Facebook page last month that he had hit his head on a light armoured vehicle and suffered back spasms after falling off a wall while in the military. He said he had been told he had post-concussion disorder as well as PTSD. Desmond's sister-in-law explained that he recently decided to stay at his grandparents' house because he was "getting so out of control," and that he was verbally aggressive with his wife.

Rev. Elaine Walcott, another relative, said, "Lionel loved his mother, his family, and he was a victim of post-traumatic stress disorder and the memories he didn't want to have." Lionel's sister, Cassandra Desmond, told CBC News: "My brother suffered in silence for 10 years fighting demons that we don't even know, seeing things, replaying events in his head..."

According to Shanna Desmond's aunt, Catherine Hartline, when Lionel Desmond returned from Afghanistan he sought treatment in Montreal but did not get the adequate assistance. "The poor guy needed help and they sent him up to Montreal and put a little Band-Aid on him and sent him back."

It was also revealed that Desmond tried to check himself into a mental health facility at St. Martha's Regional Hospital in Antigonish the day before the tragedy, but he was apparently told there were no beds and that the hospital did not have his files.

This revelation prompted Nova Scotia Premier Stephen McNeil to claim that his government, in conjunction with health authorities, would find out "what may or may not have happened" at St. Martha's. In another token gesture, the Canadian government announced that it would pay the costs of the funeral of Desmond and his family members.

The government is clearly seeking to wash its hands of the situation and cover up the fact that the lack of services at St. Martha is the result of years of austerity measures imposed on public services by successive Liberal, Conservative and NDP provincial governments.

An emergency room doctor who works at the hospital, Dr. Maureen Allen, told CBC how budget cuts had impacted the services provided. Allen said emergency rooms "are inundated" with people struggling with mental health and addiction issues, and that the facility no longer has a dedicated budget for mental health services.

Under both the previous Harper Conservative government and the current Liberal Trudeau government,

Veteran Affairs Canada has slashed millions of dollars, translating into hundreds of job cuts, closed offices that previously provided assistance to veterans and cut back on medical marijuana. In power, the Conservatives eliminated lifetime pensions for Afghanistan veterans and clawed back benefits. The number of VA employees shrank 21 percent between 2008 and 2014, resulting in the department's smallest workforce since 1998.

Many ill and injured ex-soldiers must wait for months to find out if they qualify for benefits. Documents obtained by *The Canadian Press* show that just over half of the 6,000 veterans who applied for disability benefits between April and July last year received a decision within 16 weeks.

Veteran services have also been targeted for privatization. The most recent job cuts imposed by the Liberals will now force veterans to deal with Medavie Blue Cross, a for-profit private insurance company, for their benefit claims.

According to reports, Desmond received treatment from a joint personnel support unit for a year prior to his release from the military in July 2015. The JPSU, which is meant to provide support to physically and mentally ill soldiers, is severely under-funded.

The horrific event in Upper Big Tracadie is the latest in a string of similar tragedies involving war veterans. According to a *Globe and Mail* investigation, at least 62 soldiers and veterans have killed themselves after serving on the dangerous Afghanistan mission. The most recent reported case took place in 2015, when Robert Giblin, a veteran of two Afghanistan tours, jumped to his death after stabbing his wife and throwing her body from a high-rise apartment in Toronto.

Nearly one in 10 Canadian military personnel who took part in the mission in Afghanistan (about 3,600 out of 39,000) are now collecting disability benefits for post-traumatic stress disorder. However, experts say the prevalence of the illness is likely much higher among Canada's combat troops. There are probably many ex-soldiers who have not reached out for benefits, and others who have never been diagnosed.

Calls by the media and politicians for better help for veterans are highly hypocritical. Above all, they seek to obscure the real cause of the Upper Big Tracadie tragedy: Canada's participation in imperialist carnage in Central Asia and around the globe. In fact, after wiping their crocodile tears, the Canadian ruling class and the media will continue to push for a more aggressive foreign policy.

The Afghan war played a critical role in the reassertion of aggressive Canadian militarism. It marked the definitive end of a period in which, for their own geopolitical interests, the Canadian ruling class presented itself on the global stage as a "peacekeeping" nation.

Military strategists and government advisers celebrated the Afghan intervention, which saw the Canadian Armed Forces assume the leadership role in counter-insurgency operations in Kandahar. In the words of one official, this was a "revolution" in Canadian foreign policy. The ruling class is not about to allow what it views as collateral damage to the lives of veterans and their families to get in the way of the ruthless assertion of its interests.

Desmond's fate—and the high number of soldiers suffering from PTSD—points to the real character of the Afghan war. Launched in 2001 shortly after September 11 as part of the US-led so-called "war on terror", the Afghan war has revealed itself as a neocolonial war in which the major powers sought to destabilize and dominate the entire energy resource-rich region.

The Conservatives and the liberals both supported Canada's participation in the war. For its part, the union-backed New Democratic Party, which made the withdrawal of Canadian troops from Afghanistan one of its main "progressive" policy planks, made an about-face in the 2008 election campaign when it sought a coalition with the Liberals and pledged to back Canada playing a leading role in the conflict through 2011.

Since then, the Canadian government has joined every military adventure led by the United States. Far from backing down from this war drive, the Trudeau government will soon announce a new deployment of Canadian troops in Africa to join US and French-led counter-insurgency missions and has already sent Canadian forces to Eastern Europe to menace Russia.

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