

'People should know what is going on there'; Former soldier Travis Schouten is still fighting to protect Afghan boys from what he calls systemic sexual abuse, writes David Pugliese.

The Ottawa Citizen

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Page: A1 / FRONT

Section: News

Byline: David Pugliese

Source: The Ottawa Citizen

Travis Schouten lives with the image of the rape of an Afghan boy at a Canadian base every day of his life.

Witnessing two men, one armed with a knife, sodomize the child during an incident in late 2006 helped drive the 26-year-old to the brink of mental collapse.

But the former corporal says the assault is just the tip of an iceberg and underneath lies the systemic sexual abuse of boys at the hands of Afghanistan's police and army. It's a practice, he says, the Canadian Forces has turned a blind eye to.

"It's disgusting," said Schouten, now retired after eight years in the military. "We're telling people that we're trying to build a nation there and we let this happen?"

"We allow rampant abuse of young boys at the hands of what is supposed to be their finest police officers and army officers, then what does that say?"

Schouten's allegations that Afghans were sexually abusing children at a Canadian base near Kandahar made headlines in 2008, but his claims were dismissed earlier this year by military investigators as unfounded.

He is, however, not alone in voicing his concerns.

Defence Department records show military police were upset about such incidents, but were told not to interfere.

Army officers also met in the summer/fall of 2007 to discuss the issue of Afghan security personnel "having anal sex with young boys," but their main concern was the media would somehow find out.

Others in the military note they were told such practices were an age-old part of Afghan culture. One soldier who e-mailed the Citizen stated he served at the same base at another time and troops had orders to stop any rapes. But he also noted they were told the practice of "Man Love Thursdays," as it was called, involved consenting Afghans and no one was raped by older men. The children involved were given small gifts or money in return for sex, soldiers say.

Schouten, however, questions whether a five- or six-year-old child, or even an 11-year-old, can consent. "The Canadian Forces wants people to think it's a cultural thing, that everyone is doing it, because it takes the onus of responsibility off them to stop it," he said.

The United Nations has also questioned arguments that sex with children is a cultural issue. In July 2008, a UN special representative spoke out against the Afghan practice.

"What I found was nobody talks about it; everyone says 'Well, you know, it's been there for 1,000 years, so why do we want to raise this now?' " said Radhika Coomaraswamy. "But somebody has to raise it and it has to be dealt with."

And not all Afghans are so accepting of what some claim is tradition. Afghan villagers this summer complained to British troops in Helmand province that Afghan police were abducting children to be used for sex.

Last year also saw an extremely rare event; three Afghan police officers who gangraped a 12-year-old boy and his father were sent to prison.

Although reports in a Toronto newspaper noted that Schouten saw the aftermath of the attack on a young boy, he says that is not accurate. He actually entered the headquarters and witnessed two Afghan security personnel sodomizing the child. "I walked in and they were raping a kid," he recalls. "The kid was bleeding. They guy with the camo fatigues had a knife in his hand."

He left the headquarters shaken. The Canadian unit had already been dealing with other problems with the Afghans and his immediate options were limited. "I wasn't going to start doing something at the scene," he recalled. "I'm in the middle of the ANP headquarters. What do I do; start shooting Afghan police? I'd get myself shot."

Afterwards he was approached by an Afghan interpreter who worked with troops. The man had with him a couple of five-year-boys who had also been allowed on the Canadian base. "He brought up the fact he likes to rape little boys," Schouten said. "He's telling me how he likes to use a knife on them."

Schouten said after the incident his life fell apart. He began drinking heavily. After returning from Afghanistan he was involved in a car accident that injured one of his passengers. He went absent without leave when he was supposed to be at a psychiatrist's appointment.

The army's reaction was to try to dishonourably discharge him, but Schouten successfully fought that. In August he was honourably discharged on medical grounds.

Schouten wasn't surprised the military investigation concluded his allegations were unfounded and his chain of command had not been informed of any such incidents.

Back in Canada, he told a lieutenant colonel and Defence Department officials of the incident, who in turn informed others in the army's leadership. However, since none of those people were in Schouten's direct chain of command, the Canadian Forces National Investigation Service could conclude nothing was reported, he explained.

Other soldiers were also reluctant to come forward. "Guys have mortgages, they have kids," explained Schouten. "If they go and get involved in this their careers will be stopped. Look what the army did to me."

Schouten isn't expecting anything different from an army board of inquiry launched last year. Although soldiers know Afghan security forces are having sex with children, the issue is too explosive to deal with, he adds.

Schouten said the rape and its aftermath shook his faith in the military.

"In my mind, when I signed up, it was a brotherhood to me," he explained. "I thought I was there for an established set of values and I loved that. I was wrong."

Schouten, of Sarnia, is now rebuilding his life and is going to university. "I'm putting myself back together," he said. "But at the same time I do feel people should be held accountable and people should know this is what is going on over there."

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OTTAWA  **CITIZEN**

Military investigation of sex abuse 'doesn't ring true'; Critics seek independent review of allegations Afghan children were raped on Canadian base

The Ottawa Citizen

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Byline: David Pugliese

Source: The Ottawa Citizen

Although it was acknowledged among Canadian troops and some military police that Afghan security personnel were sexually abusing children, investigators took just 11 weeks to determine there was nothing to the concerns raised by a soldier who said he witnessed such an incident, according to Defence Department records.

The Canadian Forces National Investigation Service decided not to send any of its investigative team to Afghanistan, but came to an initial determination in October 2008 that there was little to a soldier's claim he had seen two Afghans sodomizing a young boy at a Canadian installation outside Kandahar.

But MPs from the NDP and the Liberal party say the NIS investigation is flawed and it's time for military investigators to step aside and for an outside and independent organization to be brought in to get to the bottom of what happened.

The NIS was given the task of looking into the allegations on July 18, 2008, after the sex abuse issue was reported in the media and raised in the Commons. Dawn Black, the NDP defence critic at the time, had filed a complaint about the allegations.

According to the NIS, they conducted a thorough investigation that ended in May of this year and determined the sex-abuse allegations were unfounded.

But according to an e-mail sent by army commander Lt.-Gen. Andrew Leslie, the NIS had already concluded months earlier -- by Oct. 2, 2008 -- that there was nothing to the sex-abuse claims.

"An initial NIS investigation did not find anything substantive," Leslie wrote to Josée Touchette, the Defence Department's assistant deputy minister for public affairs. Leslie told Touchette that to be thorough, a board of inquiry would also investigate the issue.

The sexual abuse of young boys by Afghan military and police personnel is so commonly known that Canadian and other foreign soldiers have coined a phrase for it; they call it "Man-Love Thursdays," although at least one soldier has noted that the rape of children also took place on other days.

Two soldiers have already come forward to outline details about alleged sexual abuse of children at the hands of Afghan personnel at Canada's Forward Operating Base Wilson. Travis Schouten, then a corporal, said he saw two Afghan security members sodomizing a boy at the base in 2006.

Canadian soldier Tyrel Braaten also told the Toronto Star he saw a boy no more than 12 years old brought into the same base dressed in a wig and wearing lipstick. He was told by an Afghan interpreter the boy was "one of the bitches" and he later heard him crying in the nearby building. Three military chaplains have also come forward to detail their concerns about the incidents and how that was affecting the mental health of Canadian soldiers.

In addition, military records obtained by the Citizen question the extent of the NIS investigation.

A June 2008 e-mail from Lt.-Col. Stéphane Grenier confirms army staff and Defence Department officials held two meetings in the summer and fall of 2007 over concerns that Afghan army and police officials were "having anal sex with young boys." A member of Leslie's executive staff and one of his public affairs officers were involved in one of those meetings, according to the e-mail.

Other Defence records show military police also raised concerns about the issue and were told not to interfere in such incidents as they would not be supported in their actions by their chain of command.

Asked by the Citizen whether 11 weeks was enough time to conclude there was nothing to the sex-abuse allegations, NIS deputy commander Maj. Francis Bolduc said he did not know where Leslie got his information.

Bolduc said the NIS investigation wrapped up in May and "during the course of our investigation we determined the initial allegation concerning such incidents contained serious discrepancies."

Bolduc suggested the Citizen talk to Leslie. The newspaper requested an interview with the general on the sex-abuse issue, but it was declined. An army official noted that since a separate board of inquiry is still looking into the issue, it would be inappropriate for Leslie to comment.

In addition, Bolduc said the NIS could find no reports of sexual-abuse claims in the military police system and that allegations of abuse were never reported to the chain of command. "We put a high priority on this investigation," he noted. "We interviewed all persons who could have information."

The Citizen, however, has obtained a Defence Department e-mail noting that one military police officer in 2005-06 complained about a sexual-abuse incident involving Afghans to his chain of command. In that case, the Canadian commander complained to an Afghan officer who put a stop to the abuse. All the documents were obtained by the Citizen through the Access to Information Act.

The NIS said it interviewed close to 40 people for its investigation. Bolduc said investigators weren't sent to Afghanistan because most of the people who needed to be interviewed were in Canada.

But the NDP's defence critic, Jack Harris, questions the validity of the NIS report. "My initial reaction to the report was that it doesn't ring true and it still doesn't ring true that all of these allegations can be dismissed as having no substance at all," Harris said. "It doesn't pass the sniff test."

He said it is time for an outside police force to investigate.

Liberal MP Bryon Wilfert, vice-chairman of the special standing committee on Afghanistan, also suggested it is time for an outside police agency to become involved in investigating the sex-assault issue.

"There's always questions in the public mind whether certain organizations should investigate themselves," Wilfert said. "I think the severity of these allegations are such and (the NIS report) seems to fly in the face of pretty credible witnesses who have come forward."

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DND brass told of rape; Sex abuse and silence exposed. Three years ago, this Canadian soldier watched in horror as Afghan soldiers raped a young boy -- an act widely practised. Earlier this year, an investigation concluded that such sexual abuse claims were unfounded and commanders were not told about them. Now, records obtained by the Citizen reveal military leaders were told in 2007 about the abuse, which took place at a Canadian base.

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Byline: David Pugliese
Source: The Ottawa Citizen

Army staff and National Defence headquarters officials were told in 2007 that young boys had allegedly been sexually abused by Afghan security forces at a Canadian base in Afghanistan, but the concern at the time was that the incident might be reported in the news media, according to military records obtained by the Citizen.

In addition, last year Brig.-Gen. J.C. Collin, commander of Land Force Central Area, passed on to the senior army leadership the concerns raised by military police who said they had been told by their commanders not to interfere in incidents in which Afghan forces were having sex with children.

The newly released records raise questions about a military investigation that earlier this year concluded that allegations about sexual abuse of Afghan children by members of the Afghan army and police were unfounded. The Canadian Forces National Investigation Service also stated that its thorough investigation concluded allegations of such incidents were never reported to Canadian military commanders.

The allegations first surfaced publicly in June 2008 after concerns about the incidents, originally raised by soldiers and military chaplains, were reported in the news media.

Former Cpl. Travis Schouten told military officials he had witnessed an Afghan boy being sodomized by two Afghan security personnel at Canada's Forward Operating Base Wilson in Afghanistan in 2006. Another soldier also came forward to a Toronto newspaper to report a similar occurrence at the same base in 2006. A military chaplain talked about the abuse in a report sent up the chain of command at Canadian Forces Base Petawawa. Two other chaplains have also come forward to state that soldiers came to them upset about such abuses.

The issue is sensitive for the Canadian Forces and the federal government as the Afghanistan mission has been promoted to the public as being about protecting Afghan civilians. The Afghan National Army and police are seen as key to Canada's military withdrawal from that country in 2011.

It is the position of the Canadian Forces that its troops have no jurisdiction over the activities of Afghan military and police personnel, even those operating on Canadian bases.

The military records obtained by the Citizen through the Access to Information law note that a 90-minute meeting was held between an army public affairs staff member and a member of army commander Lt.-Gen. Andrew Leslie's executive staff in the summer/fall of 2007. According to the June 2008 e-mail written by Lt.-Col. Stephane Grenier, an adviser on operational stress injuries, the meeting focused on various controversies that might be brought out in the news media, including, "ANP/ANA members having anal sex with young boys."

ANP stands for Afghan National Police while ANA refers to Afghan National Army.

A second meeting about Afghan police and soldiers having sex with children was held later that week at National Defence headquarters involving senior members of the Defence Department's civilian and military public affairs staff, according to the e-mail.

In addition, on June 18, 2008, Brig.-Gen. J.C. Collin, commander of Land Force Central Area, passed on to Leslie's staff and Brig.-Gen. Ian Poulter the concerns raised by several military police officers. Collin called the e-mail from the military police commander, "rather disconcerting."

Included were details from military police who noted it was well known among Canadian troops that ANA and ANP personnel had sex with kids. Another was upset that military police were told not to intervene in such matters, according to the e-mail.

"At this late date I cannot specifically remember who delivered the said briefings however I can say that it was delivered in Gagetown and that it sparked considerable debate amongst the MP pers(onne), " noted one police officer in an e-mail Collin forwarded to the army's senior staff. The e-mail had been written by Maj. V.R. Ethier, the commander of 2 MP Unit, the army military police unit of Ontario.

"Of greatest concern to the MP members was the belief that if they were (to) intervene in any instances of this nature that they would not be supported by the C o C," the e-mail added. C o C is a military term for chain of command.

Having sex with children is against the law in Afghanistan, but some military officers have argued that since it is practised by some Afghans, particularly in Kandahar, then the Canadian Forces should not get involved in what should be seen as a "cultural" issue.

Maj. Francis Bolduc, deputy commanding officer of the Canadian Forces National Investigation Service, said his organization's examination of the issue found no evidence to support the sexual abuse allegations.

He said a thorough review of military police records showed no complaints were made about the issue and "all the allegations were unfounded." Bolduc noted that the investigation found the sexual abuse concerns were never reported to commanders.

Asked about the e-mails from Lt.-Col. Grenier and military police commander Maj. V.R. Ethier, he replied: "This is outside our lane."

Bolduc said those issues could be looked at by a board of inquiry into the issue that had been ordered by Lt.-Gen. Leslie.

Last June, Defence Minister Peter MacKay told the House of Commons that troops would not turn a blind eye to the abuse of children. "Let us be clear, in no way, shape or form have Canadian soldiers and certainly the Canadian government ever condoned or excused allegations of sexual abuse against children in this country or anywhere else," he said.

Another incident recounted in the Ethier e-mail detailed how a complaint was made about the sexual abuse of children to his chain of command in 2005-2006 in Kandahar and after that an Afghanistan commander dealt with the situation.

In addition, Brig.-Gen. Poulter received an e-mail on June 17, 2008 indicating that the sexual abuse issue had been raised by a Canadian colonel, a veteran of the war, during a military training session about Afghan culture. "He emphasized that it is not a practice that Afghan men discuss or practise in an open manner ... one of those things that Afghans know happens but nobody talks about," noted the e-mail to Poulter.

In addition, it appears senior Canadian commanders were also concerned about the abuse. In a June 13, 2008, letter to army commander Leslie, the office of Lt.-Gen. Michel Gauthier asked that an investigation be started into the sexual assault allegations. "Furthermore, initial queries suggest there appeared to be some concern of the part of the Roto 2 BG chain of command with respect to certain off-duty activities related to the same incidents later raised to the reporter," the letter noted.

The records also indicate the allegations sparked much debate inside the military on what to acknowledge in public. The first response was to deny anything ever took place.

However, a series of "talking points" were produced on June 17, 2008, in which it was acknowledged in regard to "Afghan male sexual abuse of underage males" that "Soldiers are generally aware of this practice taking place in Afghanistan; They know that abuse, let alone of minors is wrong by our standards; They will report this activity to the appropriate authorities."

It is unclear how the NIS investigation concluded the allegations were unfounded when other organizations inside the Canadian Forces were acknowledging that the sexual abuse was indeed taking place.

A board of inquiry, ordered by Leslie last year, is still under way. The board, which has not released its report, will look only at whether the one assault reported in media occurred. The board is to "identify the actions taken by individual CF members and the chain of command in response to that incident," as well as assess whether medical care was provided to any soldier who witnessed the incident.

Recommendations will be made on how to address future incidents of that nature, noted the board of inquiry outline produced by Leslie.

Leslie will review the contents of the report even though, according to military records, a member of his staff was informed about the sexual abuse issue in 2007.

Leslie, through a spokesman, declined to be interviewed as the board is still ongoing.

Asked whether there was a conflict of interest in allowing Leslie to review the findings of the board examining how the senior army leadership responded, an army official noted that Chief of the Defence Staff Gen. Walt Natynczyk will also review the records.

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THE WINDSOR STAR

You call this freedom?; While the Canadian military may jackboot the Taliban at will, soldiers have to tiptoe quietly

around Islamic justice that clashes with our version of the law and the consequences for breaking it.

The Windsor Star

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Section: Editorial/Opinion

Byline: Don Martin

Column: Don Martin

Source: Canwest News Service

Canadian soldiers in the main guard tower at forward operating base Wilson last summer winced when I asked about the sudden lineup of teenage boys along the mud walls of the neighbouring market.

"Wait a few minutes. You'll see," said one, his lip curling. "It's disgusting."

Sure enough, a handful of uniformed Afghan police officers emerged from their run-down detachment, walked through the barricades and started chatting up the dozen or so teens, some looking decidedly pre-teen.

A few minutes after they returned, the selected kids were waved through the main gates and went straight inside the police station. An hour later, when I left the observation post, the boys were still inside.

This evening ritual is often derided by soldiers as man-love Thursdays.

Afghan officials insist the notion of men and boys getting together the night before the Muslim holy day for sex is a myth. And, sure, it's theoretically possible the cops were merely good-deed-doers giving these teens reading lessons.

But Canadian soldiers insisted we'd just witnessed the regular Thursday evening negotiation for sex between Afghan men and boys, apparently for gifts or money.

It raises the disquieting question of how much responsibility Canadian soldiers shoulder, being military guests and all, to stop Afghan activity that would result in severe rape or child prostitution charges back home.

It should be stressed that the activity at FOB Wilson does not mean Afghan police and army officers are engaged in an epidemic of juvenile sodomy.

But the issue was given fresh legs last week by a military chaplain named Jean Johns, who reported that soldiers under treatment for post-traumatic stress syndrome had been told to "ignore" any assaults or rapes on Afghan civilians they'd seen.

The Toronto Star also reports a Canadian soldier overheard an Afghan soldier abusing a young boy in late 2006 and later saw the victim with signs of rape trauma.

There's not much doubt that, while the Canadian military may jackboot the Taliban at will, soldiers have to tiptoe quietly around Islamic justice that clashes with our version of the law and the consequences for breaking it.

If Canadian soldiers had intervened between Afghan police and boys clearly selling themselves for sex, for example, an important partnership would quickly sour.

Now that several years' worth of Taliban apprehensions have been freed during the Kandahar prison breakout, we arguably need what passes for an Afghan police force more than ever.

Still, Defence Minister Peter MacKay told the Commons he'd met with military leaders and insisted soldiers "report any allegation of unlawful activity they see."

That's easy for him to say, as our soldiers rumble through swaths of opium-producing poppies so vast, a single field would net Canadian law enforcement its average annual seizure.

There's not much even top military brass or diplomats can do to prevent marriages forced on pre-teen Afghan girls or women who have been raped from being charged with adultery for failing to convince male justice that the intercourse wasn't consensual. Global pressure barely prevented an Afghan student from being executed for downloading a report on women's rights from the Internet.

Yet Canadians have a right to question the sort of Afghan freedom our troops are being sacrificed to defend if police can openly molest young boys without fear of our intervention.

No wonder Canadian soldiers come home confiding that killing Taliban insurgents isn't as stressful as knowing an innocent kid may be regularly raped by an Afghan cop inside a Canadian military base.

Man-boy homosexuality has flourished in the aftermath of Taliban zero-tolerance laws, albeit a selectively punished offence in that era.

The strict social separation and severe consequences for pre-martial sex with women has given rise to the cultural wrinkle of men used for sexual recreation and women reserved for reproduction.

But that hardly makes it right when Afghan boys are police rape victims.

And it's wrong Canadian soldiers should be encouraged to report to their superiors so that Afghan officers being trained in law enforcement can be pressured to practice it themselves.

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Value of a Star
TORONTO STAR

Don't look, don't tell, troops told; Civilian sex assaults by Afghan soldiers ignored, military chaplain says

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Source: Toronto Star

CORRECTION: MP Bryon Wilfert was appointed as the Liberal party's national defence critic in March. A June 16 article about orders to Canadian soldiers in Afghanistan to ignore sexual assaults in the civilian population misstated Wilfert's given name and his position within the Liberal party. 20080617

Canadian soldiers serving in Afghanistan have been ordered by commanding officers "to ignore" incidents of sexual assault among the civilian population, says a military chaplain who counsels troops returning home with post-traumatic stress disorder.

The chaplain, Jean Johns, says she recently counselled a Canadian soldier who said he witnessed a boy being raped by an Afghan soldier, then wrote a report on the allegation for her brigade chaplain.

In her March report, which she says should have been advanced "up the chain of command," Johns says the corporal told her that Canadian troops have been ordered by commanding officers "to ignore" incidents of sexual assault. Johns hasn't received a reply to the report.

While several Canadian Forces chaplains say other soldiers have made similar claims, Department of National Defence lawyers have argued Canada isn't obliged to investigate because none of the soldiers has made a formal complaint, says a senior Canadian officer familiar with the matter.

"It's ridiculous," the officer says. "We have an ethical and moral responsibility to pursue this, not to shut our eyes to it because it would make it more difficult to work with the Afghan government.

"We're supposed to be in Afghanistan to help people who are being victimized. "

The independent claims bolster the credibility of an account provided by Cpl. Travis Schouten a Canadian soldier who served in Afghanistan from September 2006 through early 2007 and now suffers from severe post-traumatic stress disorder.

A Star story Saturday detailed an allegation levelled by Schouten that during his tour, he heard an Afghan national army soldier abusing a young boy and then saw the boy afterwards with visible signs of rape trauma, his bowels and lower intestines falling out of his body.

The alleged abuse occurred in late 2006 near a forward operation base, some 20 kilometres from the Kandahar Airfield. Another chaplain at CFB Petawawa, Joe Johns, said a third chaplain told a group meeting last summer about having been approached by several Canadian military police officers who asked for help reconciling the fact they hadn't done anything to stop abuses. That chaplain declined to comment.

Byron Wilfert, the Liberal Party associate critic for foreign affairs, says he has asked party officials for approval to grill Foreign Affairs Minister David Emerson about the sex-abuse allegations today during Question Period.

Wilfert called Schouten's claims "very serious and disturbing" and says Canada at least should have sent the Afghan government a diplomatic note about the allegations. "Anybody who says this is about cultural differences should have their head examined," he says.

Maj. Paul Doucette, a Canadian Forces spokesperson, says the military is aware only of Schouten's allegation and intends to investigate. Doucette didn't say why an investigation hasn't already taken place. Schouten last month described the assault while testifying to the parliamentary subcommittee on national defence. The testimony was given behind closed doors.

Doucette said in an email that "specific additional information would be required before any such issue could be raised with Afghan officials. However, allegations of this type of behaviour would be an issue for Afghan authorities to address under Afghan law."

Asked if Canadian Forces personnel are prevented from intervening in cases of abuse because of rules of engagement, Doucette wrote, "the general purpose of ROEs is to control the use of force by military forces in conducting their operations.

"All Canadian Forces members, whatever their rank and trade, are trained to inform their chain of command of significant incidents."

Lt. Col. Stephane Grenier says he has spoken to Schouten, believes his story, and adds he has talked to another Canadian soldier who claims to have witnessed a similar assault. Grenier has also counselled a British soldier who said he watched a young boy being raped by an Afghan soldier while his senior officer concluded a meeting nearby with Afghan army officers.

The sexual-abuse allegations put Canada in a thorny position with the local Afghan government and rekindle memories of past deployments that led to Canadian soldiers developing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

After serving in Bosnia, some soldiers were diagnosed with PTSD after rules of engagement prevented them from interfering when they witnessed civilians being raped by soldiers. Retired general Romeo Dallaire famously struggled with PTSD after the United Nations thwarted his efforts to stop a genocide in Rwanda in 1994.

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Hidden scars; Our troops in Afghanistan are being gutted by post-traumatic stress disorder and experts say we're leagues behind the U.S. in dealing with the crisis

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Byline: Rick Westhead
Source: Toronto Star

After spending a muggy afternoon last July drinking beer and bickering with his brother during a round of golf, Cpl. Travis Schouten was in a sour mood when he returned to his mother's well-kept bungalow on a quiet side street.

Belligerent from the moment he walked through the door, the 24-year-old Schouten agreed to take a nap and cool off.

He reappeared a few moments later.

"He ran into the kitchen, darting from window to window and crouching, acting like he was holding a gun, yelling out co-ordinates or something," says his mother, Ann LeClair.

Schouten was suffering a flashback, another in a series of erratic, sometimes psychotic, behaviours that have included three suicide attempts, alcohol abuse, insomnia and delusions. He spent six months in late 2006 and early 2007 in Kandahar with the Royal Canadian Regiment's Seven Platoon, Charles Company, a 38-soldier unit that took part in foot patrols in the grape groves and poppy fields west of Kandahar airfield. "Corporal Schouten, stand down!" his stepfather, Drew LeClair, barked. That snapped Schouten out of his state - for a moment.

As the LeClairs explained to him what had happened, Schouten ran out the back door, dropped to his belly, and crawled across the patio into the rose bushes, screaming he was under attack.

LeClair, a former teacher, knew that splashing water on the faces of special-needs students sometimes brought them out of distressed states. So the two hosed down their son.

"At that point, I'm crying and he's bloody from crawling on the brick and the rose thorns," LeClair says. "For the next five hours, he lay down on the sofa and I couldn't put the lights off or leave him alone. Every time he started screaming, I started flicking water on his face."

Schouten is one of a growing number of soldiers who are returning from Kandahar with hidden scars. The Canadian Forces says one in seven soldiers arrive home suffering from debilitating mental conditions.

They struggle to cope with symptoms such as severe depression, flashbacks, suicidal tendencies, alcoholism, drug use, angry outbursts, and sleep disorders. Some are suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which did not formally exist until 1980, when the American Psychiatric Association recognized it as a combat-related illness.

Soldiers have always returned from battle with pent-up rage and haunting nightmares, dismissed in World War I as "low moral fibre," understood as shell shock during World War II, and personified by the broken Vietnam veteran.

Warfare changes with the times and has changed yet again. In Afghanistan, teenage boys strap bombs around their waists and blow you up. Troops in convoys sit cooking in the back of light armoured vehicles, uncertain about when an insurgent might use a cellphone to detonate a bomb as they drive by.

"Every day, our enemies are coming up with something more cunning than the day before," says Kathy Platoni, a clinical psychologist in Centerville, Ohio, who works with the U.S. Army.

"Our soldiers go through these deployments where they are targets literally every minute they're there and then they come home and, for the most part, they're left to their own devices. We just don't have enough (resources) to go around for people with wounds that don't bleed."

Treatments have changed, too. The Canadian Forces is making progress, securing funding for mental health care, opening clinics across the country and introducing innovative peer counselling programs. But a chronic lack of medical workers means some soldiers are waiting for months before they are diagnosed and receive treatment.

Dr. Mark Zamorski, who is in charge of the post-deployment health of Canada's soldiers, says he isn't surprised by reports of delays.

"Often there are waits longer than I would like," he says. "I've heard stories of soldiers having to wait 10 weeks for an assessment."

Some, like Schouten, have slipped through the cracks while they wait.

Cpl. Marie Yanchak, a full-time reservist from Dryden, Ont., arrived at the Canadian Forces base at Kandahar Air Field on Aug. 14, 2006, and worked as a clerk until she returned home on Feb. 8, 2007. She worked near the "graveyard" where the charred, twisted shells of vehicles maimed by Taliban bombs were dumped after they were cleaned of body parts. Yanchak, 38, struggled to cope with the volume of Canadian casualties. She couldn't sleep and lashed out at colleagues. She says she met five times with Col. Randy Boddam, a military psychiatrist.

"Col. Boddam asked me if I was suicidal and when I said I wasn't, he said he was sure what I had, whatever it was, wasn't PTSD," Yanchak says.

Her troubles continued after her return to Petawawa, where she was surrounded by things that triggered her stress. Artillery shells rained down on a practice range near her home. Troops marched daily past her front door. Even lightning bothered her. "It was so bad at one point I had diarrhoea in my pants in the car," she says.

Yanchak went to a family doctor on the base and asked for a referral to a psychiatrist.

"I was told they were totally booked for at least a month to six weeks with more troops preparing for deployment," Yanchak says.

After phoning the base 17 times - she kept a log of her calls - Yanchak gave up. Last summer, she spent \$25,000 to move to London to be closer to Parkwood Hospital, known for treating war veterans.

Yanchak met with an intake worker July 6. Two weeks later, she met with counsellor Dana Martel. On her second visit, Aug. 29, Yanchak says Martel told her "I think you have PTSD," she says. On Sept. 18, Dr. Don Richardson diagnosed Yanchak with PTSD and major depression.

Yanchak was prescribed Effexor, an anti-depressant, and admitted to a weekly group therapy session. She is awaiting her medical release from the Canadian Forces.

"I would love to go back to Afghanistan but it wouldn't be with the Canadian Forces," Yanchak says, sitting at her dinner table in her new home on the outskirts of London, Ont. "I have been totally abandoned by our military."

"I've heard exactly that same story a number of times from other soldiers," says Zamorski.

Dr. Greg Passe, a Vancouver psychiatrist and former Canadian soldier, says he knows soldiers in Quebec who have just returned to Canada and must wait six weeks or more before being assessed.

But testing and timing are tricky. Schouten and LeClair believe - and Passe agrees - that soldiers are tested for PTSD far too early and then there is no follow up.

"They should test when soldiers get back, and then after a year and again after two years, at the very least," says Passe.

Zamorski counters that soldiers following any deployment of two months or more are assessed with a 100-question survey three or four months after their return to Canada, adding that soldiers bristle at too much testing. "There's a diminishing return to doing too much," he says. "You can't screen them every five minutes."

Schouten looks like the guy in a recruiting poster. He is 5-9 with broad shoulders and powerful arms, as you would expect in an infantryman. Sitting at his mother's kitchen table one recent afternoon, he wore Ray-Ban sunglasses and a tan baseball hat.

"One of the biggest things I've lost is my sense of self," Schouten says. "Whether or not you believe in Afghanistan, this is a job I signed up for and I'm proud to do it as a Canadian. We showed the world over there don't mess with us. We can take care of stuff. Now I'm left behind. I'm not a soldier, not really a civilian. I'm kind of living between these two worlds. Who am I now?"

In the beginning, Schouten saw the Canadian army as a lifeline. After attending two high schools in Sarnia, Schouten, a skinny kid with an interest in basketball and other sports, wasn't sure where he was headed.

After school on Sept. 11, 2001, he walked into his mother's living room as newscasts showed the World Trade Center ablaze.

"He said, 'Oh my God, I have to join the army. We have to stop this. We cannot let this happen to Canada,'" LeClair says.

On Jan. 28, 2002, Schouten enlisted at a recruiting centre in London and went for 10 weeks of basic training in Saint-Jean, Que., followed by 16 weeks of intensive battle school in Meaford, Ont., and was steeped in the art of war. He was taught to use assault rifles and machine guns, grenades and pistols,

and to use a knife to prod his way clear of a minefield. But Schouten and the others had no clue of the horrors they would soon face.

"There's really nothing you can do to prepare people for what they're going to face," says Lt. Col. Stephane Grenier, who oversees a peer-to-peer counselling program for Canadian soldiers. "What are you going to do, take them to the morgue? When I was there, there was a soldier who was removing a body from a burned-out vehicle and the head came right off in his hands. You can't prepare for that."

Schouten was assigned to the Canadian Forces base in Petawawa, and in the summer of 2002, he shipped out to Bosnia for an uneventful six-month tour.

In September 2006, Schouten, then 22, deployed with the Royal Canadian Regiment to Kandahar. Canadian soldiers had been on the ground in Afghanistan for some four years.

"It couldn't have been more different from Bosnia," LeClair says. "One morning, Travis called and while we were talking, the phone dropped. I could hear Travis running and yelling, 'What the fuck.' It was 5:15 in the morning and I'm hysterical and all of a sudden, it became real. Fifteen minutes later, Travis called back and says, 'Sorry about that. That one was a little close.' You want to yell through the phone, 'Come home.'"

During most of his time outside the wire, Schouten took part in the foot patrols. He ate American-issued rations that typically consisted of Kraft dinner, a cookie, fruit and beans - "the Canadian rations aren't enough food" - and from time to time, patrolled Kandahar City.

"It's a dusty shantytown," he says. "The streets are full of people and wrecked vehicles and you get a lot of dead-eyed stares. There was no soccer with kids or anything. Our job was to kill the Taliban. We were there to fight. It was other guys who came in behind us who sat down for tea with village elders."

What he saw would haunt him. He says he was told by an Afghan translator about "Man Sex Thursday," a weekly routine in which Afghan soldiers, police and translators sexually abused young boys. Schouten is overwhelmed by guilt for not having intervened when he heard what he believes were the cries of boys being sexually assaulted, sounds he says were corroborated when he later saw a young boy, barely alive, with signs of rape trauma. His bowels and lower intestines had fallen out of his body.

Canadian Forces spokesperson Maj. Paul Doucette says the Army will conduct an investigation into Schouten's claim and has not raised the allegation with local authorities. "Specific additional information would be required before any such issue could be raised with Afghan officials," Doucette says. "However, allegations of this type of behaviour would be an issue for Afghan authorities to address under Afghan law."

Schouten also wrote that while at Strong Point West, a compound of mud walls that provided cover to soldiers protecting a main road, his platoon came under fire and took position on the roof. Canadian artillery exploded nearby, sending white-hot slivers of shrapnel whistling through the air.

When Schouten descended from the roof, a sergeant was waiting for him. "'Sorry', the sergeant said," according to Schouten's email account. "'I forgot to tell you guys on the roof that arty was coming in.'"

"I have never in my life wanted to kill a man as I did at that moment," Schouten wrote.

In April 2007, Schouten was stationed at Petawawa. He couldn't sleep or stay focused and his drinking was out of control. When he asked for help, he says Dr. Stefan Boyle prescribed a host of medications: antidepressants Effexor, Terazadone and Clonazepam; insomnia medication Imovanet and Seroquel, used to treat schizophrenia and bipolar disorder.

At about 5 p.m. on June 10, 2007, Schouten phoned LeClair and read her a suicide note. While Drew kept him on the phone, Ann reached one of Schouten's friends, who agreed to stay with him until LeClair could drive from Sarnia. She met with Cpt. Steve Brown and was told Schouten had been listed as AWOL for five days. "(Brown) wouldn't even look at us, all he would do was stare at Travis," LeClair says. "He told Travis he had been (in combat) and that Travis just needed to suck it up. I wanted to slap him."

LeClair reached Boyle, the base's top doctor, on the phone the next day. The conversation was short and terse. "He says, 'I don't have to talk to you, we take care of our own,'" LeClair says.

"That hasn't been working too well for you," LeClair says she replied. "Now I understood why Travis thought he was nuts."

Neither Brown nor Boyle were available for comment. Brown did not return several voice messages. A colleague of Boyle's in Petawawa's health services unit, refused to pass a message to him. "I can't give you any information," she said, hanging up the phone. Doucette declined to discuss Schouten and Yanchak, citing privacy laws.

Some psychiatric experts say Canada is making progress.

A series of mental health clinics for veterans have opened across the country. In 2002, the Department of National Defence and Veterans Affairs started a program for veterans to act as peer counsellors for those who suffer war-related mental traumas. About 40 veterans now work full-time as counsellors.

"It's cutting edge. We're actually hoping the U.S. military builds a program using Canada as a guide," says Dr. Charles Figley, a Florida psychiatrist who is a noted U.S. expert in the field of PTSD.

"There's no leadership in the U.S.," he says. "Everyone says we should go to the VA and they'll do it, but peer support is actually a radical idea. There are liability issues because you can't really control what happens with the veterans who are acting as peer supporters."

Just this month, DND started training corporals in line to become master corporals to help comrades suffering post-deployment health problems, says Grenier. "Instead of prescribing medication, we want them to say, 'It's okay that you feel that way, let's get a coffee and talk about it.'"

Life hasn't become easier for Schouten. In November, the military began investigating his suicide attempt and Schouten was asked by an investigator to fax his account of the episode. Four times. He was repeatedly told his file had been misplaced, LeClair says. A Canadian officer involved in the investigation confirms that account.

"It's shameful, the treatment he received," says the officer, who does not have clearance to publicly discuss Schouten's case.

In April, Schouten and LeClair flew to Ottawa to testify about PTSD during an in-camera Parliamentary subcommittee session. "We were told the information was too emotional for the Canadian people," LeClair says.

Schouten last month checked himself into Toronto's Bellwood Health Services. He left the centre this week, roughly a month before he was scheduled to be released.

Critics slam Afghan rape probe; Investigation drags even as more soldiers accuse Afghan allies of abusing young boys

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The Canadian military's National Investigation Service is telling some witnesses it could take up to two years to investigate claims by Canadian soldiers that they've seen Afghan soldiers and interpreters raping young boys near Canadian bases outside Kandahar.

That would leave the problem unresolved until about 2011 - the year Prime Minister Stephen Harper has pledged to pull Canada's soldiers from the country - when the issue could well become moot.

"It's unconscionable," said Michel Drapeau, a retired Canadian colonel who practises military law in Ottawa. "It's completely unacceptable that they would take two years. How many more boys will be forced to go through this before we finally get around to looking at this seriously?"

Canadian investigators, who were initially slow to move on the claims, saying they lacked formal complaints, began reviewing the allegations in July at the request of military police.

That followed comments by Gen. Rick Hillier, then Canada's top soldier, who said in June that Canadian soldiers have a duty to intervene when they see abuse committed.

"We have all the authority we need," Hillier, who has since retired, told the Commons defence committee. "If somebody is being seriously abused and we are witness to it, we are not going to stand by ... no ambiguity from this chief of defence staff," Hillier told the committee, adding he'd just "reconfirmed that direction through the entire chain of command into Kandahar province."

Soldiers who allege they have witnessed assaults are continuing to return home from Afghanistan seeking trauma counselling.

The latest soldiers to request counselling are from a group of about 30 based in Newfoundland, said a senior military source who asked not to be identified. A medical officer is scheduled to go to Newfoundland to help the soldiers later this month.

In June, the Star reported that several Canadian soldiers had complained about the abuse of Afghan children to military officers in Afghanistan and chaplains and medical staff in Canada.

The first soldiers to complain said their allegations were ignored.

John Pike, an analyst with GlobalSecurity.org, a Washington-based military think tank, said a two-year timetable is "preposterous."

"Two years is enough time to complete your doctoral dissertation."

By way of comparison, Pike said the U.S. military took mere weeks to complete an investigation into an Aug. 22 airstrike on a suspected Taliban compound in Azizabad, a town in the western province of

Herat. Pike said the investigation was complex, but it was able to quickly conclude that 33 civilians had died in the strike - not the five to seven civilians the U.S. Army had said were killed.

A Canadian Forces source confirmed that the investigation into abuse in Afghanistan remains "in a preliminary stage."

"We are pulling together every detail on this issue, and an investigation is underway to establish the facts surrounding these allegations," a forces spokesperson wrote in an email.

"No further details will be discussed so as not to compromise the ongoing investigation."

Among the witnesses being pursued by the NIS is an American dog handler who was employed by the Canadian military and was stationed at a forward operating base.

The dog handler allegedly witnessed rapes and complained to Canadian officers. The NIS hopes to determine whether the handler's complaint was ignored, a source said.

The NIS could file criminal charges against Canadian military police or officers if it finds they ignored complaints. Yet investigators aren't sure they have jurisdiction to charge Afghans who may have committed rapes, even in the case of interpreters hired by Canada.

"I'd say it would be almost impossible for the Canadians to prosecute Afghan citizens," said retired Canadian major general Richard Rohmer.

The NIS has interviewed soldiers such as Cpl. Travis Schouten a Sarnia native who in 2006 was based at Forward Operating Base Wilson in Afghanistan.

Schouten said he heard an Afghan soldier raping a young boy at one of the outposts near Kandahar and later saw that the boy's lower intestines had fallen out of his body, a sign of trauma from the assault. Schouten has been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress syndrome and the military intends to have him discharged.

A Canadian military chaplain has said she has heard similar accounts from other soldiers.

And Lt. Col. Stephane Grenier said he counselled a British soldier who said he watched a young boy being raped by an Afghan soldier while his senior officer concluded a meeting nearby with Afghan army officers.

The Afghan rape allegations are the subject of two investigations.

Besides the NIS, a military board of inquiry is also examining the rape claims

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VOICE of the GTA
TORONTO STAR

Military to probe response to sex charges; Afghan soldiers accused of assaulting children

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The head of Canada's army has launched an investigation into reports that Afghan soldiers were assaulting children and how the Canadian Forces responded when they heard about the allegations.

Lt-Gen. Andrew Leslie, chief of the land staff, yesterday announced that a board of inquiry has been convened to investigate the circumstances surrounding allegations of assault by Afghan National Security Forces members in late 2006 or early 2007.

The investigation appears to be a response to Star articles in June that highlighted troubling allegations of sexual assault by members of the Afghan forces on young boys.

"We will examine and report on these allegations to determine what may have occurred, the circumstances surrounding these allegations, what the Canadian Forces responsibility is in instances such as these, what actions were taken as a result, and to make specific recommendations for the future," Brig.-Gen. Glenn Nordick, who has been tapped to lead the investigative team, said in a release.

In June, the Star reported the story of Cpl. Travis Schouten, who served in Afghanistan where he was told by an Afghan translator about "Man Sex Thursday," a weekly routine in which Afghan soldiers, police and translators sexually abused young boys.

A military chaplain told the Star at the time that Canadian soldiers in Afghanistan were ordered by commanding officers "to ignore" incidents of sexual assault among the civilian population.

A military spokesperson was unable to confirm yesterday whether the new investigation is related to these assaults. However, the news release announcing the probe says it "stems from allegations reported in the media of possible abuse of Afghan minors by Afghan National Security Forces."

The probe appears to centre on the allegation levelled by Schouten, who told the Star how he is overwhelmed with guilt for not having intervened when he heard what he believes were the cries of boys being sexually assaulted. He says he later saw a young boy, barely alive, with signs of rape trauma.

The inquiry is expected to be completed next spring.

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