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Preface

Diplomacy is not supposed to be lethal.

That was my thought as I sat with the leadership of Canada's diplomatic corps at a sombre memorial service for my colleague, Glyn Berry. A friendly, funny and smart man of vast experience, he had volunteered to go from New York, where he was a senior diplomat at the UN, to Afghanistan to lend his diplomatic skill and political analysis to the Canadian forces in Kandahar so they could navigate the treacherous terrain of the Taliban homeland.

An expert on peacekeeping, he was the first Canadian diplomat to work on the front line in that theatre of war. He was killed on Sunday, January 15, 2006, when a Taliban suicide car bomber smashed into his G-Wagon (a lightly armoured Mercedes SUV), killing him and injuring the three soldiers he was riding with. Fifty-nine years old, he left behind a wife and two sons.

I was at home in Chelsea, Quebec, when the news came in on my Blackberry. I was shattered. We needed civilian diplomats and aid workers to go to Afghanistan, to help the Afghans rebuild their country so they would believe in their government and leave the Taliban behind. Canada has the best small army in the world, but counterinsurgency is the hardest kind of war to win—killing the enemy is not enough. If we couldn't help the Afghan people, what were we even doing there?

Sitting in the memorial, I thought long and hard about what we were asking people to do, and what it meant for Canada to enter into hot combat in a distant country. And then the government asked me to go. Four years later, I was to be the last RoCK (Representative of Canada in Kandahar) to lead Canada's civilian mission.

Canada ended its combat mission in Kandahar in 2011, but our military mission to provide training and support in Afghanistan came to an official end on March 15, 2014—Canada's longest war. Most of us in Kandahar left as quickly as possible, anxious to return to our families and get on with new jobs. There was never a chance to process what was the most intense work experience of our lives.

Now, ten years later, the international mission has collapsed in failure and the Taliban are in power. My publisher convinced me it was time for a book that conveyed the human experience of what it was like to be in Kandahar, the difference we made and how it changed us.

Unwinnable Peace is based on interviews with twenty-five people with whom I worked: civilians, soldiers and Afghans. Most discussions were conducted online with individuals across Canada and all over the world. I reached out to Global Affairs Canada and they permitted their employees to speak to me on the record. Unless otherwise noted, information provided by these individuals was obtained during those discussions. These interviews were not vetted by anyone at Global Affairs. The views contributors shared with me are their own and do not necessarily reflect those of any government or organization.

Not everyone I contacted agreed to talk to me. The reasons differed but triggering re-traumatization was common. Most wanted to talk. There were a few who believed their careers would suffer if they spoke candidly about their experience, notwithstanding departmental approval. I have used pseudonyms where attribution was a concern.

Of course, everyone who was there has a different story and a different way of looking back. Some of us went out of a sense of duty and to support our troops. Some were curious; others wanted adventure. Everyone remarked on the impossibility of describing the experience to people who did not go through it.

This book has been a personal journey of exploration and discovery. When I began to write, I didn't know what to think or how to conclude. My experience in Afghanistan left me mentally immobilized by the idea that I might have spent a year of my life on a fool's errand. I've come to realize that there are lessons to be learned and capabilities—like cleaning up prisons and promoting governance in territory dominated by warlords—to be drawn upon the next time young men and women, military and civilian, are asked to risk their lives for our country.

We can't know if and when Canada will have to mount another mission of this size, scope, difficulty and risk. However, the arc of conflict and state failure that threatens global peace and security is plain to see. It runs from Afghanistan through Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Somalia, Sudan, Libya and, on our doorstep, Haiti. Israel and Palestine are locked in a conflict they can't solve alone.

We could have shirked our international obligations and refused to go to Afghanistan. But we didn't. Being a capable and trustworthy ally is fundamental to Canadian national security and sovereignty. In Kandahar, we paid our dues to the NATO alliance. We also made contributions to the lives and well-being of Afghans, of which some will endure.

I believe examining our role in Kandahar will make readers both proud and sad—angry, too. I am.

akes.