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## ROADSIDE BOMBS: PROTECTING OUR TROOPS

# How one soldier cheated death

**Petty Officer James Leith and his 13-tonne vehicle went airborne and landed with a 'sickening crumple'**

Mar 23, 2009 04:30 AM

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(15)**ALLAN WOODS**  
OTTAWA BUREAU

OTTAWA – The sun was rising on the horizon and the birds were chirping on the morning that Petty Officer James Leith came face to face with his roadside bomb.

The navy clearance diver was at the turret of his Bison armoured vehicle, heading south along Route Comox, a dusty unpaved road in Pashmul, just west of Kandahar City.

"I remember thinking it was going to be a really good day. Little did I know," said Leith, a 41-year-old Brampton native now based at CFB Shearwater in Nova Scotia.

Moments later, the explosives expert and his two-man crew struck a roadside bomb, a deadly weapon the Canadian military had sent him to Afghanistan to defuse and destroy in a fight against a Taliban force that had increasingly turned to guerrilla tactics



PAUL DARROW FOR THE TORONTO STAR

James Leith with a bomb disposal robot at CFB Shearwater, N.S. His remote unit was destroyed in an attack in 2006.

**Map: Canadians killed in Afghanistan****A map of the home towns of Canada's Afghan dead.**[View Map](#)

"There was a sensation of being airborne, that kind of suspended-in-midair feeling when you know you're not touching anything solid. Then there was that sickening crumple when we landed again," Leith said of his Sept. 28, 2006 encounter with the improvised explosive device.

Unlike the 63 other Canadians who have died from roadside bombs, Leith lived to tell his story – an experience for which he will be awarded with the Star of Courage.

The honour, announced last week, is bestowed on those who have shown "conspicuous courage in circumstances of great peril."

His 13-tonne Bison, significantly heavier with its extra armour and equipment, was thrown nine metres forward through the air. The explosion dropped Leith back into the hatch and his vehicle plunged into a dusty darkness as it returned to ground.

Its electrical system had failed, communications were down and everyone around – including a U.S. team working to clear the route of roadside bombs and the Blackhawk and Apache helicopter crews keeping watch overhead – feared for their comrades' lives.

His tale demonstrates both the great risk to soldiers on the ground and the results of hours of drills, training and preparation that allow troops to keep a clear head amid the chaos.

In the pitch-black aftermath of the explosion, Leith patted himself down, checking for wounds, missing limbs. There were none.

He called out to make sure his driver just ahead of him was okay. He was. Then they called back to Cpl. Jim Lightle, the combat engineer travelling in the rear with the robots, ropes, pulleys, X-ray equipment and other tools of the bomb disposal trade.

First there was silence, then a grunt. When they scrambled into the rear hatch, they found Lightle slumped and suffering from the blast, which had cut into the Bison's hull about 60 centimetres from where he'd been seated.

He was conscious and alert enough to know that the exposed bone from his shattered right leg signalled a serious injury. But five minutes after the blast he was on his way, via U.S. helicopter, back to Kandahar Airfield. Within 20 minutes, he was in his first of what would be several surgeries on the years-long road to recovery.


When the medical threat was dealt with and a follow-up enemy attack never materialized, Leith went to work on a post-blast investigation that revealed something even more serious than the ordeal his crew had just faced.

"I discovered an area of disturbed ground and I started to investigate it, I started to excavate a little bit. I knew right away when I started to uncover it that it appeared to be a large explosive," he said.

They say that bomb disposal experts are a different breed, and Leith proved that on this morning in Kandahar's Zhari district. After setting up a security cordon and pushing everyone else back a safe distance, he approached, positioning himself right over top of the double mine.

"I really had nothing left except your old standards: my wits, skills and my good old trusty bayonet that the engineers had given me," he said. "My remote means had been destroyed in my vehicle."

The hole in the ground was filled with two anti-tank mines and about 45 kilograms of explosives. The

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bombmaker had run a detonation cord from the mines to a large, highly flammable napalm mixture about half a metre away. To the side of the napalm was a pressure plate that would activate the deadly, though unsophisticated device.

"I was kind of laughing," he said. "I was like, `If this goes up ... I won't feel anything it'll be so quick.'"

With just the bayonet – a tool as foreign to the diver's usual kit as Afghanistan is to the depths of the Atlantic Ocean – Leith dismantled the power source, the pressure plate, and neutralized the IED.

"His courageous actions enabled the reopening of a vital route for coalition forces," his commendation reads.

But Leith feels overwhelmed by the recognition for something he says soldiers had dealt with before he arrived in Kandahar and will be dealing with as long as Canadian troops are deployed to Afghanistan.

"It's just part of the job. Unfortunately everybody's got a story, everybody's got an experience they can relate to."

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#### re: Rational Thought

one more point you said that more people have been killed in Toronto, thats true, but over 5 million people live in Toronto and around, we have 2500 troops in Afghanistan at a time some the percentage killed in Afghanistan is far far higher than in Toronto. Hardly Rational Thought.

Submitted by mbr1967 at 3:42 PM Monday, March 23 2009

[Agree](#) | [Disagree](#) | [Alert a Moderator](#)

#### re: Rational Thought

wrong. 116 Canadians are dead, countless afghans are dead. The Taliban are stronger. The mission was to defeat Al Qaeda thats done, the we have over stayed our welcome over 70% of Afghans want us gone. Lets give them their wish, leave the country to them and stop wasting Soldiers lives in a lost cause.

Submitted by mbr1967 at 3:33 PM Monday, March 23 2009

[Agree 1](#) | [Disagree 2](#) | [Alert a moderator](#)

#### Are we in Soviet Russia?

And is the Star now the official paper of the Canadian Department of Propaganda. Stories like

this paint a far too rosy picture of whats occurring in Afghanistan. Regardless of some nice story about a Canadian this article totally misses out on the real news thats happening over there.

Submitted by Fart at 1:05 PM Monday, March 23 2009

[Agree 1](#) | [Disagree 2](#) | [Alert a Moderator](#)

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### How come

the Taliban are winning with IEDs, rifles, RPGs etc & we are losing with all the killing machines? It's simple; they are fighting for their country, their home, tends to make for better fighters, they have a real reason to fight. I seriously doubt very many of our guys believe in the mission once they've been there for a while, they are fighting for their buddies as soldiers always do but they know they are NOT fighting for Canada.

Submitted by biker650 at 12:42 PM Monday, March 23 2009

[Agree 1](#) | [Disagree 4](#) | [Alert a moderator](#)

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### Not a pointless mission.

No mbr1967, the mission isn't pointless. Canadians along with our allies have made a huge difference to the lives of the average Aghan, especially the girls who now get to go to school. And smartguy, seen any terrorist attacks on N. America lately? I think the mission is a success on that front. I am not sure what you mean by "blown up every day." There have been 116 Canadians killed, and we have been their since Chretien sent the troops. Over that period more people have been shot to death in Toronto.

Submitted by Rational Thought at 12:26 PM Monday, March 23 2009

[Agree 4](#) | [Disagree 1](#) | [Alert a Moderator](#)

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### re: Blutonium

who cares? the guy is alive. what a waste of your time.

Submitted by mbr1967 at 10:56 AM Monday, March 23 2009

[Agree 1](#) | [Disagree 6](#) | [Alert a moderator](#)

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### How Fox News Reports Our Involvement

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=toL5YkSFLk>

Submitted by Zarapinsky at 10:19 AM Monday, March 23 2009

[Agree 2](#) | [Disagree 3](#) | [Alert a Moderator](#)

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### **Its great that is an wasn't killed, but lets not make him a hero**

for propaganda purposes, lets ask why others have died? This story is being trotted out by the military to distract people from the fact that our soldiers are dying in Afghanistan for nothing. This mission is pointless lets end it before more Canadian Soldiers lives are lost. We went in get get Al Qaeda, Al Qaeda no longer exists in any real capacity and with Dr. Fadl turning against AL Qaeda that is a serious blow. Al Qaeda is finished, the Afghan people can fix their own country. No more Canadian lives should be wasted there.

Submitted by mbr1967 at 10:16 AM Monday, March 23 2009

[Agree 2](#) | [Disagree 13](#) | [Alert a moderator](#)

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### **Well done indeed...**

however, a slight quibble with the meaning of BZ, from the US Navy site: "In the U.S. Navy signal code, used before ACP 175, "well done" was signaled as TVG, or "Tare Victor George" in the U.S. phonetic alphabet of that time. ACP 175 was organized in the general manner of other signal books, that is, starting with 1-flag signals, then 2-flag and so on. The 2-flag signals were organized by general subject, starting with AA, AB, AC, ... AZ, BA, BB, BC, ... BZ, and so on. The B- signals were called "Administrative" signals, and dealt with miscellaneous matters of administration and housekeeping. The last signal on the "Administrative" page was BZ, standing for "well done."

Submitted by Blutonium at 9:30 AM Monday, March 23 2009

[Agree](#) | [Disagree 2](#) | [Alert a Moderator](#)

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### **bewilder is**

exactly right... the russians gave up after 15 yrs of loses...they are all taliban...same as vietnam when the viet cong walked side by side with the americans ...because you could not distinguish the friend from foe..this country only serves the opium trade...why do we continue to send our troops on these suicide missions to get blown up day after day... i would just bomb the hell out of them... just wait til the mighty american army gets there...with all their firepower !!!!!

Submitted by smartguy at 9:26 AM Monday, March 23 2009

[Agree 3](#) | [Disagree 7](#) | [Alert a moderator](#)

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**Great!**

As Canadians we always knew our service men and women were heroes. This article should be plastered on FoxNews website in response to the offensive comments made. The Canadian Forces are a proud and brave force.

Submitted by WeeOne at 9:07 AM Monday, March 23 2009

[Agree](#) 15 | [Disagree](#) 1 | [Alert a Moderator](#)

**A good news story**

Its nice to hear of someone like Leith escaping death in this hell hole! Hopefully, in the not to distant future all our troops will "escape" from a land of death and destruction!

Submitted by goldnruhl at 8:58 AM Monday, March 23 2009

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