

# Lang's death raises questions about how media reports from Afghanistan

BOB BERGEN

From Monday's issue of The Canadian Journalism Project  
January 4, 2010

*Hundreds of reporters have briefly embedded with Canadian forces in Afghanistan and, in most cases, returned to their regular beats at home. In light of the death of Calgary health reporter Michelle Lang, former military journalist Bob Bergen questions whether this is the right approach to covering the armed forces at war.*

Thousands of tears have been shed for Michelle Lang, the 34-year-old Calgary Herald reporter who – at the close of 2009 along with four Canadian soldiers – was the first Canadian journalist to be killed covering the war in Afghanistan.

Barrels of ink have been committed to her courage, character and dedication to journalism covering a war that is far from the work-a-day knowledge of the vast majority of Canadians.

Lang's courage, character and dedication are beyond doubt, but it is appropriate - and timely - during this period of heightened awareness of the Afghanistan war to step back and consider the broader issues involved regarding the current state of Canadian military journalism and war correspondence.

Lang was like more than 300 other Canadian journalists who have been embedded with the Canadian Forces in Afghanistan since the program began there during Operation Athena in the summer of 2003, when Canadian journalists "embedded" with the 3 Royal Canadian Regiment (RCR) Battalion Group based out of Kabul.

(In the old days, journalists didn't embed with Canadian Forces overseas. We just covered them.)

Rather than remain in the relatively safe confines of Kandahar Air Field, she decided to risk going on out a patrol with the soldiers south of Kandahar City.

Experienced war correspondent or not, Lang was simply in the wrong place at the wrong time and there, but for the grace of God, went the hundreds of other Canadian journalists who preceded her and lived to talk about it.

They were doing exactly the same thing Lang did, taking the same existential risks to write stories about the Canadian military mission in Afghanistan but – and this is an important "but" – there are serious shortcomings in the way the news media covers the Canadian Forces.

More than 130 Canadian soldiers have died in Afghanistan and untold numbers have been wounded. But the vast majority who return to Canada stay in the Forces and systematically train the next groups to be deployed.

At the Canadian Manoeuvre Training Centre at CFB Wainwright, Alberta, they even learn how to deal with embedded journalists like Lang, hostile local Afghan journalists or indifferent international journalists from other countries.

Therein lies the difference between the Canadian Forces and Canadian journalists: The playing field is not level. It is not even close

The Canadian military has highly trained personnel in public affairs, communications planning, media relations and news management who design programs and exercises to teach other soldiers how to deal with the media.

Unlike, the military, journalists are not a team. They are competitors. They do not share their expertise. They are like cats.

Although she was a National Newspaper Award-winning health reporter, when Lang showed up in Kandahar the military already knew how to deal with her and the countless others like her who are learning on the job from scratch.

Then tragedy struck when Lang courageously put her life on the line to do what she did best – write the stories of others. She did not make it back and could not share with others what she learned there.

Hundreds of other journalists just like Lang, however, have made it back after their six-week stint and their military stories end there.

They have been there and they have done that and they go back to covering court, health, provincial politics, city hall, police, environment, women's issues and myriad other assignments or beats their news outlets give them.

Unlike the Canadian Forces, they do not systematically train the next cohort.

Moreover, they do not continue to cover the Canadian Forces on a beat over time.

At the very best, there may be a dozen Canadian journalists who specialize in reporting on the Canadian Forces; the rest don't know a master warrant officer from a major general.

All that said, had any of the committed long-term military journalists been in Lang's seat that fateful day, they would have been just as dead.

Will her death have a chilling effect on news outlets willing to send those who are willing to go to Afghanistan to report the Canadian Forces stories as best they are able? I hope not, but I fear it may.

Like soldiers, journalists have mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, wives, husbands and children who fear the unknown and who have a say in their careers.

Unlike soldiers, nowhere in any journalistic code of ethics does it ask reporters, photographers, cameramen and women or columnists to accept unlimited liability the way soldiers do.

They simply don't have to risk their lives to make a good living in journalism.

Will Lang's death drain the already shallow pool of experienced journalists who specialize in reporting on the Canadian Forces and develop some real expertise over the long term?

I hope not, but that is my very worst fear.

Bob Bergen, Ph.D., is a former military journalist and is an adjunct assistant professor at the University of Calgary's Centre for Military and Strategic Studies and a Research Fellow with the Canadian Defence & Foreign Affairs Institute (CDFAI) in Calgary.