

Death of an embed

Michelle Lang's death underscores the risks journalists face in covering a war where improvised explosive devices are so common.



By Clayton Swisher

26 Dec 2009

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I am saddened to learn the tragic news that a professional colleague, Michelle Lang, was among the casualties that marked the deadliest day for Canada in Afghanistan since 2007.

Michelle was an award-winning reporter for the *Calgary Herald* (link to her blog: <http://communities.canada.com/calgaryherald/blogs/afghanistandispatches/default.aspx>).

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She began her military embed at Kandahar Air Field in mid-December, until it was cut short yesterday by a roadside bomb attack that killed her and accompanying Canadian soldiers.

Michelle's death underscores the risks journalists face in covering a war where improvised explosive devices are so common.

Their blasts do not discriminate.

I trust the Canadians will be taking the news especially hard.

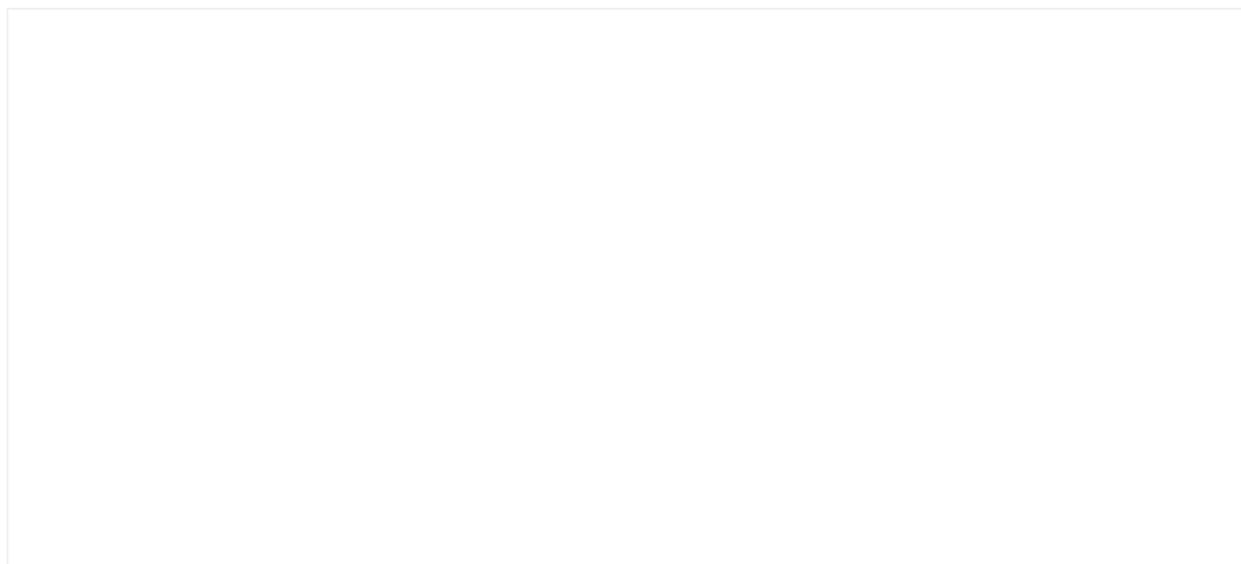
When we interviewed Brig-Gen Daniel Menard, Canada's top officer in Afghanistan and the man responsible for the Kandahar area of operations, I was struck by how many Canadian journalists turned out to grill him with pointed questions – about the Canadian military deaths, the direction and duration of the war, and especially what the Obama surge would mean for their struggling forces.

The issue of Canadian casualties was well on their mind. The day prior to our meeting, Menard's staff asked us to stop filming a memorial ceremony he was hosting for the family of a single Canadian soldier who was also killed in Kandahar.

We obliged. The emotion was already running high amongst the Canadians serving there and we did not want to add to it.

The past 24 hours must be especially difficult.

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One unusual announcement (<http://english.aljazeera.net/news/asia/2009/12/2009123153319496846.html>) of yesterday's violence was that those killed at US Forward Operating Base (FOB) Chapman in Khost were CIA employees.

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This obviously highlights the risks of operating near the volatile Afpak border.

But it also touches on the delicate issue of incorporating Afghans into US security and intelligence operations.

Most FOB's in Afghanistan, including the one we embedded at in Kunar this past summer (link: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F7ml9BgAJ4I>), employ a fair number of local Afghan nationals.

They are normally vetted first by tribal elders in the area who co-operate with the US, then kept under the watchful eye of Afghan National Army soldiers as well as US military intelligence.

Local Afghans are searched when they enter the installation, normally by an Afghan being watched by a US soldier or Marine.

If the reports are true that as many as seven CIA officials have been killed, this will surely widen a rift of mistrust between the US and its Afghan partners.

For their part, the Afghans are also angry by repeated US strikes that have claimed the lives of innocent Afghans.

Bottom line: the confluence of these events are a body blow to the struggling US-Afghan alliance.

The Taliban, meanwhile, has closed out 2009 with a deadly grand finale. In total this year the group has killed more multinational forces than in all previous years.