

# current 2009 10 14

**Announcer:** This is a CBC podcast. The season has arrived. Support for delivery of this podcast comes from Canada Savings Bonds.

**Man:** It's Wednesday, October 14. In response to disasters like Hurricane Katrina, an architectural firm in California has designed a house that could actually float in the event of sudden flooding. Currently, not to be outdone, FEMA has a plan that, under similar circumstances, would dock those floating houses in the Superdome. This is "The Current" podcast.

**Anna Maria Tremonti:** Hello, I'm Anna Maria Tremonti. You're listening to "The Current." Well, gone are the days when Canadian soldiers took almost all of the heat of battle in southern Afghanistan. Soon after coming to office, U.S. President Barack Obama said that he would send 21,000 American troops to help stabilize the troubled nation. Yesterday, the "Washington Post" reported that the White House was quietly deploying 13,000 troops on top of that.

Canada's mission in Afghanistan is already being affected by the surge of U.S. soldiers into the war-scarred theater. Our top soldier in that country, Brigadier General Jonathan Vance, says it is all for the better. General Vance has been in the Canadian forces for 27 years. Last February, he took over as commander of Task Force Kandahar.

Brigadier General Jonathan Vance joins us from Kandahar Province. Hello.

**Jonathan Vance:** Hi, Anna Maria.

**Anna Maria:** We're always told we don't get enough good stories out of Afghanistan, so let's start with, maybe, a good news story. What can you tell us to start with that's on the good side of things today?

**Jonathan:** I'd say that the effective arrival of considerably larger U.S. force presence in Kandahar has allowed us to position our forces in such a way that the vast majority are now providing direct security support to the Afghan population. That has translated into a sizable percentage of the population now starting to see that we are not going to leave their immediate vicinity, where we used to have to do that. If you think about what we were like in Kandahar for close to three years; essentially, one Canadian battalion and one Afghan brigade. We are now four battalions, and there are four battalions in the other part of the Kandahar Province area, and the Afghan brigade has grown by another battalion.

All of that combines to allow us to focus more on protecting the population as our main effort. Inside that protective sphere, good things start to happen. NGOs start to show up. The U.N. is able to exit Kandahar and start delivering services.

We see it every day where communities become more confident. After a number of years of very difficult times living cheek by jowl with the insurgency, it's great watching them rebound and sort of come back to life. That's what we're seeing right now. So there's a really good news story.

**Anna Maria:** Well, this is what Canada was always asking, right? We need more forces in Kandahar, and now you're getting them.

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**Jonathan:** It's what we've been wanting to do from the very beginning of the mission, but we simply didn't have enough forces. Now we've got enough that we can start focusing on the significant majority of the population. Up to 85 percent of the population will start to feel this stabilizing influence over the next year.

**Anna Maria:** I'm struck, though, that in the very places where Canadian soldiers do make progress, they are still most vulnerable to attack from someone in the crowd. And increasingly, we see this with U.S. soldiers in other parts of Afghanistan as well. We saw this two weeks ago, near Deh-e-Bagh, that area that is like a model village for Canada. Your convoy was going through, and someone fired a rocket-propelled grenade. What happened that day?

**Jonathan:** Well, it was reported, accurately, our convoy was struck by some shrapnel. Further on down the road, another vehicle had struck an IED, and we got up to it just after the IED had gone off. To put this into context, it is important to understand that military security, that is, security at the point of a gun, is only a small part of the answer, ultimately, as we try to rehabilitate the social, political, and economic fabric of these communities. As we secure an area, it is possible to attack it. It is possible for two people to walk across a field towards a village undetected and lob an RPG at a passing convoy. It's possible, although less and less likely every day, for someone to try and plant an IED.

What we try and do, and you saw in the aftermath of that strike, we conducted a drill and we always do, where we engage the population, where we talk about what happened, where we get advice from them as to how we could do better. And we also encourage them to be active players in what you would consider to be normal community security. In your hometown, if someone was around that was a stranger and doing something like digging in the side of the road with a bomb, you'd probably report it to the police.

The population here is terribly fearful of Taliban reprisals. Now, what we've seen in Deh-e-Bagh, specifically, the population is calling in all the time. Everything from minor infractions where they want to get the police involved, petty theft or something, right through to "There's a stranger in my backyard with a gun. Please come and deal with him." So it's normalizing.

**Anna Maria:** Now, still, you were pretty frustrated that day, according to the reports, though. You were quite strident with the elders in that village, were you not?

**Jonathan:** I think that someone seeing that drill for the first time, it could be perceived that way. I certainly didn't feel frustrated. I've known those elders for a number of months. I know all of them personally. But I certainly do make the point with them that it's impossible for us, together, to make progress if the perception of security slips. And so this was just a restatement of how critical this was. And they understood it. They, in this culture, appreciate that frank exchange. And that's what it was.

**Anna Maria:** But the point that you can't keep up development if this continues is a point to be made, I guess.

**Brigadier General Vance:** Right. Well, as the security situation, if it was to deteriorate significantly. It hasn't, and I'm pretty sure it won't. But if it was to deteriorate, there is a danger that some of the very critical actors in community rehabilitation wouldn't be able to work. Think of the U.N. agencies that are here or the NGOs who are here that want to get out, that want to provide the services. They need an environment that is beyond just militarily secure; it's stable. That's the environment we're trying to create. We're trying to create fertile ground for those people to work, and for government itself to extend to the community. That's what really happened that day.

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**Anna Maria:** This mix of the military engaged in economic and social development, it's not the kind of soldiering you learned on your way up the ranks, is it? It's something you're adjusting to, is it?

**Jonathan:** Well, in part. We're certainly trained for the high-end, classic, military offensive and defensive operations that you would associate with other types of warfare. I would say that we also have a skill set that's well-ingrained in the Canadian forces, as a result of our peacekeeping experience, as a result of the kind of force we are in Canada, where if we need to help we can help. Look at something like the ice storm. We can move into a community and assist the local government in reestablishing some basic services and so on. It's not a direct relationship, but we do have that as part of our doctrine. On that, we also have a very strong counterinsurgency doctrine, well-founded, academically and intellectually, to address the kinds of things we see here.

We get involved in economic and social development in terms of setting conditions. We help in the initial phases, with some sort of immediate work that our engineers can do, and we have a tremendous organization that can employ and supervise Afghans themselves to do some of the absolutely necessary things in the community.

I'll give you a real simple example. This area of Dahan District was badly shelled by the Soviet military. So there's these massive craters everywhere, which have standing water in them, and that causes malaria and all sorts of other things. And kids play in that. So, with an engineer supervised work crew, we can get some of the local laborers to repair that and turn it back into arable land. Safely, because of the threat of mines and so on. Little things like that mean a lot.

**Anna Maria:** I've heard that you go out a fair bit on night patrols with your troops. What are you seeing that speaks to the counterinsurgency challenges of the Canadian troops?

**Jonathan:** That's a great question. This theater is incredibly challenging. It's very, very complex. Just the nature of counterinsurgency warfare is hard, and it's a quantum leap harder in Afghanistan, for a whole bunch of reasons. One of the things that is very important for us is to partner very closely with Afghan security forces, because it's impossible for us to determine whether someone is an insurgent or not. Generally speaking, the police and the army can. So that partnership operation that we do all the time eases that challenge of actually being able to see the insurgents. When they declare and start shooting at us, it's pretty clear and we know what to do. But the real threat here is not the armed threat of the insurgents. Yes, they use IEDs and they use weapons, but honestly, that is a small part of what they offer as well.

What is a real challenge, and the most insidious aspect of an insurgency, is that creeping fear, the intimidation, the involvement of some political actors who play both sides of the fence. It's a very convoluted environment in terms of supposedly responsible actors not acting responsibly.

**Anna Maria:** So you can see that, can you, on the ground, where the government's not doing enough on corruption, and that is directly related to what your troops confront?

**Jonathan:** That's exactly right, because, in general, large parts of the population are free from threat. But those segments that do feel threatened, and whether they feel threatened because there's actually a threat or it's simply perception is immaterial. What they perceive is real to them. If they don't perceive that their government is acting in their best interest, that their government is present through the police, and when they are dealing with government, in terms of getting basic services, what anybody would expect from a functioning government, if that's absent, and the Taliban poses this sort of creeping sense of superiority or spreading fear or intimidation, the population gets despondent, and a

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despondent population won't commit.

So, what is absolutely necessary is, as we are conducting our operations, still in the early stages, but as we conduct those operations to sort of free them from that direct harm, the idea is then to create a bit of hope, a bit of a charge in the population that says, "OK. We can start doing what we want to do. We can start asking government for its services," and so on.

**Anna Maria:** It sounds like a lot to oversee when you're the brigadier general. And yet, I was asking about night patrols. You're still out there with your troops at night. How important is it for you to be out there with them, some days, some nights?

**Jonathan:** Well, it's important. First and foremost, I like to see what they're doing, encourage them, practice the basic tenants of leadership. It's also very good for me to get a really close look at what's going on. I can read the reports and so on, but there's nothing quite like being there. And these patrols are often great opportunities to engage the local population directly. Nothing like stopping on a patrol and having a quick chat with a shop owner. Generally speaking, they're quite open and responsive. We have cultural advisers with us that give us hints on their body language and so on, and we sort of gather intelligence as we go along. It's that sort of understanding of the atmospherics in the population which is very important, particularly in the counter-insurgency.

So yes, I find it vital to go out. You can't command an enterprise like this from your headquarters. You need to be out, not just with the troops, but I'm also out with the Afghans.

**Anna Maria:** I heard you don't sleep much either.

**Jonathan:** Well, I do my very best to sleep as much as I can, but sometimes it doesn't work out that way.

**Anna Maria:** What keeps you awake?

**Jonathan:** We often have tough days here, as you know, when we lose a soldier. Those are very hard days. Generally speaking, I've got to tell you, not a lot keeps me awake. I don't worry about an awful lot of things in a mission such that it would keep me awake or have this persistent worry. I'm always concerned for the safety of my soldiers, but I honestly have a great deal of confidence in the leadership out there and in our American allies.

I think we're doing the right thing. I really do. I think that the mission has evolved such that we're doing the right things the right way with the right number of forces to achieve some considerable progress over the next year.

**Anna Maria:** Yet back here, just last month Liberal Senator Colin Kenny said Afghanistan's turning into Canada's Vietnam. There's real concern here that there's a quagmire there. How do you respond to those concerns?

**Jonathan:** I can tell you that I understand why this mission is hard to get a grip on if you were only perceiving it through media reports and so on, because it is an intensely complex environment. Just imagine the kind of project it would take to turn around a community at risk in Canada, all of the things that would need to happen. Imagine that same community at risk with all of the social ills that could beset it at the same time in the midst of an armed insurgency, and try and get that done quickly. These things take time, and there are a lot of things to do. Lining it up such that you get the effect you want or that they need when they need it is a huge challenge, so it is slow. We deal on the military side of the insurgency quite quickly. We don't really have too many challenges there. It's still present. It's still a threat. It's all of the rest of the insurgency, as I described to you. So I can understand why it would be difficult to perceive any sense of success. Counter-insurgency is not linear. In the second World War and previous wars, they were often linear. You could measure progress by far

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across the map you moved on a day, how much of the enemy army did you destroy. You could celebrate crossing the Rhine, landing on a beach, liberating a town.

It's very difficult to do that, and one of the things that we're trying to do, certainly as we've adopted this protect the population, this village, approach, is give Afghans a sense of some momentum. So when we show up and we say, "Hey, we're here to stay. What can we do to help?" that is the modern-day counter-insurgency version of that liberation of a town in Holland.

**Anna Maria:** Yet you know, too, that when a Canadian soldier dies, the country reacts badly.

**Jonathan:** Well, I think the country mourns, and the country mourns as it should. I think the outpouring of support that certainly I see from here and participated in when I was at home, it's certainly heartwarming for a soldier. We appreciate it. The country, I think, is tightly bound to its military, and that's a great way to be. That a death of a soldier is sometimes used as a launching pad to criticize the mission is really a non sequitur. Most of the time I perceive that that death is rarely put into context so that people would even understand what that soldier was doing at that particular moment. Sometimes a soldier, when he is killed, is doing the exact right thing and we win the day.

**Anna Maria:** What's the hardest lesson you've learned since you took command of Canadian troops in Kandahar?

**Jonathan:** I think, in part, it's communicating the mission. The troops here, my officers and my staff, we understand the mission, and we can explain it to ourselves. One of the more challenging aspects of the mission is communications in general - communications with Afghans, communications with Canadians such that people can... It's not to sugar-coat anything. It's certainly not to make the mission seem better than it is. It's a serious, desperate situation. It's a major emergency. But to try to put all of that into some sort of context such that people, whether they believe we should be here or not, at least they understand.

**Anna Maria:** Brigadier-General Vance, thank you for speaking with me today.

**Jonathan:** It's been a pleasure, Anna Maria. I listen to your show in Canada. I love it, and I appreciate very much your interest in the mission.

**Anna Maria:** OK. Bye-bye.

**Jonathan:** Take care. Bye-bye.

**Anna Maria:** That is Brigadier-General Jonathan Vance. He's commander of Canada's Task Force Kandahar. He was on the military base at Kandahar, Afghanistan. Well, that brings us to the end of this podcast. You can listen to "The Current" weekday mornings on CBC Radio One right after the 8:30 news, 9:00 in Newfoundland and parts of Labrador, as well as on Sirius Satellite Radio 137.

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Thanks for listening to "The Current" podcast. I'm Anna Maria Tremonti.

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