

Soldiers

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The explosion in the Maywand district near the border with Helmand province also caused serious but non-life-threatening injuries to one Canadian soldier and light injuries to another.

The more seriously injured soldier will likely be flown to Germany for treatment at a U.S. military hospital.

Sunday's toll brings the total number of Canadian soldiers killed in Afghanistan since 2002 to 51. A Canadian diplomat has also been killed.

There had been no Canadian combat casualties since November 2006, when Chief Warrant Officer Bobby Girouard and Cpl. Albert Storm, a Fort Erie native, were killed when a suicide car bomber attacked their Bison armoured personnel carrier just outside of Kandahar City.

Ten soldiers, all members of Hotel company, were in a LAV-3 light armoured vehicle when the blast occurred around 1:30 p.m.

They had been out in the desert for a month living off their vehicles, eating field rations and sleeping under the stars.

Over the past few days, they were busy shepherding coalition convoys to the Sangin district, the scene of fierce fighting between the coalition and the Taliban.

Loved by the troops, the LAV-3 is an eight-wheeled, light armoured vehicle capable of handling a variety of armaments and reaching speeds of up to 100 km/h.

In Afghanistan, LAVs have weathered many roadside bombs and suicide car bomb blasts, usually limping away with a few destroyed tires.

Earlier this week, soldiers from Hotel company proudly handed around home-made pictures and construction paper cut-outs of Easter bunnies sent by their children, with greetings and endearments scrawled in crayon.

Some of the troops said they were going to save their treats until Sunday.

Word that something terrible had



Soldiers from Hotel company, Royal Canadian Regiment battle group, climb out of their LAV-3 light armoured vehicle last month after patrolling Maywand, Afghanistan. Six members of the company were killed Sunday.

CP PHOTO

happened quickly rippled through the base at Kandahar as helicopters brought the wounded in from Maywand.

Attempts by the troops to call home were stymied for hours when the military imposed a communications lockdown because of the deaths.

Speaking in France to mark the 90th anniversary of the Battle of Vimy Ridge, Prime Minister Stephen Harper said it has been a "difficult day in Afghanistan."

He broke the news of the six deaths at a dinner for veterans and said "our hearts ache for them and their families."

Hours before Sunday's explosion, Lt.-Col. Rob Walker, the battle group commander, said his troops were making progress cracking down on Taliban roadside bomb activity in some parts of Kandahar province.

He said his troops recently eliminated an insurgent "cell."

"We have killed or captured a number of individuals, and we have had no mines or anything for at least a week now," Walker said.

There have been reports that Taliban leaders pay cash bounties to insurgents for killing NATO troops and Afghan se-

curity force members with roadside bombs.

Bronzed, sunburned and dirty from their time in the desert, the troops of Hotel company were in high spirits earlier in the week.

On Thursday, some soldiers stripped off their sweaty body armour after a day of patrolling in the desert and played hacky-sack in a rough circle while listening to hip-hop tunes. There was lots of laughter and joking.

Another soldier serenaded the sleepy crew of his light armoured vehicle in the pre-dawn darkness by singing "Good morning, good morning, to you" over the vehicle's intercom system, to catcalls and curses from his comrades.

Hours before the deaths were officially announced, a subdued hush fell over Canadian troops at the base in Kandahar as they tucked into their evening meal at the dining hall, which was decorated with blue-painted Easter eggs and chocolate bunnies wrapped in gold foil.

Without fanfare, soldiers at headquarters quietly lowered the Canadian flag to half-mast in the darkness.

"It has been a bad day," said one officer, his face twisted in pain.