

Exhibition Category (CMA AWARD 2008)

Project Title: “Afghanistan: A Glimpse of War”

Institution: The Canadian War Museum, Ottawa, Ontario



The Afghanistan exhibition explored the human experience of war through a series of photographic and film vignettes, principally recorded by the journalists Stephen Thorne and Garth Pritchard, who enjoyed unprecedented access to Canadian bases and units during their visits to Afghanistan. Their material was used to develop intimate personal histories from the perspective of individual Canadian soldiers and Afghans.

The exhibition displayed in graphic terms what is involved in modern war, and permitted visitors to revisit the origin of Canadian involvement in Afghanistan, and the obstacles faced by Canadians since the onset of their mission. The vignettes explored combat operations, overpowering grief and loss, and challenges to reconstruction in a country ravaged by war. Museum staff selected eye-witness accounts captured on film or through oral history interviews to accompany the displays, which permitted Canadian soldiers and Afghans to tell their own stories in their own words. A small selection of powerful artifacts complemented the displays, such as a fragment of one of the aircraft used to attack the World Trade Centre, Afghan schoolbooks burned in a Taliban attack against a school, and a G-Wagon military vehicle badly damaged by an improvised explosive device. The exhibition also featured Afghan stories, highlighting how Afghans have worked to rebuild their country, at times with the support of the international community or coalition forces, but more often on their own.

Interactive visitor feedback stations allowed the exhibition to be used as a forum for informed discussion of contemporary military subjects. Encouraging visitors to post their stories, their memories of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, their opinions about the decision to invade Afghanistan, and other topics, these stations permitted the visitor’s candid responses to form a part of the exhibition storyline.



The Afghanistan exhibition was particularly challenging because it explored unfinished history. Just months before the exhibition opened in February 2007, Canadians were fighting and dying in some of the fiercest combat operations since the Korean War, and have remained in close contact with the enemy since. To display on an ongoing topic, the museum incorporated space for periodic updates as new material and stories were researched. Half-way through the exhibition’s run, three new stories were added to the fixed displays. Museum staff updated the concluding section of the exhibition every month with photographs of Canadian fatalities in Afghanistan, provided by their families. In so doing, the content of the Afghanistan exhibition remained both moving and up to date for visitors throughout the display period.