



Alison MacLean donned full body armour during a visit to Afghanistan's Kandahar province in 2010. The independent filmmaker from South Surrey was embedded with Operation Athena as a one-woman combat camera crew to capture footage for her documentary, *Outside The Wire*, about women in military operations.

FILMING UNDER FIRE

South Surrey documentarian and mother of two takes huge risks to reveal the inspiring stories of Canadian women in combat

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Hunkered down in a Blackhawk helicopter watching a medevac team return enemy fire in Afghanistan's Kandahar province, Alison MacLean was faced with a stark choice: obey or aid.

The 55-year-old independent filmmaker from South Surrey was only on the aircraft as an observer on a military training run. But once in the air, the team was directed to rescue injured soldiers pinned down by insurgents.

They landed amid a firefight. Bullets whizzed through the open sides of the helicopter.

"I remember the pilot on the headset saying under no condition was I to leave my jump seat," MacLean recalled.

But seeing the officers struggle to both return fire and rescue a fellow soldier, MacLean put her camera aside and leaped down to help them drag him in.

In her 2010 documentary, *Outside the Wire*, MacLean shows footage of the team as they work to staunch the wounds of that bloodied soldier.

What she doesn't show is the moment she noticed that a bullet had ripped through the bottom of her jump seat.

Personal battles

Close calls are part of the job for this mother of two.

MacLean has worked on the frontlines in Afghanistan, filming the moving stories of NATO soldiers as a one-woman combat camera crew for her company, Tomboy Productions. Her recent documentaries focus on the untold stories of women in the military.

Along the way, she's enlightened Canadians about the roles of their servicemen and women and has forged links with Afghan police-

women overcoming the odds in order to serve.

To do so she's had to fight her own personal battles.

MacLean shrugs off the danger involved in her war-zone projects because her closest brush with death came on Canadian soil.

In the mid-1980s, MacLean was working as one of the few sports camerawomen at TSN in Toronto. But her career crashed to a stop on a snowy Ontario road one night in 1986, when a drunk driver collided head-on with her vehicle.

She survived with serious head, neck and spinal injuries that left her with stroke-like symptoms. She was unable to sit up for two hours, let alone haul camera equipment.

"That was very humbling, to be at a point where I lost everything and had to start over," she said of her five-year recovery. "I celebrated the first day I could walk a block."

There were more blows to come. She lost her job during her recovery. Then she lost her father to an aneurysm.

She launched her own company in order to work reduced hours and produced programs on sports. But her father's death made her realize her real calling: military documentaries.