



Alison MacLean at home in South Surrey with her daughter Teyana, 15, and son Skye, 12. JENELLE SCHNEIDER/PNG



While on her September 2012 trip to Afghanistan filming *Burkas 2 Bullets*, Alison MacLean, right, meets with women in a French military contingent — a NATO doctor, left, and three Afghan women who were involved in a community midwifery program.

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— ALISON MACLEAN, DOCUMENTARY FILMMAKER

Her father, a Scot who immigrated to Ontario in the early 1950s, was drafted into the British Royal Air Force during the Second World War. He flew over the Middle East conducting aerial surveillance and meticulously photographed his journeys to Israel, Egypt, Bahrain, Iraq and Afghanistan in a faded album his daughter treasures.

His interest inspired her to visit Saudi Arabia and Afghanistan in the '90s as a flight attendant.

“I’d always planned on interviewing him. He had lived such a full life at a young age because of the war, as have all of our veterans.”

She realized that other Second World War veterans were also passing without sharing their stories.

After moving to Vancouver with her now ex-husband in 1998 and having two children, Teyana, now 15, and Skye, 12, MacLean began work on *The Power And The Grace* in 2002.

The documentary, which aired on Vision TV in 2005, interviews a dozen Canadian women, many in their 80s, who served in the Second World War. They urged her to tell the stories of Canadian women serving in Afghanistan.

“There needed to be war documentaries from new angles,” MacLean said. “I felt that I wanted to show the humanity of war.”

Going Outside the Wire

So in 2010, MacLean embedded with Operation Athena, based at Kandahar Air Field, in the company of Canadian and U.S. troops. She was the only independent filmmaker in the program.

“I’d always worked in crews,” she said. “I’d never been all on my own. But there are times in your life when you have to go for it.”

It wasn’t easy. “I took a lot of criticism,” MacLean said. “I was criticized as a mother, with people asking why I was trying to orphan my children.”

As the custodial parent, she had to justify her trip to a war zone in court. Only her children were encouraging. “My daughter thought it was cool. She wanted to try on the body armour.”

Security experts stressed the real risks she took to bring home stories of women in combat.

“My familiarity with the security environment in the areas where Alison has operated leaves me with no illusions about the grave risks she has faced, particularly as an independent filmmaker without the resources that most people would take for granted before even contemplating an assignment in a high-risk environment,” said Martin Cronin, a former British diplomat who was posted to the Middle East.

“The Taliban are determined to stop any positive stories emerging from Afghanistan, let alone any by women about women,” said Cronin, now the Kelowna-based CEO of Helios Global Technologies, a firm that supplied MacLean with her body armour.

MacLean’s documentary, *Outside the Wire*, which aired on W Network in November 2010, showcased women working as gunners, liaisons, logistics operators, medics and hospital staff.

“I wanted the soldiers to tell their stories without spin, where it wasn’t a news highlight,” she explained.

Her straightforward depictions were well received in the military.

“Alison has been a leader in capturing the deeper story of the sacrifices and service of our women and men in uniform along with those of their families,” said Royal Canadian Navy Rear Admiral William Truelove.

From burkas to bullets

While filming *Outside the Wire*, MacLean met Afghan police and military women being trained to



Watch the documentary *Outside the Wire* by viewing this story at theprovince.com

serve with the Afghan National Security Forces. In September 2012, she returned to Afghanistan, this time to Kabul, to document their stories for a forthcoming documentary called *Burkas 2 Bullets*.

“They’re a story people aren’t aware of,” she said. “They have smaller numbers and bigger hurdles.”

Condemned by the Taliban, female police officers have been murdered by insurgents and male family members.

They earn little respect even in their own ranks, few drive or carry weapons and they are seldom issued uniforms.

The inequality troubled MacLean. So she donated a portion of her profits and partnered with Rotary Clubs to raise \$6,500 for uniforms for 100 policewomen in Mazar-e Sharif.

“Alison felt very concerned that these women had no support to buy proper uniforms,” said Ann-Shirley Goodell, a member of the Rotary Club of Vancouver Sunrise, which assisted MacLean. “The women were walking in 100-degree sands with our equivalent of flip-flops.”

B.C. RCMP Cpl. Denise Keatley, who deployed to Afghanistan in 2012 to assist their police, saw firsthand the difference MacLean’s gift made.

“I believe the knowledge that they are being thought of and supported by women from other countries helps build their confidence and determination to try to make a difference,” Cpl. Keatley said of the Afghan policewomen.

Today, MacLean gives talks around the Lower Mainland and screens her films to raise awareness of ongoing issues in the military.

Once she releases *Burkas 2 Bullets*, she plans to begin a documentary that examines Post Traumatic Stress Disorder among recent NATO veterans.

She points to the tragedy of nine suicides among Canadian Forces veterans since last November as urgent proof of the need to tell stories of the true consequences of war.

“That is unacceptable to me. I feel we have failed them,” MacLean said. “I want to make sure that we continue to honour the fallen.”