Canada’s political establishment and media rally round military top brass after 4 soldiers killed and 39 injured in devastating fire at CFB Wainwright

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A grass fire at Canadian Forces Base (CFB) Wainwright in Alberta killed four Canadian Armed Forces members and severely injured 39 others October 17. CFB Wainwright, located approximately 200 kilometers southeast of Edmonton, is one of Canada’s most important military training installations.

Despite the scale of the disaster, the military and government’s narrative of an unforeseeable disaster, triggered by freak high winds, has been widely accepted by the media and political establishment. Initially, some media did raise questions about the chain of decisions that resulted in soldiers conducting exercises in close proximity to a wildfire. But in the almost three weeks since, reporting has largely focused on expressions of sympathy from the community, family interviews and funeral announcements.

This conforms with a pattern, where events that could undermine the Canadian state’s narrative of the armed forces as a pillar of Canadian “democracy” led by a self-sacrificing top brass are quickly sanitized and covered up.

Instead, the political establishment and corporate media are seeking to exploit the understandable popular sympathy for the Wainwright fire victims to promote militarism. No doubt attempts will soon be made to attribute the manifest failure of senior CAF personnel to take heed of explicit warnings of an “extreme” fire risk at CFB Wainwright to a lack of “resources”—and thus justify accelerating the drive to raise military spending to 5 percent of GDP.

On the day of the Wainwright Base fire, members of the 3rd Battalion, Princess Patricia’s Canadian Light Infantry and Army reservists were executing routine, high-intensity live-fire qualification drills. The drills were in preparation for their upcoming “high-stakes rapid deployment” in the spring of 2027 to reinforce the Canadian-led NATO Multinational Brigade in Latvia under Operation Reassurance. The fire ignited on the base’s automatic grenade launcher range, likely sparked by live rounds fired from C-16 40mm automatic grenade launchers during morning drills.

According to military officials, the fire was known to base range control and the base fire hall several hours before the overrun occurred. Due to this sector being classified a “Permanent Danger Area 2” due to high concentrations of unexploded explosive ordnance, firefighters were prohibited from entering and fighting the blaze. The fire was instead “monitored” and training exercises in adjacent areas of the base were allowed to continue. According to the military, the fire was driven out of the permanent danger area “just before” or “approximately around” 4 p.m. by high winds and headed toward the soldiers holding the exercise, overrunning their position with no advance warning.

Four young men lost their lives as a result of injuries sustained in the fire. They are Sgt. Morgan Wong (26), Pte. Shaun Farrell (23), Pte. Aidan Goulding (23) and Pte. Hayden Lykkemark (19). Thirty-nine more were injured, 19 of them initially in critical condition. According to a November 4 Canadian Armed Forces’ statement, of those injured, 14 have been released after receiving treatment, while 25 remain hospitalized. Almost three weeks after the incident, 13 CAF personnel remain in critical condition, suffering from severe thermal burns covering up to 50 percent of their bodies.

The grief of the families and friends is understandable, as well as their need for social support. But efforts have been made to dissolve any questions or criticism in a wave of “national mourning” and “solidarity,” serving as a distraction and a distortion of reality.

The launching of three separate investigations by the military police, the Military Board of Inquiry (BOI), and the Canadian Forces National Investigation Service allows officials to evade difficult questions indefinitely to “protect the investigations.” Moreover, there is no guarantee that the findings of these investigations, which could take up to a year, will be made public as announced.

That said, what is known all points to the inescapable conclusion that the deaths were caused by criminal negligence.

The Canadian Wildland Fire Information System (CWFIS) had rated the regional fire danger as “Extreme” (FWI 30.8), with local rainfall measuring just 3.5 mm for the month of October.

On Friday, October 16, the day before the Wainwright tragedy, Environment Canada issued a forecast warning of westerly winds at 40 km/h gusting to 70 km/h for Saturday afternoon, meaning any fire could rapidly spread.

Yet an internal Canadian Armed Forces memo issued by the Strategic Joint Staff (SJS) on the morning of Saturday, October 17, rated the regional fire hazard index as “LOW” for the scheduled live-ammunition exercise. Paragraph 342 of CFB Wainwright Standing Orders, it need be added, explicitly flags October as a high-risk month for grass fires and recommends conducting live-fire shooting drills during early morning hours. Command treated this as a non-binding guideline and proceeded with high-intensity live-fire exercises in the

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hot, dry afternoon.

Environment and Climate Change Canada issued a Yellow Wind Warning at 2:14 p.m. “damaging wind gusts up to 100 km/h” and again at 3:05 p.m.

Military leadership has repeatedly evaded questions by journalists and given contradictory statements. They refused to confirm whether CFB Wainwright had a meteorologist or wildfire behaviour expert on hand, or the precise time when the fire began on the grenade launcher range.

A recent report by GlobalNews, interviewing experts and reviewing satellite information, showed an active fire at 12:17 p.m. According to military accounts, the timing of the cold front and a “major escalation in fire activity” occurred 30 minutes before the fire reached and quickly engulfed the soldiers.

Military leadership and politicians have presented the disaster as a highly unpredictable, natural anomaly. Major-General Wade Rutland stated, “The fire was a kilometre away when the wind shifted. It is not normal for a fire to move a kilometre in 30 to 60 seconds. ... Within 30 seconds to a minute they saw no fire, and then there was a fire right on top of them.”

The Chief of the Defence Staff General Jennie Carignan has flatly stated that the primary reason that soldiers died was simply “how fast the fire travelled.” For his part, Prime Minister Mark Carney has termed the Wainwright fire an “impossible-to-understand event.”

On October 19, Carney, Conservative leader Pierre Poilievre, Bloc Québecois leader Yves-Francois Blanchet, the NDP’s Gord Johns and Elizabeth May of the Green Party all joined in a moment of silence in the House of Commons, followed by speeches that lauded the CAF and omitted any questioning of the circumstances surrounding the Wainwright fire or responsibility of the military command.

The official mourning has served to obscure the contempt with which the military treats the lives of its own soldiers. In remarks to the press, the top brass made clear that the dead and injured were, in their eyes, an expendable resource in the service of imperialist interests. General Carignan declared it was “normal” for the Armed Forces to conduct training in the vicinity of brush fires to simulate realistic combat conditions. Brig.-Gen. Vanessa Hanrahan stressed that the training was entirely “routine” and that risk is inherent to military service.

In an address to the nation, Carney tried to present the reckless training exercise next to an active wildfire as a necessary sacrifice: “CFB Wainwright is where the women and men of our Armed Forces learn to do the hardest things this country can ask of anyone. Those we lost were training to defend Canada. To serve Canada. Now Canada serves them.”

What is being left out of the patriotic discourse is that the soldiers who died and were injured were going to be sent to fight an imperialist war for resources and markets. Their deployment could well have ended in their deaths under conditions where Canada and the other NATO powers are ratcheting up pressure on Russia, not for the defence of Canada’s population but for the defence of the profits and strategic interests of the Canadian ruling class.

The soldiers were preparing for deployment to Latvia, where Canada leads NATO’s “forward” forces on Russia’s border, a deployment Carney has extended to 2,600 troops through 2031.

Since the 1990s, NATO has expanded relentlessly eastward, absorbing the former Warsaw Pact states and Baltic republics up to Russia’s borders. The war in Ukraine is a NATO proxy war, in which Washington and its allies instigated, armed and directed the far-right Zelensky regime to fight Russia, seeking to reduce a nuclear-armed, resource-rich state to semi-colonial status.

The rearmament of Canada, Germany, France, Britain and the US is not preparation for some hypothetical future conflict. It is the escalation of a war already underway, driven by the crisis of world capitalism and the violent redivision of the world among the imperialist powers, exactly as in 1914 and 1939. The difference today is that the contending powers are nuclear-armed.

The Carney Liberal government’s own newly released national security policy, “The Plan for a Stronger Canada,” pledges to “prepare for all contingencies up to and including war,” meet NATO’s 5 percent of GDP target by 2035, and give the CAF “one clear, central mission: the defence of Canada and Canadian interests.”

“Canadian interests” means markets, cheap labour, raw materials and geostrategic dominance—the spoils Carney himself was referring to when he proclaimed before the world’s oligarchs and their political representatives at the 2026 Davos World Economic Forum that Canada is determined to secure its place “at the table” and not end up “on the menu” of great-power conflict.

The media coverage around the medical crisis caused by the fire has carefully avoided mentioning the connection between the waging of war and social spending cuts. The same government pouring tens of billions into rearmament has left the healthcare system so gutted that a country of 40 million has only 46 dedicated burn beds, and specialized staff and equipment had to be flown in to treat the victims. The soldiers’ families have been reduced to crowdfunding for their medical care.

Nearly three weeks after the fire, the following questions remain:

• What criteria were used to assess the threat level if range control officers were aware of the fire on the grenade range “for several hours”?

• Why did the wind warnings at 2:14 p.m. and 3:05 p.m. not trigger a halt to the training exercise?

• Who assessed the threat level that day? Who gave orders for the training to take place? Who allowed it to continue despite the wind warnings?

• Were the soldiers aware of the danger beforehand? Were they alerted when conditions changed?

• What was the condition of the firebreaks at CFB Wainwright that were unable to stop the fire?

• Did the impending deadline for deployment to Latvia cause military leadership to dismiss routine security measures?

On October 29, the Canadian Press reported that a fire was burning in Canada’s second largest military base, CFB Gagetown. It was also caused by artillery shooting in a training area.



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