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TV
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Fatal attraction

Documentary traces Canadian woman's foolhardy journey into radical Islam's heart of darkness after 9/11

What's an appropriate price to pay for stupidity? A few thousand dollars? A couple of million? Or should stupidity carry a penalty of death?

That's the difficult question that lies at the heart of *The Woman Who Joined the Taliban*, a provocative and painful documentary that kicks off the new CBC series *Firsthand* on Oct. 15 at 9 p.m.

The film, produced by Toronto-based Matter of Fact Media and directed by Kai Lawrence, tells the uneasy story of Beverley Giesbrecht, a Vancouver woman whose ambition-clouded poor judgment led her into one of the most dangerous places on Earth, with predictably tragic consequences.

Long before embarking on the ill-advised journey that would ultimately lead to her death, Giesbrecht appears to have led an average but somewhat troubled life near Vancouver.

As described in the film, hers was an existence that included a reasonably successful career in the publishing business and a social life that included too much partying and a few failed relationships. One set of archival clips in the documentary shows Giesbrecht being interviewed, probably on a Christian TV program, about her past struggles and the newfound faith that had saved her life. Friends interviewed in the film recall her as a good person who loved to entertain and was happy when her guests were enjoying themselves.

And then the 9/11 attacks happened, and Giesbrecht's life headed in a sharply different direction. She apparently became obsessed with 9/11-related issues and delved deep into the darker conspiracy theories that began to circulate online in its aftermath.

She converted to Islam and eventually launched her own website, Jihad Unspun, which sought to present an alternative (and more positive) version of the religion's more militant factions.

In 2008, having moved to the Middle East and reinvented herself as a journalist and aspiring filmmaker named Khadija Abdul Qahaar, she set out for the Taliban-controlled mountains of northern Pakistan with the intention of producing a first-person documentary on the subject of Taliban women.

By convincing an influential local leader that hers was a sympathetic perspective, Giesbrecht/Khadija was afforded a level of protection in the region and was able to travel farther into territory considered so dangerous some of her handlers refused to accompany her.

But when her Taliban-connected protector began to question her motives and stated he was no longer willing to support her quest, Giesbrecht opted to continue. In the fall of 2008, she attempted to travel, without protection or permission, farther into the mountains, and was taken hostage and held prisoner for nearly two years.

Ransom demands began at \$2 million plus the release of an American-held prisoner in Guantanamo Bay, and eventually fell to about \$1,200, not even enough to cover her captors' costs. The film includes video clips and satellite-phone recordings in which she is seen and heard making increasingly desperate pleas for help.

In the end, that help never came, and Giesbrecht is presumed to have died, either at the hands of her captors or as a result of failing health after her lengthy imprisonment.

It's a difficult story to watch. Giesbrecht is not, in any way, portrayed in a sympathetic light -- as several friends and observers recall, she was driven as much by a misguided belief that her film would make her rich and famous as she was by her ideological and religious zeal -- but as one interview subject points out, she was also a Canadian citizen being held against her will in a dangerous region, and the federal government appears to have made little effort to secure her release.

One is certainly not left with the impression of a person who died nobly for a belief or a cause; it's the tale of a woman who made a very bad decision and paid with her life, and perhaps also of a country whose government seemed comfortable with death being an acceptable price to be paid for stupidity.