

Mackenzie Institute Commentary 1108

PO Box 338, Adelaide Station Toronto, Ontario M5C-2J4 Tel: (416)-686-4063
E-Mail: institute@mackenzieinstitute.com Web: mackenzieinstitute.com

Canada's Post Kandahar Military: Now What?

By John Thompson

Introduction

Canadians tend to think of themselves as an unmilitary people – forgetting the long British-French struggle for global domination, the American Revolution, two armed revolts, Fenian terrorism and the American Civil War which all made significant contributions to Canada's creation. Canada's unmilitary self-image also conflicts directly with the sterling performance of our Armed Forces in both World Wars and Korea.

In November 1918, the hard-fighting Canadian Corps was undoubtedly the most elite formation on the Western Front – the next year we couldn't disband it fast enough. In 1945, we dismantled the tough veteran 1st Canadian Army with equal speed, also shedding highly experienced Air Force Squadrons and naval ships as we did so. One might think we find excellence embarrassing.

Canadian troops have been in Afghanistan since 2001, but stepped up to the plate to accept assignment in Kandahar in 2006, knowing it was one of the strongest centres of the Taliban in the country.

Now that the combat mission is over, will Canada go back to neglecting its Armed Forces?

The Canadian Military in Afghanistan

For those who forget – a quick reprise. The first Canadian soldiers in Afghanistan were members of the JTF 2, who turned up in December 2001 for the hunt for members of al Qaeda and the remaining Taliban forces in the country. They earned a Presidential Unit Citation from the Americans for their work. They were joined in January 2002 by a battle group based on the 3rd Battalion of the PPCLI for more conventional operations against the enemy (where the Patricia Snipers, particularly, earned Canada much respect from the US military) and then the Canadians settled in to secure Kandahar Airport.

In 2003, we expanded our contribution to 1,900 troops and left Kandahar to help secure Kabul as a part of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). This was a combination of guard duty and infrastructure development. In the meantime, the Americans went into Iraq and were doing most of the combat operations against what was left of the Taliban in Afghanistan. In fact, the US has always undertaken the majority of combat work there.

By 2005, the US was pleading for somebody to help carry the heavy freight and Paul Martin's Government pledged that Canada would increase its contribution and return to Kandahar to help

suppress the Taliban. In early 2006, a 2,300 strong Canadian contingent moved in – just in time for a major Taliban offensive. The next three years saw much fighting with the Taliban in the Panjwaii, Kandahar, Zhari and Daman districts.

While the Taliban have proven as tenacious as a cockroach infestation, their major concentrations have been stamped flat and the rest tend to be doing their equivalent of lurking far back under the fridge. However, they remain quite capable of surging out once more if left untended. Canadian operations from 2008 to 2011 have been more in the way of hunting Talibs in more difficult areas. In 2008 Parliament extended Canada's combat commitment to 2011, it is now over. However, Canada is still committed to providing 950 personnel until 2014 to assist in training Afghan police and military.

In ten years in Afghanistan, the Canadian military has lost 157 dead (and five civilians) plus 1,869 wounded in varying degrees. From most accounts, our soldiers have done very well. Canada has experienced the highest proportional casualties of any ISAF/NATO contingent and the third highest level of casualties over all, but a larger portion of the contingent was devoted to combat operations.

There are also the complaints from the Taliban to consider. Apparently, the Canadians are regarded as the most pugnacious opponents they encounter – being more likely to initiate an engagement and to pursue it longer than the Americans, British or Dutch normally will. There seems to be a trend here; the Germans always rated Canadians as aggressive and innovative opponents and the Chinese found it very hard to push Canadian troops anywhere in Korea.

As an aside, the author has been somewhat involved with his old Reserve Regiment in a very minor way; but has been astounded at the changes between his service of 30 years ago and his unit today. Almost all of the NCOs and officers have campaign service medals (these were great rarities 30 years past). As a one-time reconnaissance troop leader, it was interesting to sit with three contemporary ones; all of whom have been in combat and all had slain Taliban (invariably from afar with 25mm cannon from their vehicles, or by calling down a Hellfire missile or Smart Bomb on them).

The Usual Way to Treat the Armed Forces

The usual Canadian inclination after a war is to completely dismantle what we have assembled and let the Regulars retreat back into their culturally isolated shells on remote bases, while the Reserves can go back to 'Saturday Night Soldiering' with few resources and scanty equipment. Then, next time we need them, we can re-assemble an Army and implicitly trust there has been enough retained corporate memory to function properly.

This won't do anymore.

In the long nervous peace of the Cold War from 1953 to 1991, the Canadian Army maintained a brigade group in Germany and practiced with what it had in Canada – with time out for occasional peacekeeping details elsewhere. We got used to that and started trimming the military's resources; generally replacing five completely obsolete items (fighter planes, trucks, or what have you) with two second rate new ones; and letting the regiments and battalions shrink.

The military tried to retain its hardest lessons from earlier days. Peacekeeping was good for carrying on staff training and keeping logistical skills sharp but other lessons learned so hard in 1943-45 were transmitted less efficiently to every new soldier. Every year there was less fuel, less ammunition, less money (particularly for Reserves) and less training time. What there was more of every year were new regulations, more equipment sidelined for repairs, more staff-work and nonsensical new requirements mandated by the political notion of the day.

Things got worse with the ebb of the Soviet threat in the late 1980s – at least the fear of confronting the 1st Guards Tank or 3rd Shock Armies and all the rest of them justified some readiness. The end of the Soviet Union meant that the best employment for the Canadian military would be ‘peacekeeping’ ... never mind that most advocates of peacekeeping had no notion of what could be involved.

The Canadian public bought into a myth of peacekeeping as a Canadian military tradition (we really, really neglect our history sometimes). Best of all, peacekeepers didn't need new artillery, they didn't need new main battle tanks and they didn't need new helicopters for their frigates. Peacekeeping involved being Boy Scouts with rifles and was safe and morally superior.

So the Canadian Army didn't update its field guns and didn't get new tanks and the Canadian Navy didn't get new helicopters to go with their frigates. Instead the Canadian Forces made do with the ‘stuff’ from the ‘60s and modernized it as much as tight budgets and weary old frames could take.

As so often happens, reality is quite distinct from expectation.

Can We Learn this Time?

In 1989 and 1990, the Soviet Union was collapsing and the public's notion of a military based on peacekeeping was not what really happened.

1990: Oka Crisis: An entire Brigade Group was called in to muscle the Warriors away from the barricades and use intimidation to prevent bloodshed. Please note:

- We *don't* have ready brigade groups of fully equipped disciplined soldiers anywhere in Canada anymore.
- The average standards of training have fallen considerably since 1990 as most resources were spent honing the next contingent for Bosnia/Croatia or Afghanistan. Without a war to be ready for, all of the Army is likely to lose its edge.

1990/91: The Gulf War: We sent four hastily retrofitted aging warships, two squadrons of CF-18s and a field hospital. The CF-18s conducted 56 bombing missions and shot up an Iraqi warship.

- Does anyone remember that we stripped anti-aircraft guns out of a museum to beef up the warships bound for the Persian Gulf in the Autumn of 1990?
- The Canadian Mechanized Brigade Group based in Germany was conspicuous in its absence; forcing the British Armour Division to go into Iraq with two manoeuvre brigades rather than three.

1992-1995: Wars in Croatia and Bosnia: At first meant to ensure conditions for peace talks and set up protected zones, this complex mission required a Canadian Battle Group which rotated between Canadian regular Army units which were heavily supplemented with reserves. This was the United Nations Protection Force (UNPROFOR).

- The mission involved a lot of exposure to combat. Canadian troops were sniped at, shelled and were sometimes involved in major engagements – such as the battle of the Medak Pocket.
- It took the Canadian public a long time to realize that our ‘peacekeepers’ were making a lot of use of their combat skills.
- In the end, after five failed peace plans and a failing sixth one, it took air strikes and the muscular NATO-led IFOR (Implementation Force) to bring the local belligerents to heel and then SFOR (Stabilization Force) to keep them that way. The Canadian Army then carried out activities like target practice on derelict armoured vehicles with anti-tank missiles to awe the locals.
- Shortages of body armour and new helmets meant that rotations had to pass off their gear to the incoming troops still warm – sometimes literally.

1992-1993: The Airborne Regiment (which had acquitted itself very well when general warfare broke out in Cyprus in 1974 – another forgotten ‘peacekeeping’ episode) went in as part of an effort to force stability on Somalia.

- Those who fret about any supposed disgrace of this Regiment there don’t seem to have looked too much at the behaviour of other contingents in the operation; and the Somalia Inquiry was stripped of funding before it became too comprehensive in its analysis.

1998: Ice Storm – not a political crisis but dealing with a massive ice storm that completely cut off the power and roads to much of Quebec and Ontario did result in a large deployment of Canadian troops. This served as a reminder of their utility and importance during ordinary domestic emergencies.

- What has been almost completely forgotten is that stores of winter equipment, tents and the inventory of trucks and radios had been much diminished. There was some frantic scrambling to get everyone the equipment they needed. One wonders if these deficiencies have been made good since.

1999: The Toronto blizzard – let’s not go here because the rest of the country is still laughing at Toronto over Mayor Lastman’s call for military aid (although Regulars and Reserves came with their usual willing spirit and were very helpful).

1999: The Kosovo Crisis where Canada committed 18 CF-18s and sent 1,470 troops to participate in KFOR (the Kosovo Protection Force).

- The Canadian CF-18s delivered about 10% of the ordnance dropped in Serbia and Kosovo. We bombed factories, bridges, suspected troop concentrations, etc.
- The cynicism about the politics of international interventions in the Canadian Forces – already at a very high level – reached its apex when the troops in KFOR realized that the Kosovo Albanians were worse than the Serbs..

- Does anyone remember that we sent a squadron of Communications troops into the region without any small arms to protect themselves and that they had to arm themselves with heavy sticks to keep wild dogs at bay? Some signalers would leave their computers and satellite links, to grab clubs and confront dangerous animals... an interesting juxtaposition.

2001-2011: Afghanistan.

- This mission required a rush purchase of six FH-70 long range 155mm guns because we had mothballed all our old M109 self-propelled guns without upgrading them.
- This mission required a rush purchase of 66 Leopard 2 Tanks... But, hey, peacekeepers don't need tanks, right?
- We had to lease back CH-47 helicopters from the Dutch, to whom we had sold ours earlier.
- We really needed more surveillance drones which would probably have reduced our IED casualties for a start.
- We improvised armament on our helicopters and made much use of American attack helicopters. We could really use properly armed helicopters of our own.

2011: We dispatched a warship and 15 aircraft (including 7 CF-18s) for the UN mandated NATO effort in Libya and our Navy and Air Force are once-again involved in a shooting war.

Lest we forget, there have been all manner of civil aid operations inside Canada and interventions and humanitarian aid operations all over the globe while our Navy has been busy chasing pirates (and firing the occasional shot as they do).

So based on the last twenty years:

- About every seven years or so, the Air Force is flying combat patrols and dropping munitions on defended targets. Obviously, Canada needs effective combat aircraft.
- During 15 of the last 20 years, elements of the Canadian Army have been in combat. Next time, we might not be able to hone troops before deploying them and may have to go with what we have on hand. More resources for training more personnel more often are required.
- Our Navy has been on continuous operations in the Atlantic, Pacific, and Indian Ocean with numerous deployments in the Persian Gulf and anti-piracy patrols.

In Summary

The Canadian military has seen far more activity in the last twenty years than it did in any other time outside of both World Wars and Korea.

The long slow decline of Canadian combat power since the Trudeau Era has been checked... but not reversed. The sudden equipment purchases of the Martin and Harper Governments have kept Canada's overall ability to influence events and contribute to collect security from decaying anymore, but – aside from purchases like the C-17 transport aircraft and the new logistic ships to replace the 50 year old ones we still have - everything was a minimal purchase.

For example, In 1978 Canada bought 114 Leopard 1s (a German design from 1960), to replace 350 aging Centurion Tanks. Recently, we hurriedly bought 66 Leopard 2s. It might be useful to actually have at least one full regiment of tanks available somewhere. We could use some modern Artillery too, instead of just six tubes.

Our Canadian Patrol Frigates are entering their mid-life refit cycles now, the first of them has been hard at work at sea for going on ten years already. However, it would be useful if the helicopter hanger actually contained a viable combat helicopter, and we let the last of the 50 year old Sea Kings go gently out to pasture. What we now have on board these Frigates is a very expensive weight room or volleyball court in the empty hanger.

After 30 busy years, the CF-18s might not be flying much longer either... and we do need something that can do the daily work of intercepting intruders and drug-runners and can drop explosives on defended locations.

Troops need realistic training (and most of them love it), but that means fuel, ammunition, field rations and much else. A reconnaissance soldier, for example, cannot stay familiar on a machine gun by only firing a half-belt of ammunition once a year or be confident with hand grenades by only throwing a couple every three years.

However, most of all, what the Canadian Forces really need are some realistic attitudes about the world and the use of force among the countrymen they serve so well...

So perhaps, gentle reader, the next time you hear somebody expounding the notion that Canadian soldiers are peacekeepers and don't need new weapons systems, might you care to – figuratively speaking of course – gently chide and admonish them?

The Mackenzie Institute

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The Mackenzie Institute
PO Box 338, Adelaide Station
Toronto, Ontario
M5C-2J4
Tel: 416-686-4063
email: institute@mackenzieinstitute.com
www.mackenzieinstitute.com