

## Jeeps, then Helos, now Subs – What Makes This Time Different?

By Nic Boisvert

A fire in a submarine, Iltis jeeps blown up by a Taliban landmine, Sea King helicopters crash on deck. Death and injury to Canadian servicemen has become an all too common theme of late. But blaming the spate of incidents over the past year on the poor quality of aged equipment is too simplistic, just as defining responsibility is problematic. As spin-masters correctly point out, none of these incidents was the direct consequence of political action. The latest Sea King crashed because of a fault in a new engine. Soldiers complained about the Iltis because it was a maintenance nightmare, not that it was any more vulnerable to landmines than its G-Wagon replacement. And it is too early to speculate whether the cause of the fire in HMCS *Chicoutimi* was particular to that submarine or a fault common to the whole class.

Canadians, however, do see a connection at a more basic level, as evident from a recent *Global Sunday* poll. It found 97 per cent of our fellow citizens agreed just where the blame lies: “the Liberal government’s long-time neglect of Canada’s decaying military.” The key phrase is “long-time neglect.” The naming of a Sea King replacement has only just come a full decade after Jean Chretien made canceling it his first order of prime ministerial business. The Iltis replacement was stalled so that the government could set up a deal for a friendly Canadian firm, but that took so long it was no longer interested and we had to buy foreign. The submarines were offered to us in 1994, before they were mothballed, and a decade of sitting out of the water has only complicated the re-activation process.

The government has got away with this neglect because it has been able to point to other priorities and because it has no long-term plan it can be held to. The last White Paper made a very good case for a submarine acquisition, but it dates from 1994 – about the same time the government discovered it had a deficit problem. Canadians agreed with that priority, put off having a defence policy, and have been slow to demand reinvestment in our military now that surpluses are the order of the day. Fixing health care is an easy diversionary priority.

Which is what makes that 97 per cent figure so staggering, even considering it is from a non-scientific web-based poll. Something about this latest tragedy is different from the Sea King crashes and the Iltis minings. Historian Jonathan Vance has attempted to identify the reasons, citing a combination of our becoming jaded over the accident-prone Sea Kings, the obvious unsuitability of the Iltis, and the alien ways of submarine life. Those are definitely factors, but a greater part of it more likely is that deep down we are beginning to realize that we are the guilty ones, for letting our government get away with its shoddy treatment of our military forces. And unlike the friendly-fire incident in Afghanistan that killed four of our soldiers, we cannot blame this one on the Americans.

If this is a tipping point, for whatever reason, then what are we to make of it? Because government long-term neglect in delaying the submarine acquisition arguably contributed to the re-activation problems, the Opposition smells blood, and is in a unique

position to force its demand for a separate Parliamentary investigation in addition to the naval board of inquiry. That would be a mistake. If the Liberals cannot resort to their normal inclination to make the problem disappear by ignoring it, a different survival instinct may kick in. We should be aware of the precedent set by the Somalia Inquiry that was used to shut down the Airborne Regiment without a fair hearing. Already the Globe and Mail quotes “a political official close to the [naval] investigation” leaking information damaging to the submarine service. Questioned as to options under consideration, the Minister of National Defence refuses to rule out the possibility of disbanding it.

The Navy has a sufficiently good track record of honesty in its boards of inquiry that it should be left to get to the bottom of the narrow technical issues. As tempting as it might be for the Opposition to score quick political points in a single issue parliamentary inquiry, the question of whether Canada’s defence needs demand a submarine service is more properly just one of many issues for the consideration of a wider ranging foreign and defence policy review.

Ill-informed commentators with their own anti-military agendas have been quick to observe that, when the Navy supposedly was “selling” government on the needs for these submarines, it highlighted the post-Cold War priorities of spying on foreign fishing fleets and patrolling the Arctic against our American allies. True, those tasks probably were given more of an airing than they had before the demise of the Soviet fleet, but the Navy has been quite consistent in describing the warfighting role of submarines in support of allied fleets against potential enemies. This writer is confident the case has been made that retention of a submarine capability is in our best national interest. But if others remain unconvinced, let it be part of a full and open review.

One is drawn once again to observe upon the demise of the Airborne Regiment and the loss of its rapid reaction capability: once a military resource is lost, it is difficult to rebuild. Let’s not do it to the submarine service too – especially not on a political whim.

October 14, 2004

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