

## It Must Depend on Your Definition of “Major”

By Nic Boisvert

Most Canadians interested in defence are by definition proud of the past and present achievements of the Canadian Forces, but concerned as to its decreasing capacity to sustain those operations into the future. For those same reasons, many of us find ourselves conflicted over the role of the Canadian Forces in Afghanistan.

A year ago now, when the Army was exploring options to support the Coalition effort in Iraq, the best bet seemed to be the dispatch of a brigade to join a British division. It would have been a stretch on the available resources, but at least our forces could draw from our allies the essential support services we find in particular short supply. The change of mission, literally at the last minute, to send the force instead to Afghanistan was generally perceived as a backroom political ploy contrary to all military advice, taken solely to avoid joining the Americans in Iraq – and it left us responsible also to provide those support services, a move practically guaranteed (or so said the then Chief of the Land Staff) to drive the Army to the verge of collapse.

So we took some heart when the Chief of Defence Staff said that after the end of the yearlong Kabul mission there would be no major new assignments for the following eighteen months. Our sense of national pride grew as the Canadian contingent formed the bulk of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Kabul and actually proved to be contributing to local stability. Though our troops regrettably still suffered casualties, those were significantly lower than fearful estimates.

Optimism reined until the last couple of weeks, when a suicide bomber killed Corporal Jamie Mackay and injured his comrades patrolling in an Ilitis jeep; that was followed very soon by Prime Minister Martin's pledge that a force of 500 Canadians would continue to serve in Afghanistan “for the foreseeable future.” A new Chief of the Land Staff, on his way to take command of ISAF where he can use the additional troops, says the Army is capable of sustaining the new commitment. In what is proving to be our very own Clintonian moment, it must depend upon what one's definition of “major” is.

On the one hand, a cynic would observe that it didn't take long for the backroom boys to get re-established. Anyone with even passing knowledge of things military knows that “500” corresponds to no established military formation. It's too small for a battalion, and too large for a company group. But it is probably just right as an easy-to-remember round number, and not a really very big one at that. A realist, on the other hand, would admit that Afghanistan is in desperate need of international assistance, and that out of a force of 60,000 soldiers, sailors and airmen, Canada must be able to drum up 500 bodies. The problem is that, since their mission will be to provide security to a Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT), those 500 bodies can only be the foot soldiers that are in such desperately short supply. In present-day Canadian terms, 500 soldiers is a major commitment. That it is so constitutes a national disgrace.

So it comes down to two fundamental questions. Are the Canadian Forces, and the Army in particular, really in the dire straits that they (and we) claim? And if “yes” to that question, why can't they learn to say “no means no”?

Last year, when the Army got the “no more commitments” pledge from the CDS, it appeared it had finally taken a page from the Navy's book. The Navy, it will be recalled, had gone flat out for two years patrolling the Arabian Sea. With his service exhausted and on the verge of its own collapse, the Chief of the Maritime Staff announced that there would be no more deployments for a full year while the fleet was re-constituted, the sailors sent on leave, the ships maintained, and the task groups on each coast exercised back to full readiness. With progress better than expected, the frigate *Toronto* has just been sent off to join an American carrier battle group deploying to the Gulf.

After a dozen years of “Rotos” in and out of the Balkans, and too many other missions in-between, the Army was exhausted long ago. There has been only one meaningful brigade-level exercise in that

period. Desperate for an operational pause, the army leadership can't say "no" to more missions because of our national variation on the Stockholm Syndrome: everywhere our soldiers go, they become hostage to the public's belief they are essential to saving that little bit of the world. "Peacekeeping" (or in Kabul, peace enforcement) has been internalized by the Canadian public as the army's reason for being, and inflating its importance somehow makes up for what is really a very paltry showing. Admit it: 500 Canadians are not going to save Afghanistan. But if they stayed home and the Army was allowed to get on with re-constituting itself, we could have a brigade over there in a year. That would make a difference.

The only other explanation is that the Army leadership has failed in what the business-speak set call "resource stewardship". If only the damage could be contained to their service. In the annual budgetary "impact assessments" last year, the Air Force and Navy each determined they had a shortfall of about \$100 million. They got only \$6 million each (the Army was granted over \$70 million, to support on-going operations). This year the other services are forecasting a 50 per cent greater shortfall. Any thoughts on how much they will receive towards it?

The fact of the matter is that the cuts in defence spending over the past decade, like the proverbial chickens, have come home to roost. Without significant new funding, the Afghanistan mission is going to remain a wasting drain on our military resources for the foreseeable future. The capital budget will continue to be robbed to pay for current operations. Transformation – whatever that means this week – will never be achieved. The Air Force and the Navy will wither. As repeatedly warned by pro-defence groups, we have arrived at the threshold of a "Canada Without Armed Forces."

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