

DARTs and Laurels

By Nic Boisvert

The tsunami disaster that swept the Indian Ocean has brought to light much that is good in Canadians – but much more that is wrong with the Canadian Forces. The good news is that in the wake of catastrophe, in addition to their own great personal charity, the Canadian population turned instinctively to the CF as the national institution best suited to “do something”. Only the armed forces have the resources and organizational skills to contribute effectively to a relief mission of any size and complexity. The bad news is that DART has become the focus of attention simply because of the sound of its name – Disaster Assistance Relief Team. Encouraging words, but little substance to them.

It is painful to be churlish in these circumstances, but DART really does represent about the least we can do as a nation. Why that is so points to the diminished combat capability of the Canadian Forces. With this disaster coming as it does just before publication of the government’s long-delayed International Security Policy, it presents an especially good opportunity for a realistic baseline assessment.

No one can fault the dedication and sacrifice of the 200 individuals who make up DART. Those field engineers, logisticians, medics and security personnel are precisely the trades that have been in highest demand for every overseas deployment our forces have undertaken in the decade and a half since the end of the Cold War. Practically every member of the team sports ribbons proving previous service in the Gulf, Bosnia, Somalia, Haiti and Afghanistan. DART, however, is not their parent unit. It is an “ad hoc” formation, thrown together as circumstances arise, stripping people from the units with which they actually earned those ribbons.

Like its team members, DART is something of an orphan. Neither a proper combat unit nor an NGO relief agency, it was foisted on the CF in the softheaded days of the early-1990s, when history was supposed to have ended, and militaries could disengage from such archaic practices as war-fighting. Concerned with controlling the national debt, the Chretien government was unwilling to provide dedicated funding for the unit. Thus, having to rely instead upon existing CF resources, it became a drain on the military budget, and the customary DND minimalist approach produced a classic compromise that satisfies no one. Add the millions of dollars diverted to it over the years with the expected \$20 million cost of the present deployment, and Canadian taxpayers have every right to ask if they have received good value for their money.

DART is constituted to provide potable water to meet the needs of 5000 people and to treat 250 medical outpatients daily. That is probably great relief to the 5000 fortunate enough to be treated by it, but if we are absolutely honest it is not much to throw against any disaster worthy of the name. It certainly pales against the scale of a tsunami that has affected millions. That is part of the reason DART has deployed exactly twice in the decade of its existence, for hurricane relief in Nicaragua and after an earthquake in Turkey. The other part became clear during the disaster of hurricane-ravaged Haiti last fall, when the military balked at sending it off – not because Haitians didn’t rate, but because 24 Hercules flights are needed to ship the unit out, and only three aircraft were serviceable. The government continues to waver indecisively

on the strategic lift file, so the CF has been forced to charter a pair of giant Russian Antonov aircraft to transport the unit.

DART boasts that it brings its own vehicles for use in-theatre, but again that is not much use in a disaster scenario where all ground infrastructure has been wiped out. Unfortunately, the Canadian Forces have no heavy or even medium lift helicopters to turn to (the lightweight Griffons just do not cut it, and the new Maritime Helicopters won't be available for another decade). Already DND is euphemistically styling the present deployment to Sri Lanka as a "non-traditional mission." In plain language, that means the unit will be split up and elements attached to existing local facilities.

The lesson in this is that, just as it takes real combat-trained soldiers to undertake effective peacekeeping missions in the 21st Century, it takes real military capabilities to perform proper disaster relief. The US Navy aircraft carrier and amphibious assault ships dispatched from their base in Guam began to provide measurable relief even before they arrived off the Sumatra coast. With their attack aircraft safely stowed below, the flight decks were clear to launch waves of heavy lift helicopters to begin local distribution of the piles of relief aid from local airfields to isolated villages that were the hardest hit. Onboard water purifiers are churning out hundreds of thousands of gallons of potable water daily. And those combat aircraft below decks are still serving a purpose, ready to deal with any outbreaks of violence in civil war-torn Aceh province (which was deemed "too dangerous" for Canada's DART, a sorry admission for a military unit). Maybe Paul Martin was too quick to dismiss Stephen Harper's election proposal for a hybrid carrier, which would seem to be tailor-made for just this sort of situation.

More to the point, the Prime Minister should take a page from his own Throne Speech that said Canada's international military efforts should be "smart, strategic and focused." While deploying DART is better than doing nothing, it hardly scores on any of those levels, compared to what we should be capable of achieving. Canada's military leaders were right to hesitate at undertaking a deployment that will absorb millions of valuable defence dollars for minimal real return.

Disaster relief assistance should not be offered in the expectation of diplomatic return, so we should not be disappointed when any "thanks" directed our way is muted in comparison to that given the United States, Britain, Australia or India. Regrettably for the suffering masses of Sri Lanka, any benefit from the DART deployment is more likely to be enjoyed by Canadian politicians. In pandering to a public easily satisfied with the dispatch of DART, the Martin government has lucked in to diverting attention from Canada's very real military shortcomings.

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