

Winning Canada, losing Afghanistan

MITCH POTTER (feat. SHARON HOBSON)

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Yours and mine weren't the hearts and minds Canadian soldiers were aiming for when they first landed in Kandahar amid the stratospherically high hopes of early 2002.

But as the last of our combat troops trickle home nearly a decade later, few would dispute it is Canada they won. Death by death, injury by injury, the hard slog of the longest war transformed not only the Canadian Forces, but the way Canadians see them.

Afghanistan remains, at best, an open question. At worst, a lost cause.

But the "new" Canadian army — bloodied, battle-hardened and better equipped than at any point since the Cold War — occupies the Canadian consciousness in a way old hands can't remember since the 1950s.

It's not just a question of resources, though the money has freely flowed. Canada's annual military spending has surged by half since 9/11 — we now rank 14th globally in military outlay, with a 2010 infusion of \$22.8 billion, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute.

But arguably more significant, the national embrace of the dust-encrusted rank-and-file: the Highway of Heroes, the Red Fridays, the yellow stickers on cars; the lone bagpiper at the ramp ceremonies that accompanied 157 soldiers' coffins home.

"Our soldiers are not outsiders anymore. They are embedded in Canada's consciousness in a way we haven't seen since the Korean War," said Col. (Ret.) Brian MacDonald, senior analyst with the Conference of Defence Associations.

"That connection was lost around 1966, when the military dropped its presence on Canadian campuses. The Forces lost contact with the people, to a large extent.

"But now we have a Highway of Heroes running into the heart of our cities. And when the motorcades go by, people line the bridges. It's a striking change."

As they come home, the Canadian Forces also find themselves kitted as well, or better, than many of their NATO peers. A self-contained, modernized army, replete with the once-missing pieces — Chinook helicopters and a fleet of four massive CC-177 Globemaster aircraft — for whatever comes next.

What might that be? And what sort of work might they do when they get there? It depends on whom you ask.

To the military's sharpest critics, the legacy of these last 10 years includes an acute absence of debate as the army shed its "peacekeeping" image.

"I view it as a fight for the soul of Canada and the way we view the world — and the fight continues," said Steven Staples, who has locked horns with Canada's military brass from his perch as president of the Ottawa-based Rideau Institute, an independent research and advocacy group.

"The abandonment of peacekeeping arguably started pre-9/11, but it has certainly been stuck in the basement ever since.

“But the massive increase in Canada’s military spending has come with a massive expansion of the military’s political power in Ottawa. . . There is plenty more money and power in play, but not nearly enough questions about what we want the Canadian Forces to be doing on Canada’s behalf.”

Staples readily acknowledges Canadians are now “more aware and supportive of soldiers.” But he suggests the transformation came about, in part, by design, courtesy of the Department of National Defence headquarters in Ottawa.

“I’m not saying it is a façade. There is a very real increase in people attending Nov. 11 ceremonies. But the military spends millions in public relations campaigns and that, in part, is what delivers its political clout. So how much of this is a legitimate shift and how much of it is very well-crafted emblems for the media to cover. I’m not sure.”

One especially outspoken critic is Col. (Ret.) Pat Stogran, who led the very first mission to Kandahar in 2002. Today, he doubts the Canadian Forces have actually changed as much as some believe. Neither, he says, has Canada.

When Stogran landed in early 2002, the Kandahar Airfield that would eventually grow into a veritable NATO city, with Tim Hortons double-doubles and a ball-hockey rink, was a burned-out wasteland mired in ankle-deep dust.

But nearby Kandahar City was then a place where foreign journalists could tread unhindered, even after nightfall. One encountered grinning Pashtun tribesmen everywhere, not only delighted to be free of austere Taliban rule but anticipating their lives were about to be transformed for the better by these welcome outsiders.

Stogran, who was ousted from his later position as Canada’s Veterans Ombudsman for being too adamant on behalf of vets, returned to Kandahar three months ago as a civilian. He came away with deep misgivings — convinced Canadians have effectively “lost” the war, yet immensely proud of what rank-and-file soldiers made of the impossible task they were handed.

“The units on the ground did tremendously well — they never lost a single tactical engagement. They truly are worthy of every scrap of praise Canadians can offer,” Stogran told the Star.

“But in my view, the generals let down the troops with a flawed strategy. Instead of focusing on building up Kandahar, economically and diplomatically, we ended up just blindly going in and started whacking Taliban.”

Canada’s charismatic former top soldier, Gen. Rick Hillier, is widely regarded as the key to the Canadian Forces rebranding. The shoot-from-the-hip Newfoundlander seemed, midway through the 9/11 decade, to have achieved a rare fusion with Canadian popular opinion.

But Hillier’s hawkish rhetoric — like his famed denunciation of the Taliban as “scumbags and murderers” — came with a battle posture that “did more to disadvantage Canadian Forces in the longer term anything else,” said Stogran.

“Hillier lost the war with Vietnam-style tactics. We should have been there like a police force. We didn’t need tanks, we needed to hound CCM to build a bicycle factory and create some jobs. Instead, we ended up clawing over and killing a lot of Afghan civilians in the rush to get at the bad guys.

“The U.S. will declare victory, undoubtedly, and pull out in 2014. And by 2016, probably, the bubble will break like Saigon. It’s a travesty.”

There was a time, Stogran admits, when he resented the “Canadian peacekeeper” label, because the frontline-troop reality in past missions to places such as Bosnia, Somalia and Rwanda never matched the myth.

“I hated the word ‘peacekeeper’ when I got back from Bosnia because it implied some sort of bloodless offering with no real danger. . . . It was war, and yet a soldier injured in the line of duty was supposedly no more than an industrial accident,” said Stogran.

“But when I left Afghanistan, I found myself with a new appreciation for our ‘peacekeeping’ legacy because what we were facing in Kandahar, I would submit, is not really all that different.

“That’s where the lessons learned are going to be important. Because in this new security environment we live in, if the future is about winning hearts and minds, Canada has the potential to be a superpower. As long as we don’t believe in flexing our muscles to kill people.”

The other paradox throughout the 9/11 years has been access — an unprecedented flow of journalists to the front lines, even as the flow of information tightened with each passing year.

Simple questions that once prompted immediate answers began to drag out into multi-day delays, as public affairs officers on the ground passed the query up the food chain for approval from Ottawa.

It’s a dynamic familiar to Sharon Hobson, one of Canada’s longest-serving defence correspondents, who has written for Jane’s Defence Weekly since 1985. Hobson, who sits on the advisory council of the Canadian Defence and Foreign Affairs Institute, says the information flow from DND HQ has tightened to a trickle.

OPSEC — or operational security — is often cited when reporters get shut down on basic queries. But unlike many of Canada’s NATO allies, the long shadow of OPSEC extends to the wounded, with the extent of injuries in recent years a de facto state secret.

U.S. forces, by contrast, update casualty counts once a month, while the U.K. freshens its tally of killed and injured in Afghanistan every two weeks. Canada is not expected to reveal its number of wounded for 2011 until early next year. And we may never know how badly the survivors were hurt.

OPSEC also stretches like a blanket over Joint Task Force 2, Canada’s special forces, a unit that is widely believed to have seen more action since 9/11 than any other. But the elite team, which doubled in size to approximately 600, has never been glimpsed in the field. Or rather, those among us who’ve seen them have never been allowed, under the terms of embedding, to write about it.

Says Hobson: “Of course we all understand the obvious need for secrecy when it comes to special forces. But what about six months or a year later, when the mission is long over? We should know the kinds of things they are engaging in. It can be done because other countries do it. We just don’t do it here.

“Now with the embedding program, the irony is there are more reporters than ever getting to know something about the military — but you can’t get detailed information like before. You rarely get interviews. Instead, what you get is an email with bullet points approved by the Privy Council Office and very general. We used to be let in on the big picture. Now you just get fragments.”

Which, argues Hobson, is not merely an occupational annoyance. Our ability as citizens to weigh in on Canada’s military future is at risk.

“The Canadian public needs to know what the Canadian military is doing in its name. We, as citizens, have a responsibility to make decisions,” she says.

“But that depends on getting the information. If Canadians don’t even know about it, they can’t think about it, let alone ask questions.”