

2006 taught hard lessons about Canada's fragile military capabilities

By Bob Bergen

The lessons learned in combat by the Canadian Forces in 2006 have been invaluable for revealing just how far reaching are the consequences of losing combat capabilities.

This stems from a recent conversation with an editor at a Winnipeg newspaper about the futuristic Lockheed Martin F-35 Joint Strike Fighter and why Canada is involved in its development as a low Level III \$150-million partner.

He suggested that Canada won't ever participate in an air war at any conceivable point in the future.

I respectfully disagreed because no one can tell what the world will be like in 2018, when the first Joint Strike Fighters roll off the assembly line.

That is a particularly significant date for Canada's air force because even with an \$2.6-billion modernization of 80 CF-18s now underway, the 1980s-vintage fighter-bombers will reach the end of their lifespan between 2017 and 2020.

The question after that is then what? Abandon Canada's air force?

The one lesson 2006 has taught is how quickly things change during conflict and that it is penny-wise and pound-foolish to get rid of a military capability only to have to struggle to get it back.

One striking example of that is Canada's aging Leopard tanks from Edmonton, Alberta, 15 of which have just entered combat in Afghanistan in the war against al-Qaeda-supported Taliban insurgents.

About a year ago, Chief of Defence Staff Gen. Rick Hillier called the 1970s-vintage 42.5-tonne behemoths "millstones" around the neck of Canada's military thinking.

Hillier's "army transformation" called for replacing the Leopards with the Stryker Mobile Gun System, which is essentially a variant of the LAV III equipped with a 105 millimetre gun like the Leopard's.

The LAV III is the eight-wheeled 17-tonne armoured car Canadians are using in Afghanistan with a 25 millimetre canon instead of the big gun.

While they desperately need the direct fire support of 105-millimetre high-pressure guns, the defence industry can't deliver new light materials for the LAV III variants that can withstand enemy weapons in Afghanistan.

As a result, the first Canadian Leopards arrived in Afghanistan in August. That was only possible because the Lord Strathcona's Horse (Royal Canadians) retained the complex skill sets required to maintain them, drive them, fire them and work around them.

The Strathcona's are the only Canadian regiment that still has that capability and only time will tell, likely during 2007 rotations, whether the government's wisdom of putting all its eggs in the Strathcona's basket will stretch them to the breaking point.

Another case in point is the 12 Chinook transport helicopters Canada sold to the Dutch in 1992 as a cost-cutting measure after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

What is the combat-lesson learned in Afghanistan? Canadian soldiers desperately need the transportation capability offered by helicopters to avoid mines and improvised explosive devices that are killing them in worrisome numbers.

In June, the Harper government announced it would spend about \$5 billion for 16 new Chinooks, but won't take delivery of them for nearly three years.

In the meantime, the Canadians are ferried about in Afghanistan by Chinooks owned by – wait for it – the Dutch, British and Americans when available.

There is more: In the 1990s, Canada offered its soldiers buyout packages under the Force Reduction Program aimed at reducing the regular forces to 60,000 by 1999.

Seven years later and with just 52,700 deployable troops, what to the Canadian Forces need now? More soldiers.

The government plans to add 8,000 troops this year and to keep increasing that number by 1,000 every year until 2011 when the Harper government says its military spending will peak and it will recruit 12,000 new regular and reservists annually.

But, what recruiters are seeing is how difficult it is to rebuild Canada's military after reaping the fool's gold that was the peace dividend.

It goes on and on.

The point is that we have no idea what the world will be like in 2011 and the reality is a Harper government may not be around in 2011. And, heaven only knows what other governments might do in the meantime.

The one thing 2006 has shown for certain is that there are people who actually speak unapologetically about wiping Israel off the face of the earth, while striving for nuclear weapons at the same time. So much for world peace.

All of this seems rather gloomy, but one of the bright spots is the hope that Canadian soldiers are giving the Afghan people in the fight against the Taliban.

That's one place where the stretched-to-the-limit Canadian Forces are making a difference in the world and they're doing it with tanks the military wanted to get rid of right up until this summer.

That's the lesson of 2006, military capabilities are a precious thing and we jeopardize them at our peril.

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