

Sen. Colin Kenny's Afghan questions deserve answers

There is no hotter button regarding Canada's mission in Afghanistan than the deaths of the 24 soldiers killed in 2007 by improvised explosive devices and roadside bombs.

So, when Senator Colin Kenney, the widely-respected chair of the Senate Committee of National Security and Defence, pushes that button and suggests there is a quick helicopter fix that could save soldiers' lives, ears should perk up.

Kenny did that recently when he pointed out that Canada sold off its fleet of Chinook medium-lift helicopters in the mid-1990s and won't acquire new ones likely until 2012.

A Chinook can carry 33 to 50 troops, but in absence of them Kenny asks why Canada couldn't send some of its 85 Griffon helicopters instead.

The Griffons, he noted, can only carry five fully equipped soldiers, but then asked why Canada could not send six of them that could move 30 troops at a time. Nothing, he pointed out, is more important than saving soldiers' lives.

He also argued that Canada ought to speed up the procurement process for modern unmanned aerial reconnaissance vehicles and suggested Canada deploy its recently upgraded Aurora coastal surveillance aircraft to Afghanistan to conduct surveillance there.

If one takes Kenny's arguments a step further, one can ask why not deploy six Canadian CF-18s to Afghanistan to provide air cover for the Canadians rather than rely on French jets?

No one has answered those questions, up until now.

Kenny's arguments caught the attention of the folks in the office of Chief of The Air Staff who admit nothing is stopping Canada from doing what the Senator suggests.

But, they also privately question Kenny's facts on one hand and the simplicity of his arguments on the other.

In the case of the Griffon helicopter, they say it can only carry three or four fully equipped soldiers, depending on heat conditions, which makes no sense when it also takes two to fly it. Beyond that, Canada can't just deploy six helicopters; it has to deploy a host of mechanics and technicians, as well.

The same thing holds true for the CF-18s. When Canada first deployed six to Aviano, Italy, in 1998 prior to the Kosovo air war, it also deployed pilots, maintenance crews, bomb loaders, and weapons technicians – 80 in all.

Maj. Norbert Cyr, public affairs advisor to the Strategic Joint Staff at National Defence Headquarters, says the equipment issues Sen. Kenny raises are much more complicated than he makes them out to be.

"A medium lift helicopter carries 30 people and the Griffon two or three. A Griffon has two hours total flying time, so would it be wise to have the Griffon there? The decision was no."

"To some people it is offensive to say we have to rely on the Dutch or Americans for medium lift when we don't have it, but that is the purpose of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

"It's the same thing with the CF-18. We already have air support. All the soldiers care about is: 'Can we get the bombs on target?' We can get the bombs on target with French fighters."

"If we deployed CF-18s, they wouldn't just be flying in support of the Canadian troops. They would become NATO assets in support of NATO."

The same principle would apply, he suggested, to Canadian Auroras in the event they are deployed to Afghanistan.

Canada currently has a bidding process in place to buy modern UAVs to replace its current SAGEM Sperwers, such as the Global Hawk, the Predator or the Raptor, but which won't get them into theatre in the next two years.

It's a process Kenny mocks with this anecdote: "One thinks of a badly wounded man waiting for an ambulance in a country without health care. The ambulance finally arrives. 'Wait,' he whispers hoarsely. 'I want to get two more bids.'"

On that point, Kenny is dead right and the Canadian government has already shown how quickly it can move if it wants to.

It wasn't too long ago that the Chief of Defence Gen. Rick Hillier described Canada's aging

Leopard C2 tanks as millstones around the neck of Canada's military.

One year later, not only were they deployed to Afghanistan, they are currently in the process of being replaced by 20 modern Leopard 2A6Ms borrowed from Germany and Canada announced in April it would buy up to 100 more from the Netherlands.

That raises the prospect that Canada could similarly borrow Chinook helicopters from a NATO ally.

Canadian soldiers in Afghanistan definitely need them more than the Griffons Senator Kenny says could make do.

In the meantime, the Senator is doing the right thing: asking questions how Canada's military commanders can better protect our soldiers and save lives in Afghanistan.

They are exactly the same questions the commanders are asking; he just asks them publicly.

Bob Bergen, Ph.D., is a Research Fellow with the Canadian Defence & Foreign Affairs Institute (CDFAI) in Calgary. The opinions expressed in this document are those of the author and not necessarily those of CDFAI, its Board of Directors, Advisory Council, Fellows or Donors. Bergen's column appears bi-weekly. Learn more about the CDFAI and its research on the Internet at www.cdfai.org