

## What Canadian soldiers think about mounting casualties

The next time a Canadian soldier is killed in Afghanistan or anywhere else, think about his or her death the way soldiers do and ask the following two questions:

When a police officer is killed on the job, do Canadians want the police to stop protecting their communities?

When a fireman or woman dies on the job, do Canadians want firefighters to stop fighting fires?

The troops don't understand those who get squeamish or question Canada's contribution to rebuilding Afghanistan when a soldier or soldiers are killed or wounded by the Taliban.

They accept that risking their lives in the war against terrorism is part of their job and that casualties are an inevitable fact of war.

They also understand the importance of Canada's contribution of more than 2,500 troops to NATO's fight against the al-Qaeda-supported Taliban given the extremely limited number of NATO troops.

Compared to NATO's past reconstruction effort in the Balkans in the 1990s, the 37,000 NATO soldiers currently in Afghanistan is a relative drop in the proverbial bucket.

After the Dayton Accord in November 1995, the international community responded with some 60,000 troops in Bosnia to enforce the peace effort among a population of 3.9 million Serbs, Croats and Muslims.

If the international community had responded to the United Nations approved NATO mission in Afghanistan with a population of 31 million on the same per capita basis, there would be some 476,900 troops in Afghanistan fighting the insurgents and creating the stability needed for reconstruction, not 37,000.

That fact underscores the challenges NATO faces in Afghanistan and helps explain the cause and effect of certain military responses to the Taliban insurgents.

For example, the dearth of troops has forced the United States to rely on air strikes against the Taliban that threaten to turn Afghanistan's civilian population against NATO.

Some 132 Afghan civilians have been accidentally killed since March last year, the latest being at least 21 caught between 200 Taliban fighters and pinned-down U.S. Special Forces who called in air strikes when their mortars could not take out the militants.

As one senior NATO official told The New York Times: "without air, we'd need hundreds of thousands of troops."

Unfortunately, Canadians have also caused civilian casualties, mostly as a result of soldiers firing upon vehicles whose drivers ignored commands to keep back from their convoys.

But, in combat situations, the Canadians are now using their Leopard tanks to provide direct fire support against Taliban positions which greatly reduces the politically-charged risk of civilian casualties.

In the past, Canadian troops relied upon either U.S. air support or their own heavy artillery to attack hardened enemy positions. While artillery is now much more accurate than it was historically, it remains very much an area weapon.

Canada's Leopard tanks which arrived in Afghanistan in October last year went a long way to minimizing the potential for unintended civilian casualties.

With a muzzle velocity of 1,067 metres per second, their laser sighting system is so accurate they can fire an armour-piercing round through the same hat-sized hole left in a target by the previous one at 1,200 metres.

Some of their other rounds are effective at distance of 4,000 metres.

Still, war is war and the risk of casualties whether collateral or Canadian can only be minimized and not eliminated completely as the deaths of 54 Canadian soldiers and one diplomat since 2002 painfully illustrate.

The vast majority of those deaths were caused by suicide bombers, improvised roadside bombs and mines.

Those ground threats would be greatly reduced by Chinook heavy-lift helicopters that can carry up to 30 combat-ready soldiers or some 12,700 kilograms of cargo.

Canada once had Chinooks, but Brian Mulroney's cash-hungry Conservative government sold them to the Netherlands in the 1990s.

Although Prime Minister Stephen Harper's government has earmarked \$4.7 billion for 16 new Chinooks and their maintenance for 20 years, it will be lucky if the first is put into service in Afghanistan by the end of Canada's current mission in February, 2009.

In the meantime, without those helicopters Canadians depend on our allies for helicopter transport which limits independent operations or, failing that, forces them to use ground transportation which exposes them to great risk.

And don't think it's just the combat troops whose lives are endangered.

Consider the fuel-truck-driving transport soldier who is every bit as exposed to rocket attacks, suicide bombers, improvised explosive devices and mines as the combat troops.

Together, those soldiers are winning Canada newfound respect around the world by doing their country's dangerous but vitally important work.

If one of them dies, think of the police; think of fire fighters.

Mourn the loss, but don't ask the rest to stop doing their jobs.

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