

After a year of triumph and tragedy, the Canadian Forces face uncertainty

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Canadian Press

Thursday, December 26, 2002

OTTAWA (CP) - After a year that saw both triumph and tragedy in Afghanistan, the Canadian Forces face uncertainty. Short of money, short of trained people and short of equipment, with a potential war looming, the military is at a low ebb. A tragic friendly fire accident marred a six-month campaign in Afghanistan in which Canadian soldiers won high praise for their professionalism.

Newly acquired British submarines have shown unexpected teething problems, including a dented hull and leaky valves.

The air force still hasn't signed a contract for new shipborne helicopters a decade after the Liberal government cancelled a chopper contract as too expensive.

The likelihood of an American-led war against Iraq remains murky. The government has said it supports "consequences" if Iraq fails to comply with UN arms inspections, but hasn't specified what that means.

Military planners have little they could offer in a fight. CF-18 fighter planes need upgrades to be compatible with other allied aircraft and the improvements won't be finished for another four years. A contribution of tactical transport planes - C-130 Hercules or Airbuses - is possible, as is a squadron of warships or small numbers of commandos from the JTF-2.

The military might be able to scratch together a small infantry unit, something like the battle group sent to Afghanistan. But, since the Forces couldn't transport or supply the unit at such a distance, the Americans would have to provide logistical support.

They may feel that the benefit of having the soldiers is outweighed by the need to sustain them.

Years of robbing Peter to pay Paul, of siphoning money from the capital budget to pay the operational bills, have left the Forces in a dilemma.

"Too much army for our budget, too little army for our tasks," says Lt.-Gen. Mike Jeffery, the army commander.

"Right now, Defence has a \$13-billion program and a \$12-billion budget and these two have to be reconciled," says Art Eggleton, the former defence minister.

The hope, is that Finance Minister John Manley's first budget - likely to come in February - will provide new money for defence, especially if Canada is to play a role in a campaign against Iraq.

John McCallum, the former Royal Bank economist who took over as defence minister in May, has been lobbying Manley hard for more money.

"We should be spending more than is currently planned," he says.



**CREDIT: (CP PHOTO/
The Halifax Daily News
- Scott Dunlop)**

One of Canada's newest submarines sits in drydock last summer in Halifax Naval yard undergoing repairs after its purchase from the British Navy. (CP PHOTO/The Halifax Daily News - Scott Dunlop)

Both the Commons and Senate defence committee have recommended billions more for defence. The auditor general, too, called for more, as did reports from other groups, including the C. D. Howe Institute and the Conference of Defence Associations.

It's been a topsy-turvy year for the military.

It began with members of the secretive JTF-2 commando group on the ground in Afghanistan. There then was a scramble to get regular troops into the fray. With no strategic airlift capacity, the army had to beg a ride from the United States Air Force to get its 850 soldiers, most from the 3rd battalion Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry, to the action.

The Patricia's joined an outfit of American airborne soldiers based in the southern city of Kandahar. They alternated security duties at the base with gruelling patrols deep into the rugged Afghan highlands, searching for elusive Taliban and al-Qaida fighters.

Canadian snipers protected American and Canadian patrols with extremely long-range shooting.

While the troopers patrolled the ground, Canadian warships stood offshore, mounting a blockade. Canadian transport planes and Aurora patrol aircraft flew hundreds of hours in support of the coalition.

Almost as the Patricias hit the ground, there were complaints back home that the soldier's green camouflage uniforms were the wrong shade for the job, something which the soldiers themselves shrugged off, but which became political fodder in Ottawa.

There was another political bunfight over the status of prisoners. The United States said it would not extend formal prisoner of war status to such captives. Since the Canadians would turn prisoners over to the Americans, politicians bickered over their treatment.

Eggleton found himself hauled before a Commons committee for his comments on the subject, in which he seemed to suggest he didn't know that Canadian soldiers had already taken prisoners.

In April, tragedy struck in Afghanistan when an American jet accidentally bombed Canadian soldiers engaged in a night training session.

Sgt. Marc Leger, Cpl. Ainsworth Dyer, Pte. Richard Green and Pte. Nathan Smith died.

During the next week, the return of the bodies to Canada and the subsequent funerals, drew a deep and emotional response from the public.

Two American pilots were eventually charged with manslaughter after two inquiries cleared the Canadians of any responsibility for the accident.

In May, Eggleton was summarily fired from cabinet because he had let a contract to a former girlfriend. At the time, he was the second-longest serving defence minister ever.

McCallum took over, only to stumble into a series of gaffes, including a letter in which he confused the First World War victory at Vimy Ridge with Vichy, the puppet regime which ran France during the Second World War.

The Canadian contingent in the former Yugoslavia was reduced, in an effort to ease the burden of deployments on the army.

McCallum also put a defence review on hold while he studied the problem of chronic underfunding.

After a decade in which the defence budget was gouged by 25 per cent, he found that the military had only 40 per cent of the money needed to maintain bases and equipment in 2002-03.

"At the present time, the army can afford to train only four of its 12 manoeuvre units to the minimum

essential level of competence," a briefing note said.

"This reduced level of training is steadily eroding the base of expertise necessary to maintain all-arms capability over the longer term."

The bottom line was increased risks for troops in the field, the note concluded.

The brass have long complained that personnel shortages have produced an unacceptably high tempo of operations, with soldiers putting in two, three or even four tours abroad within five or six years. That kind of burden puts too much stress on the troops, the generals complain.

Andre Marin, the military ombudsman, added to those concerns with a detail report on operational stress. He said as many as half the soldiers who go abroad on tough missions may come home with psychological problems and perhaps one-fifth suffer full-blown post-traumatic stress disorder.

No one knows the full toll, because there's no data base and some soldiers, steeped in the macho military culture are fearful of admitting to problems.

"There is a widespread ignorance and lack of sympathy about (post-traumatic stress) within the culture of the Canadian Forces as a whole," Marin said in his report.

So the Forces soldier on, overworked and underfunded, hoping for a financial infusion in February.

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A chronology of major events involving the Canadian Forces in 2002:

Jan. 7: Defence Minister Art Eggleton says 700-member force will go to Afghanistan.

Jan. 28: Prime Minister Jean Chretien says he wants "clarification" of U.S. statement that prisoners taken in Afghanistan not entitled to formal prisoner of war status; says Canadians haven't taken any prisoners yet.

Jan. 29: Eggleton says Canadians had taken prisoners a week earlier.

Feb. 1: First of the Canadian contingent leave for Afghanistan. Commons votes to have committee investigate whether Eggleton misled House over PoW issue.

March 1: Senate defence committee urges \$4 billion more for defence. Government says another 150 soldiers to go to Afghanistan.

March 14: Commons committee concludes Eggleton did not intend to mislead MPs.

April 18: U.S. bomb kills four Canadian soldiers on training exercise in Afghanistan.

May 21: Government says troops to come home in July, won't be replaced.

May 26: Eggleton fired over contract to ex-girlfriend; John McCallum replaces him.

May 30: Commons defence committee calls for billions more for defence.

June 28: Report into friendly fire incident released, says Canadian soldiers followed the book.

Aug. 9 Returning troops feted at Edmonton parade.

Sept. 13: U.S. military court announces charges of involuntary manslaughter, aggravated assault against "reckless" U.S. pilots in friendly fire incident.

Nov. 11: Doreen Coolen, whose son Pte. Richard Green was killed in Afghanistan, is Silver Cross mother for Remembrance Day.

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