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Special Report

A moving target

Afghanistan was supposed to be a six-month job

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OTTAWA -- Six months, maximum

That was the conventional wisdom in February 2002 when Canada first shipped 850 ground troops off to fight the Taliban in Afghanistan.

The intention was to go in, support the U.S. to find Osama Bin Laden and get rid of the Taliban, and then get the troops home so fast they might not even be missed.

But six months has turned into six years and counting.

■ Afghan general credits Canada for new Kandahar

"I think from the beginning people have underestimated this," says Mark Sedra, a senior fellow with the Centre for International Governance Innovation. "The reality is this is going to take a long time."

Canada is now engaged in a war the likes of which it hasn't seen since Korea almost six decades ago. Eighty-one Canadians -- 80 soldiers and one diplomat -- have died in the line of duty in Afghanistan.

What started as a plan to stand in solidarity with America was pumped up by the Canadian military's desire to prove it was able to do more than just peacekeeping. Add to that the politics of a government that felt guilty about saying no to the U.S. on Iraq, and a contingent of politicians, military officials and policy advisers -- in Canada and elsewhere -- who badly underestimated what it was going to take to repair a country they knew very

little about.

Two months after the U.S. terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, then Liberal defence minister Art Eggleton announced that 1,000 troops from Canadian Forces Base Edmonton and CFB Winnipeg would be heading to Afghanistan to secure airports and transportation routes, and provide aid to Afghans.

"It is not an offensive mission, not a front-line mission," Eggleton said at the time. "This is a stabilization mission to assist in opening corridors for humanitarian assistance." He also said Canada didn't have the ability to go to Afghanistan for the long haul, and we would only be there for "a maximum of six months." Those original troops arrived in Kandahar in February 2002 and were back in Canada by August. The navy and some special forces who had been in the area since November 2001 would remain.

But then -- with encouragement from the U.S. -- Canada decided to pick up its peacekeeping hat again and sent over 1,000 troops to join an International Security Assistance Force in Kabul.

Liberal MP John McCallum was the defence minister when that decision was made, and he says by that point, the Afghanistan mission had grown beyond just supporting our closest neighbours in their hour of need.

"My main motive as defence minister was to provide security to help Afghanistan develop and ensure it did not regress back to failed state status," McCallum said.

But there was another, somewhat more political, motive behind Canada's decision to send more troops into Afghanistan.

Iraq.

By continuing to support the American War on Terror with a peacekeeping-type mission in Afghanistan, Canada could say no to joining the U.S. on the ground in Iraq without too much damage to its relationship with its largest trading partner.

Over the next three years in Kabul, Canada's international clout and reputation grew. For six months in 2003, Canadian Lt.-Gen Rick Hillier took command of the entire NATO-mandated ISAF force in Kabul.

Two years later, Hillier was promoted to Canada's chief of defence staff and played a major part in advising the government to extend the mission in Afghanistan and set up a security force and reconstruction team in Kandahar, one of the most dangerous places in the country.

While other NATO nations had claimed most of the safer spots to set up reconstruction teams, none would agree to go to Kandahar where the Taliban presence was strongest and the risk to soldiers high.

The Canadian military, observers say, was desperate to show it wasn't just a peacekeeping force.

"There was a desire in some quarters, particularly the military, to really assert ourselves," Sedra says. "(Kandahar) was seen as a sitting challenge for Canada. Other NATO states were unwilling to go to more dangerous areas. Canada saw an opportunity and a need."

The military and the government knew Kandahar was a bigger risk for Canada's troops and began to prepare the public, warning Canadians who were used to seeing their troops as peacekeepers that this mission would likely involve casualties.

However, Sedra notes, nobody making the Kandahar decision envisioned that the danger in Kandahar was going to get worse, not better.

"I don't think anybody predicted that the violence would continue to deteriorate," he said. "We are responding to what is a growing crisis. That's the reason why our troops are there now."

Canada was supposed to be in Kandahar for one year, but it became clear very quickly that wouldn't be enough. The violence was escalating, the Taliban had regrouped and the tenuous Afghan government was at risk of losing control over Kandahar province.

In the first four months in Kandahar, eight Canadian soldiers were killed, the same number who had died in the entire first four years of the Afghan mission.

In 2006, newly-elected Prime Minister Stephen Harper -- whose Conservative government hadn't made the decision to go to Kandahar in the first place -- took control of the mission, putting a motion before Parliament to extend it until 2009.

It was the first time there had been a national debate in Parliament about Afghanistan, and the public, which had largely ignored the Afghanistan issue until then, was starting to take notice.

Because all of a sudden, Canadians realized their country was at war.

The Kandahar mission continues today with more than 2,500 troops. It is a combat mission, and the hope is that over the next few months, more reconstruction and diplomacy can happen, and efforts can be made to find other NATO nations prepared to take over from Canada when the 2011 deadline approaches.

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