

0230 GMT November 5, 2008

**The Canadians in Afghanistan**

LTC Brian A. Reid (Retired)

- **Letter** I am a retired Lieutenant Colonel in the Royal Canadian Artillery who dabbles in military history. Your analysis of the story in the Washington Post caused me to query sources familiar with the operation. My investigation revealed:
- **Part I: General comments** The aim was not to destroy the compound and kill the enemy. If it had been, there were a lot of other ways to do it. The aim was to seize and hold it, perhaps so that the materiel and whatever else was there could be exploited by intelligence. Perhaps this also explains why it was not hit by artillery and air when the advance was detected.
- Contrary to the story, the compound was not that close to our own positions. Thus any small force that attempted to penetrate would have been vulnerable to attack from an enemy concentration. Added: To reach the point where the company set out on its march required a vehicle move of "dozens of kilometres."
- Despite the criticisms a major Canadian force was able to approach undetected close enough to the objective so that the Taliban were forced to abandon it in some haste and disorder.
- The target audience was not the western public. It was the local population who awoke to find a large number of NATO forces in their backyard with the Taliban scurrying away for their lives.
- That we were able to locate and monitor an IED making site for an undetermined but not inconsiderable period indicates that our intelligence system is working.
- The mission was accomplished without causing any civilian casualties and with no undue damage to the infrastructure, while impressing the locals with the ability of NATO to suddenly appear in their backyard at will. Chalk one up for hearts and minds.
- **Part II A more detailed critique**  
This operation was very much an int [int is Canada speak for intel] driven op. Had the Editor "jumped" at every bit of int out there, he would be bouncing aimlessly all over the Arghandab (as anyone who's been here knows, threat warnings are more common than KAF-ites at KAF!). [KAF-ites are those who spend their tour inside the wire at Kandahar Air Field or KAF].
- On receipt of intelligence, the Canadians developed a plan and it was accepted for further definition. At no time was "Destroy" a mission verb in this. We weren't going after the bad guys so much as we were going after their toys. Killing these guys is the easy part: we want the toys (and bombs and stuff like that). After all, it's all about logistics. If the Indians were to rush into compounds over here helter skelter, not only would "the major" be killed, but his entire platoon as well.
- There were not three companies, there were two. The Canadians probably would have been better off with one, but hind sight is always 20/20: just a point to learn for next time. In the end, surprise was total, locals emerged with wide eyes to see NATO walking by where they hadn't been for some time. And the best part is this: the toys taken used to explode on Highway 1 about once a day: there have been none since the end of the operation. I know that they will reconstitute, but again, war is logistics, and since they are reconstituting, and since we will continue to go after their toys, they can run away all they want (they seem to run from big heavy armour combat teams). Run, but we will continue to win the info ops messaging ("Look at the Taliban flee in fear of us. They are cowards") and they will leave their toys (and in this case, they left much of their clothing and blankets as well: it's getting cold at night. Not "Canada" cold, but single digits).
- So, the Editor as armchair quarterback can call all the Monday morning plays he wishes, but in the end, all Johnny Canucks came out without a scratch, more than one Taliban failed to live to see noon, and more importantly, we nabbed some of their toys. I know that they have more, and I know that the war isn't over, but baby steps...baby steps.
- Last, the air, aviation and artillery did do some damage here, mostly to Taliban. There was a minor Taliban "counterattack", which failed miserably. Again, our lads all made it back with nary a scratch. Fortune smiled for us that day.
- I hope this aids in your understanding of the matter. As we all know, don't believe everything you read in the paper.
- **Editor Responds** First, your Editor does not occupy an armchair, a wheel-chair is more suited to his vast age. As for Monday football/quarterbacks, he had no idea anyone in Canada had heard of this quaint American folly! The phrase Monday quarterback, of course come from the days when the games were on

Monday quarterback, of course come from the days when the games were on Sunday. And the Editor does not watch TV.

- Second, we were delighted to hear from someone with knowledge of the operation. This is the kind of letter we would love to see more of. Generally, our readers tend to be shy types, who never write. Perhaps they fall into a coma at the Editor's ramblings.
- Third, we were shocked, shocked, that the Washington Post actually got most things right in their article. We owe the paper an apology. There was no mention of artillery, but of course we should have figured out ourselves there was an artillery battery, in which case yes, two companies would be involved and not three.
- Nonetheless, this detailed and very interesting letter does not change the point we were trying to make the other day. It has to be clearly understood that we were not criticizing the Canadians. Our point was about NATO CI operations generally. We love the Canadians, they embody American virtues without American vices. They are relaxed. Of course, given the size of their country and the temperature, they have to be relaxed to survive. We do have some experience of Canadian winters and can confirm they are not for the faint of heart.
- This war is now with Year 7 almost done. No one should be talking of baby steps. In World War I, we venture it took the Canadians about 4 months to learn their job. In World War II, it took them even less, that one fiasco at Dieppe was all they needed.
- BTW, someone wrote in and stated the obvious, that the Editor shouldn't be talking about this particularly Canadian raid as requiring as much planning as Dieppe. Yes, we are guilty. If Dieppe had been planned as well as this raid, things would have been different.
- Our point is simply that in CI you cannot take days and weeks to plan and mount operations. The race is to the swift etc. The reason our hypothetical Indian major and his 30 men would have succeeded is that they are able to react very rapidly to intelligence. We have not had the opportunity to analyze what percentage of Indian raids turn up dry, but we venture it is a lot less than the US/NATO for the simple reason there is not a huge buzzing of bees about the hive before an operation goes in and that much less opportunity for an operation to leak. (Cant call 99% of the raids Indian stage as "operations", but still.)
- Yes, it is probably unfair to compare Kashmir to Afghanistan insofar as Kashmir is in India, the army is dealing with its own people, and its intelligence is far better. But it didn't get far better on its own: the Indian police, paramilitary, army, other intelligence agencies worked very hard at the job before it go good enough. The real advantage the Indians have is they are dealing with South Asians, whereas US/NATO in Afghanistan are all Anglos dealing with South Asians.
- As for jumping all around a province, so what? We have mentioned at the height of the Kashmir insurgency the Indian Army was putting out *one thousand* patrols a night. When you are working in vehicle inaccessible terrain - and all of Kashmir outside the Valley is that way, you have no choice but to walk, and walk, and walk. 99% of the patrols encountered no one. Of the 1% that did and exchanged shots, perhaps 2-3 infiltrators were killed or captured - total. But the point is that the enemy could not walk anywhere without knowing he would be lucky if he did NOT meet a patrol. We are happy the villagers finally saw some NATO troops. And that to us shows just how wrong is the US/NATO strategy.
- To be clear: we have been possibly the severest critics of Indian operations in Kashmir. For nigh on 17 years there was not even a proper border fence because Delhi could not be bothered to build one, and the security forces could not convince Delhi to move. We were not extolling Indian strategy in Kashmir
- We were talking of something quite different. First, for CI, you need to travel as light as the insurgent - the proverbial bag of rice and bag of bullets that was the day's standard issue form a rifleman campaigning in the NWFP during the days or the Raj. You cannot mount a carefully planned combined arms operations of such size just to go get a bomb-making house. How many of these ops can your battalion do in a month? You need to be out all the time, all the time, all the time so that the locals can see you and sp that the enemy does not own the place. According to our sources in Afghanistan, at night the insurgents and anti-government forces own 80% of the country and this is climbing.
- Second, If you are going to go to war with your first, second, and third goal being force protection, you need to stay home. By western standards, the Indian Army is amazingly reckless. But the army knows it is (or was) at war, and it knows it has to expect casualties. No operation is planned on the basis of minimizing casualties! You want to live forever, take up knitting!
- Again, please lets be clear. We are NOT saying the Canadians are fighting this way because they, as soldiers, WANT to fight this way. Theirs is a professional volunteer army just as is the Indian. They are fighting this way because their government is more concerned about casualties than about winning

- government is more concerned about casualties than about winning.
- Now here we have Canada, a nation of - what? - 30-million people with a GDP of over US\$1-trillion. Their contribution to Afghanistan is - what? A reinforced mechanized infantry battlegroup and perhaps 1000 trainers, HQ, and base troops. The Canadian people refuse to support a defense establishment bigger than one that can put a battalion group overseas and a battalion group available on standby in their own country. Whose fault is this? Not that of the Canadian soldiers. It's their government's fault.
  - In 1940 Canada had less than 12-million people. It fielded six army divisions, a very large number of air squadrons we are told one of six RAF Bomber Command groups were Canadian, and if we recall right, the *third largest navy in the world*. 1.1-million Canadians were mobilized. Okay, so this is not World War II. But isn't that just the point we've made again and again over the years since 2001? The reason the GWOT is going nowhere is it isn't a Global War. It's a Global Goof Off by a western civilization that doesn't believe anything is worth fighting for anymore.
  - Afghanistan is 150% the size of Iraq; more important, 95% is inaccessible. What does the Canadian Government expect its contingent to achieve, aside from sucking up to the Americans, and honestly and truly, as the Canadians have learned over and over again, trying to keep the Americans happy, leave alone grateful, is like trying to keep your hyper-active, hyper-critical, and hyper-demanding wife happy: *it cannot be done*.
  - Every single country in Afghanistan is making the same mistake: trying to fight a war on the cheap, and the odd thing is, in terms of money it works out not be cheap at all. Obviously, if you're going to conduct ops the way US/NATO does.
  - We also want to make perfectly clear that we know - as well as any Canadian - every time five Canadians die in Afghanistan, the country wants its troops back home. How is that the fault of the Canadian soldiers? Obviously it is not.
  - So: *our article was not to criticize the people on the ground*. They are doing the best they can, as is also true of the American soldiers, under completely absurd conditions imposed by their government. It was to tell the Canadian people and government: you obviously cannot hack it, bring your boys home instead of setting them up to fail and then whining and moaning and weeping. Ditto rest of NATO. Especially ditto the Americans.
  - We urge LTC Reid and others to keep writing to us. The US media is not much good at covering anything non-American and it was refreshing both that the WashPo did the piece and that we got a genuine, real, authentic Canadian to write. Darn that Canadian politeness, though. It's very hard to combat.