

Tactical lessons learned from Canadian armour

07:11 GMT, March 23, 2009 Within weeks of arriving in the Afghanistan theatre in August 2006, the Canadian Army was assigned the task of clearing the Taliban from the Panjwayi and Zhari Districts in Operation MEDUSA, the largest combat action undertaken to date by NATO. Rather than adhering to small unit attacks and ambushes and retreating in the face of direct confrontation with NATO forces, instead the Taliban chose to make a conventional stand at Pashmul. They occupied well dug-in defensive positions among densely packed grape and poppy fields and they covered, with direct fire and improvised explosive devices (IEDs), all routes suitable for wheeled vehicles.

The lessons learned during Operation MEDUSA by the Canadian Army leadership included the importance of maintaining heavy armour as part of a balanced force. At the request of Commander RC(S), Canadian Brigadier-General David Fraser, the Canadian government announced on 15 September 2006 the imminent deployment of an enhancement package to better facilitate "reconstruction and stabilization efforts in Afghanistan" which was to include a squadron of Leopard C2 tanks.

Beginning in December 2006, the tank squadron and armoured engineers featured prominently in all major combat operations undertaken by the Canadian Battle Group, including at BAAZ TSUKA and ACHILLES, working side by side with Afghan National Security Forces, American Special Operations Forces (SOF), and ISAF troops. The Battle Squadron was initially responsible for establishing attack-by-fire positions in support of infantry companies and in forming the nucleus of a Battle Group counter-moves force capable of responding throughout the entire Canadian area of operations. Many Taliban insurgents learned the hard way of the capabilities of the Leopard's main gun during the following years when attacking Canadian strong points with rocket propelled grenades (RPG) and indirect fire.

During these operations, the tank squadron proved its ability to conduct sustained combat operations at great distances from the re-supply nodes at each of the forward operating bases (FOBs). Additionally, Leopard mine ploughs were used to clean up an old Soviet minefield. Since May 2007, the tank squadron has fought almost constantly alongside Canadian and Afghan infantry in close combat with the Taliban.

Supported by the artillery, combat engineers, attack aviation and fast air groups, mechanized combat teams from the 2 RCR BG have achieved decisive victories against insurgents in the Howz-e- Madad, Nalgham and Sangsar areas of Zhari District where vineyards and imposing compounds render wheeled vehicle movement particularly difficult. Leopard tank crews have extensively used the 105 mm High Explosive Squash Head (HESH) round to eliminate insurgents attempting to attack dismounted soldiers. More importantly, tank rollers and ploughs have continued to mitigate risk to coalition soldiers by clearing routes of pressure-plate detonated IEDs while providing intimate support and a breaching capability to dismounted infantry companies.

Recommendations on the Way Ahead

While the Leopard C2 has performed exceptionally well in combat, officials note that this platform is 30 years old and beginning to show its age. Battle Squadron 1 RCR BG soldiers submitted to the chain of command, in November 2006, a summary of recommended modifications to make the Leopard C2 more suitable for counter-insurgency (COIN) operations in the harsh environment of Afghanistan. Indicative of the tremendous support provided to the soldiers by both military and civilian leadership, the government of Canada announced in April 2007 that it would not only address Leopard C2 deficiencies in the interim, but that it would authorize the lease for immediate combat operations of 20 Leopard 2A6M from the German Army and the subsequent purchase of 100 Leopard 2A4 and 2A6 from the Dutch. While this tank has not yet been tested in combat, many countries revere the Leopard 2 as one of the best tanks worldwide.

Weighing in at over 60 tonnes, the Leopard 2 boasts an impressive 1500 horsepower engine (compared to the 830 horsepower of the Leopard C2), and is equipped with the L55 120 mm smooth bore gun. An electric drive turret allows the gun to be traversed much more quickly, while significantly reducing the heat inside the vehicle. Most importantly, the Leopard 2A6M will provide unprecedented protection from the mine and IED threat in Afghanistan.

Unfortunately, the Leopard 2 is not yet equipped with the tank implements that have saved many lives in operations. An armoured engineer vehicle on a Leopard 2 chassis (Kodiak) is deployed by the Swiss Army, however, it is unarmed and not yet deployed by other countries.

In order to ensure that tactical battlefield mobility and protection is not impaired with the introduction of the Leopard 2, technical staff should immediately seek to design and apply a modification to the Leopard 2 that would allow implements to be mounted. Tests would need to be conducted on the impact of mounting implements onto this chassis, which is already 15 tonnes heavier than the



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Leopard C2. Consideration should also be given to retaining a mixed fleet of Leopard C2 and Leopard 2 vehicles in the theatre until this technical issue can be resolved.

Edited from the article 'Canadian Armour in Afghanistan' published in Canadian Army Journal by Major Trevor Cadieu, Second-In-Command, Lord Strathcona's Horse (Royal Canadians).

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