

Bring tanks: Canadians tell Americans headed to Kandahar

6 hours ago

PANJWAI DISTRICT, Afghanistan — Three years of fighting in the dust-choked lanes and tangled grape fields of Panjwai district have taught Canadian soldiers some hard, bloody lessons.

As the U.S. prepares this spring to surge 17,000 fresh troops into Afghanistan, they have two words of advice for their American colleagues: Bring tanks.

By definition, the war in Kandahar is a counter-insurgency conflict meant to be fought with agile infantry, not burdensome iron beasts such as the Leopard 2A6Ms.

The 64-tonne battle wagons were intended to slug it out with Soviet armoured formations on the plains of Europe, not necessarily chase bands of lightly armed insurgents through the desert.

But since the landmark battle Operation Medusa in the late summer and early fall of 2006, the Leopards with their 120-millimetre cannon, have become a critical component of the army's arsenal.

"You don't need a lot of them," Lt.-Gen. Andrew Leslie, the chief of land staff, said in a recent interview with The Canadian Press.

Canadians learned early when combat heated up that punching through the thick mud-walled compounds and grape huts, turned into redoubts by Taliban, was almost impossible with light weapons and required the heavy power of tanks.

It is an experience the troops - especially the country's top soldier - are eager to pass along as American reinforcements arrive.

"Once you've got them and once you can see what they can do, it's very difficult to convince yourself that they're not absolutely essential," Leslie said in an interview from Ottawa.

The Americans are expected to deploy the U.S. army's 5th Stryker Brigade to Kandahar - a unit battle-hardened on the desert plains of Iraq. Those 4,000 soldiers travel in wheeled armoured vehicles similar to Canada's hardy LAV IIIs.

Leslie said he's recommending to American commanders that they bring "things much akin to a tank," either Bradley heavily armoured personnel carriers and/or M1A2 Abrams tanks.

As fighting raged in the summer and fall of 2006, Canadian commanders discovered to their horror that the light armoured vehicles could not roll through the rippled grape fields and often became stuck.

Troops with Canada's only tank regiment, the Lord Strathcona's Horse, currently deployed in Kandahar said they've been called on many times to haul wheeled vehicles out of tough spots.

One such operation in western Zhari district in December saw the Leopards spend 14 of 16 hours pulling wheeled vehicles out of the muck on a dried up riverbed.

"We were a big tow truck with a gun on it," declared Warrant Officer Richard Delaney, who is originally from St. John's, NL.

The effect the tanks have had on the unpredictable guerilla battlefield is undeniable, forcing Taliban militants to hang back or retreat once the lumbering armoured vehicles appear.

"They don't want to come out play when the tanks are around," said Cpl. Aaron Hodgin, a Leopard gunner.

"It's usually a lot quieter when we're around."

Sgt. Frank LeClair, a tank commander originally from Moncton, N.B., said his Leopard was bringing up the rear of a column that had been ambushed by Taliban fighters

"One of the LAVs was being engaged by (rocket propelled grenade) fire," he said in an interview.

"Thankfully it was all landing quite short. The LAV opened up on where the fire was coming from and the insurgents didn't back off at all until I came around the corner. As soon as I put in that first (tank) round, then it was done. There was no more fire coming from there at all."

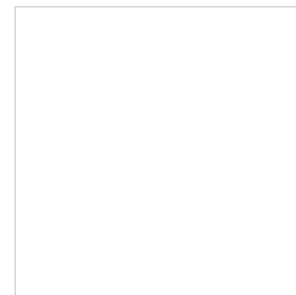
Leslie said the number of Canadian direct fire casualties among the infantry has fallen sharply since the Leopards were introduced.

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A Canadian Leopard A6M battle tank on patrol in Panjwai District, Afghanistan. THE CANADIAN PRESS/Murray Brewster


Map



The U.S. is deploying 8,000 marines to Afghanistan and many of them are destined for nearby Helmand province. It is thought they may be bringing tanks.

Delaney said there's only one thing they need to know coming in to southern Afghanistan: "Go big or stay home."

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