

The Three-Block War

by Adam Day



PHOTO: DND/M.Cpl. ERIC GORDON

Soldiers from the Royal Canadian Regiment reconnaissance platoon rehearse room clearing tactics at CFB Petawawa.

He knew they'd slow down. The Canadians always slowed down here. Sure enough, when the Iltis jeep reached the small ditch in the road it slowed down, right on schedule. At that moment the bomber emerged from the roadside crowd and detonated himself right beside the jeep. It was a brutal, almost unstoppable suicide attack and it killed Corporal Jamie Murphy and injured three other soldiers.

Reports of the attack came over the radio instantly. The quick reaction force deployed minutes later. Snipers from the reconnaissance platoon took up over-watch positions and Camp Julien went on high alert. This was Kabul, Afghanistan, in January 2004.

As this life-and-death scene developed among one group of soldiers in one part of the city, there were other elements of Task Force Kabul spread across their area of operations, some were training the new Afghan National Army, others were clearing unexploded ordnance, others were working on building new wells, while still others were putting the finishing touches on a refurbished school for Afghan girls.

Though it was one of Canada's worst days yet in Afghanistan, it's also a pretty complete example of the kind of threats and challenges confronting Canadian soldiers deployed in places like Kabul. It isn't peacekeeping, but it isn't combat either. Instead it's a relatively new kind of situation, one that the Canadian Forces first discovered in the Balkans and Somalia during the 1990s. The CF have begun referring to this kind of mission as 'full spectrum operations' but it's more commonly known as the 'three-block war,' a phrase coined in the 1990s by United States Marine Corps Commandant General Charles Krulak. The three-block war is a combination of humanitarian work, stabilization operations and low- to mid-intensity combat, generally in an urban

environment. Often, all three situations are confronted on the same day, by the same soldiers, sometimes within three city blocks, hence the term three-block war.

Though there are a multitude of causes for the rise of the three-block war situation, the reality in a place like Kabul is that years of conflict have fractured Afghanistan into tribal, ethnic, religious and/or political factions, creating a complex situation where some Afghans need help just to survive, some support reconstruction and democratization while some resist, often violently. "The rapid diffusion of technology, the growth of a multitude of transnational factors, and the consequences of increasing globalization and economic interdependence have coalesced to create national security challenges remarkable for their complexity," wrote Krulak in *Marine Corps Magazine*.

"By 2020, 85 per cent of the world's inhabitants will be crowded into coastal cities--cities generally lacking the infrastructure required to support their burgeoning populations. Under these conditions, long simmering ethnic, nationalist and economic tensions will explode and increase the potential of crises requiring intervention. Compounding the challenges posed by this growing global instability will be the emergence of an increasingly complex and lethal battlefield. The lines separating the levels of war, and distinguishing combatant from non-combatant will blur, and adversaries, confounded by our conventional superiority, will resort to asymmetrical means to redress the imbalance. In Bosnia, Haiti and Somalia the unique challenges of military operations other than war were combined with the disparate challenges of mid-intensity conflict. The corps has described such amorphous conflicts as...contingencies in which Marines may be confronted by the entire spectrum of tactical challenges in the span of a few hours and within the space of three contiguous city blocks. "

The Canadian Forces, much like the American military, has long been preparing for high-intensity combat against traditional 'stand and fight' opponents. From training to procurement, the CF was aligned toward fighting World War II style battles against a well-trained and equipped enemy, such as the former Soviet Union. But when the Cold War ended, the CF's mission changed almost overnight. Starting in the year 2000, the CF began to realize these complex operations were more than just something they did as a sideline while they prepared to fight a real war.

The Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks put some serious momentum behind transformation efforts as the reality of the new threat was now clear. With the release of the defence policy paper in April 2005, stabilizing failed states became an official part of the defence agenda. "Whether in Somalia, Afghanistan, Haiti or Sudan, the past 15 years have confronted us with the concept and consequences of failed and failing states," noted the paper. "The inability of governments in these countries, and others like them, to maintain political authority, to provide security and other basic services, and to protect essential human rights has trapped millions of vulnerable civilians in a cycle of misery, poverty and violence. With environmental pressures, resource scarcity, pandemic disease and urbanization added to the mix, this problem will remain with us well into the future.

"Failed and failing states pose a dual challenge for Canada. In the first instance, the suffering that these situations create is an affront to Canadian

instance, the suffering that these situations create is an affront to Canadian values. Beyond this, they also plant the seeds of threats to regional and global security. They generate refugee flows that threaten the stability of their neighbours, and create new political problems for their regions. More ominously, the impotence of their governing structures makes them potential breeding grounds or safe havens for terrorism and organized crime."

Now, says Canada's chief of defence staff, General Rick Hillier, the threat is no longer the Russian bear, it is a ball of snakes. Instead of massed Soviet armour to confront, there are Islamic militants, suicide bombers, warlords and heavily armed criminals. It's in this environment that the three-block war approach is so important. The snakes tend to gravitate to the lawless areas where they can operate most freely and where they can gather support from alienated, weakened populations. From these safe havens they can plot their attacks, whether local or international. The best chance of defeating the snakes is to deny them a place to gather and train, to undermine their public support by providing a better option. The three-block war approach is all about rebuilding these places while winning the trust of the local population and fighting off the snakes.

Though each separate block of the three-block war demands different tactical approaches, there is one unifying theme running through all three blocks--the need for information. As a veteran of Afghanistan and a self-described guru of the three-block war, Major Greg Miller, a company commander in the Royal Canadian Regiment, knows what it takes to succeed on all blocks, but as he points out, if you can't win on the combat block, nothing else matters. "The combat block of the three-block war differs from the Cold War mentality in that the Cold War mentality was stand-up, toe-to-toe, fighting. The shift is that instead of advancing to contact, in the three-block war you are advancing with purpose. Advance to contact is driven by a lack of information about where the enemy is or what the enemy's doing and that's old mentality--go out, find him, fix him, strike him. In the three-block war, everything's information driven: advance with purpose. Knowing how to dislocate him, you don't necessarily have to destroy him. You just have to disrupt what he's doing, because what he's doing is influencing on your execution of the other two blocks of the three-block war. If you don't have to fight him, then you don't fight him."

The importance of information in the three-block war is so acute that Miller describes intelligence, observation skills and cultural awareness as the most important attributes of a three-block warrior. "The greatest thing we have is an intelligent soldier. Every single soldier is an intelligence gatherer. The only way to defend against mine strikes and suicide bombs is information. The people need to tell you what's going on so you can avoid and dislocate. But first you have to establish a relationship that allows you to identify those threats. Human intelligence--building relationships that will get you the information."

Gaining awareness in a place like Kabul is an extremely difficult job, but according to RCR Master Corporal Jeff Donaldson, who was in Afghanistan during the 2004 suicide bombing, it centres on "getting to understand the people and getting them to trust you.

"You can't just fork over humanitarian aid on a whim, there are priorities. As many wells as we could get done, as many things as we could do, we did, but

we never promised anything. It was just the little things that brought us more information and at the end of the day, that's what you want. You're working for information but it's a trust you have to build first."

Though it hasn't yet happened to the CF on a large scale, the most threatening aspect of modern operations is what the CF calls FIBUA or Fighting In Built-Up Areas. The modern paradigm for a three-block war urban battle is Mogadishu, Somalia, where in 1993 a force of American Army Rangers and special operations Delta Force were swarmed by tribal militias as they attempted to arrest a local warlord. The ensuing 17-hour battle cost 102 U.S. casualties and led to a withdrawal of American forces from the stabilization mission in Somalia.

Fighting in an urban area, like Mogadishu, is dangerous for a number of factors. Mobility is often restricted, civilian populations can cause confusion and enemy fighters have their choice of a nearly infinite number of defensible positions. Private Ron Woodfield of the RCR received extensive FIBUA training at CFB Petawawa in preparation for deployment to Afghanistan. "You have to watch every corner. You have to watch every alleyway. Areas are tight and there's not a lot of room for error there. You have to watch rooftops, windows, everywhere.

Pte. Larry Kilby, another RCR soldier preparing for Afghanistan, agrees that FIBUA presents a difficult challenge, but that section integrity is the key to winning an urban battle. "I find it a little scary. No matter how observant you are, if there's someone there that's half decently well trained--he's going to get you. I found it really intimidating. But I trust everyone in my section and I trust that everyone's got my back and I feel good going over to Afghanistan."

For the moment anyway, the chance of Canadian soldiers having to endure a battle like Mogadishu is comfortably remote. In large part that's due to the CF doctrine that prioritizes situational awareness, to the point that Miller argues Mogadishu was an old-style advance-to-contact battle where the intelligence was inadequate to ensure success. "Everything is information driven," he said. "You don't go into something until you have 100 per cent situational awareness over what's there, otherwise you're just advancing to contact. You're not going to do that direct action unless you have good information and good support from the local authorities. The risk of doing something wrong will often be greater than the gain. Kabul has three million people, and it's a gun society. You're only there because they want you there."

Against this backdrop of changes in the global threat environment, the CF, and particularly the army, is undergoing substantial changes to the way they prepare for missions abroad. Unlike previous missions where pre-deployment training could be fairly general and rudimentary, the last several rotations to Afghanistan have seen some definite improvements in realism and specificity. At Canadian Forces Base Petawawa, several hundred soldiers spent two weeks last June living inside a replica of Camp Julien, undergoing realistic training scenarios before their deployments to Afghanistan in July and August.

But full spectrum operations, like those ongoing in Afghanistan, present a range of threats and challenges so complex that localized efforts like those in Petawawa can't possibly meet the CF's training and readiness requirements. It's for that reason that the Canadian Manoeuvre Training Centre has been created

in Wainwright, Alta., as the army's new national training centre. Though it doesn't officially open until April 2006, the CMTC has already developed quite a buzz within the CF community.

When it opens the CMTC will be one of the most technologically advanced, most complete and possibly most realistic training areas in the world. Four times a year, a battalion-size task force will deploy to the CMTC for one month of immersive training. The training area will replicate the complex terrain where the troops are about to deploy, be it Afghanistan, Sudan or somewhere entirely new. Though not yet complete, the CMTC already includes urban villages, austere airstrips, tactical operating bases, isolated farm complexes and tunnel systems where the troops can practice the entire range of their duties. "This will be a training environment never seen before in Canada," said CMTC Commander Colonel Craig Hilton. "The scenarios are relevant, accurate and very well researched. Here we are looking very closely at the three-block war, very closely at the type of combat and near combat that our troops find themselves in on a fairly routine basis now."

In addition to the realistic terrain features, there will also be a professional opposing force residing at the CMTC. These are CF soldiers whose sole responsibility is to present the type of threat profile tied to the various mission areas, anything from co-ordinated section attacks to militias to suicide bombers. But unlike previous force-on-force training, the CMTC will be employing the new Weapons Effects Simulation system to get the most accurate engagement data possible. Not only can WES simulate direct fire with high accuracy, it can determine where you've been shot and will direct you to behave according to your probable wound.

"The CMTC is one part of a wider army strategy to adjust our collective settings and meet the new demands of modern operations, what Hillier refers to as the ball of snakes," said Hilton. "We will provide the training audience with a very good feel for what that ball of snakes can be and hopefully they'll come out the other side better prepared to meet it for real."

In a conventional battle, opponents are nearly equal in strength, but in a three-block environment, the insurgents don't have mechanized regiments or a blue-water navy. As a result, their tactics are to seek out the weakest points in our society and strike there. But for as long as there are terrorists seeking out the weak spots, there will be people like Donaldson out there looking for them. "Kabul is our front line. I've been to villages where the snakes live. I've been there. I've seen them. You can't get them. They're not carrying weapons. They mould and meld into the groups, hanging around. But I know where they were. We got that intelligence through the humanitarian side. But it wasn't enough and we left a lot of things not answered. I look forward to going back."