

# Canada examined bigger Afghan deployment with jets and helicopters: documents

*Murray Brewster, THE CANADIAN PRESS*

OTTAWA - The Canadian military initially planned for a much wider involvement in the Afghan war than what it delivered in Kandahar, newly released documents show.

As a battle group of 2,200 soldiers was preparing to face the Taliban two years ago, the air force drew up plans in late 2005 to deploy eight CH-146 Griffon helicopters, specially modified as attack aircraft, and a fleet of CF-18 fighter-bombers.

The proposals were eventually set aside, despite NATO's plea for more aircraft, specifically transport and attack helicopters.

The Griffons and jetfighters were intended to give Canada's troops their own hard-hitting air power, instead of relying on other allied nations, such as the United States and Britain.

Canada eventually chose to send C-130 Hercules transports, which drop supplies to far-flung desert bases.

The country's top military commander said he asked the air force to draw up the contingency plans, but ultimately decided against recommending the deployment of the fighters and helicopters.

"The air force believes in this mission," Gen. Rick Hillier, chief of defence staff, said in a recent interview with The Canadian Press.

"They're already playing a huge part, as you know. And you have a variety of communities within the air force who are keen as all get out to participate in the mission."

Extensive preparations were made with the air force arranging a service-support contract for the CF-18s and a demonstration trial where a weapon system was installed on one of the utility helicopters.

At the same time as the army was deciding on a squadron of old Leopard C2 battle tanks to counter the surge in Taliban violence in the fall of 2006, the air force pulled together a timetable that would have seen armed Griffons on station for a year at Kandahar Airfield, beginning in February 2007.

But Hillier rejected the air force plan, saying NATO already has enough fighter-bombers and attack helicopters based in Kandahar and the CH-146 was not the kind of chopper Canada most needed.

"The Griffon community was ready to go," he said. "It's just that when we do our assessment, the real need that we have there right now is troop lift, heavy loads of people. Unfortunately, the Griffon just can't do that in that environment."

At an informal meeting of NATO defence ministers last fall in Noordwick, Holland, the shortage of helicopters was among the biggest issues. With members either unable to reluctant to deploy their aircraft, the alliance approved a scheme to rent civilian choppers for hauling cargo in Afghanistan. It also began exploring the possibility of paying former Warsaw Pact members to take their helicopters out of mothballs.

As the military variant of the civilian Bell 412, the Griffon has the capacity to carry 12 soldiers in full combat gear, or six stretchers. The Conservative government intends to buy 16 CH-47 Chinook helicopters, which carry up to 30 soldiers, but deliveries aren't scheduled until at least 2011.

Critics have been pressuring the Defence Department to send the Griffons, in part to get Canadian soldiers off Kandahar's bomb-strewn highways.

But Hillier flatly rejected the argument, saying the CH-146 wasn't suited to operate at high elevations and in 55C degree heat.

But internal air force documents suggest that to cope with the altitude and climate extremes, the takeoff weight could be lowered by roughly 453 kilograms.

Hillier also indicated he wasn't satisfied the helicopter could function well in an attack role, citing the level of complexity and precision needed to deliver guided missiles on target.

The use of air power in Afghanistan has become a politically sensitive subject as the number of civilian casualties from wayward missile and bomb strikes rose substantially throughout 2007.

Employing the air force to a greater extent would have required a substantial increase in size of Canada's commitment as well as more money. Aside from pilots, each aircraft comes with a small army of maintainers.

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