

Canadian soldiers encouraged to ditch the "terrorists killers" mindset: officer

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ARGHANDAB DISTRICT, Afghanistan — The days of Canadian soldiers in Afghanistan being encouraged to think there are bloodthirsty militants and crazed suicide bombers lurking around every corner are waning.

Instead, the concept that most Afghans are just like Canadians, with roughly the same values, hopes and aspirations, has started to take root in army training and operations.

And this subtle shift in attitude is not something for which the politicians can take credit. It was underway long before Liberal Leader Stephane Dion made a focus on reconstruction instead of combat a condition for his party's support for extending the country's military deployment until 2011.

Months ago, as he was knee-deep in pre-deployment preparation, Maj. Stacy Grubb took a break from tactical drills and weapons training to sit down with an Afghan cultural adviser in Ottawa.

The more he listened the more he and fellow officers with the 2nd Battalion Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry realized the black-and-white arguments they've used to motivate soldiers were not only growing stale, but were possibly counterproductive.

"We can't go around with the mindset of being terrorists killers," said Grubb, the commanding officer of Charlie Company.

If you hike along the boardwalk, or visit the American PX at Kandahar Airfield it's easy to spot T-shirts with the "terrorist killer" and "infidel" messages.

Grubb called it post 9/11 propaganda and said it should be forgotten.

"That was the message in 2001 for these young guys, but the message now is supporting the (Afghan) government and we don't need that attitude," he said in a recent interview at a forward operating base.

Grubb has encouraged his men to see the positive side of the Afghan Pashto culture, with its emphasis on honour and family.

"Take all the good things we have in common, show our soldiers what we have in common so they can appreciate that" was the approach, he said.

Getting past the more violent aspects of the tribal code, such as Badal - or swift revenge for a wrong - will take some effort, he conceded.

None of that is to say Canadian troops have started putting flowers in their rifle barrels.

Southern Afghanistan is still among the most dangerous places in the world and the level of violence has crept upward this spring with the end of the poppy harvest when thousands of young men of fighting age find themselves idle and prime recruiting material for the

Taliban.

The Conservative government recently expressed displeasure when it was disclosed that Canadian soldiers had encouraged militants to lay down their weapons and talk with the Afghan government.

Defence Minister Peter MacKay said members of the military who were doing so were out of line and that the Department of National Defence "doesn't make policy."

The fear was that it was being perceived politically that Canada was a party to negotiations with terrorists - something Ottawa says it does not do.

The reality, like so many things in Afghanistan, is much more nuanced.

There is a deliberate tactic of trying to woo wayward Taliban sympathizers with promises of jobs through make-work projects as part of the new approach.

Implementing this outlook has meant more of an emphasis on foot patrols, less time buttoned up in armoured vehicles and more face-to-face time with locals in remote dust-choked hamlets.

Wandering among the tumbledown shacks of the market of Arghandab district centre last weekend, Sgt. Sheldon Quinn seemed to grow more comfortable the more he engaged shop owners in conversation.

"We're trying to get the message across that we're trying to make Afghanistan as safe as possible for the local population," said Quinn, 39, who grew up in Abbotsford, B.C..

"We're trying to get out and meet the people more than what was going on before."

It is a thoughtful approach to counter-insurgency war, one that straddles the middle ground between Americans who emphasize firepower and throwing dollars at reconstruction and Europeans, namely the Dutch, who fight but also place emphasis on cultural respect and dialogue.

Washington has often looked at the European approach with a jaundice eye and that contributed to a diplomatic flap last winter when U.S. Defence Secretary Robert Gates suggested NATO allies weren't up to the task of insurgent fighting.

Some of Quinn's men toss a few dollars into their pockets when they go out on patrol with the expressed intent of promoting goodwill, buying from local shopkeepers, who have cases of chilled Pepsi cola beside live chickens in cages. On this particular day in Arghandab, one of them bought fragrant black tea.

It is almost a throwback to Quinn's days as a peacekeeper in the 1990s, when he virtually adopted a Serbian family in Bosnia, sharing meals with them and helping out by scavenging surplus supplies.

"For me it's the right approach," said the 18 year veteran. "Getting out there and letting (the Afghans) know that we're here is the proper thing to do and just let them know, the more they help us, the more we can help them."

How well received they've been depends strictly on geography. The approach doesn't go over as well in the Panjwahi and Zhari districts, long hotbeds of Taliban militancy.