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Memo to U.S.: Canada a leader in counter-insurgency training

By SCOTT TAYLOR On Target
Mon. May 12 - 5:35 AM



BACK ON Jan. 16, U.S. Defence Secretary Robert Gates ruffled a few feathers north of the border when he was quoted in the Los Angeles Times making disparaging remarks to the effect that NATO troops in southern Afghanistan were letting the Americans down. According to Gates, the troops deployed to Kandahar — including Canadians — were "not experienced in counter-insurgency" and he identified NATO's shortcoming as being "due to a Cold War orientation."

In response to the U.S. defence secretary's slight, British members of Parliament rose to defend their troops, and the Dutch government called in the American ambassador to demand an explanation. In Ottawa, Defence Minister Peter MacKay took a different approach by apologizing to Canadians on behalf of his loose-lipped U.S. counterpart.

Had MacKay wanted to pour gasoline on the fire, he could have easily challenged Gates on his own military's dismal record. To date, Vietnam ranks well up there on the all-time David-versus-Goliath military defeats and thus far, American victories in Iraq and Afghanistan remain an elusive dream. While it is understandable that MacKay needs to be diplomatic with Gates, given that we are still trying to beg and borrow helicopters and other equipment to sustain our mission, the fact is the Canadian military is actually one of the leading innovators in the world in terms of training soldiers in counter-insurgency.

In April 2006, our army established the Canadian Manoeuvre Training Centre at CFB Wainwright in Alberta. Last week, I had the opportunity to visit the centre during Exercise Maple Guardian — essentially a full-scale dress rehearsal for the battle group slated to go to Kandahar this August.

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She's just doing what comes naturally

Admittedly, I have not returned to CFB Wainwright since I graduated from infantry battle school in 1983, so I understood that there would have been some technological improvements in the training equipment in the interim. What I did not fully comprehend until my recent trip was just how thoroughly our army has converted from teaching linear, conventional war procedures to a dedicated focus on not just counter-insurgency in general, but the campaign in southern Afghanistan in particular.

The maps depicting the 620-square-kilometre training area have been reprinted, and areas renamed to reflect Kandahar province. Mock-ups of villages bear the monikers of Afghan towns such as Spin Boldak, and the troops on exercise are housed in camps intended to replicate Kandahar Airfield and the forward operating bases that they will use when in theatre.

More than 100 Afghan Canadians are on the payroll at the centre to play the roles of translators, civilians and Taliban fighters. Canadian actors and students are also employed to play the part of aid workers, Canadian diplomats and the media. By the way, the media in the training program are designated as part of the opposition force. In addition to the actors, real diplomats and CIDA reps also participated in Maple Guardian before they went to Afghanistan.

The training scenarios involve all the variables that make the Afghan mission such a challenge. In addition to the constant security implications, the commanders and troops being mentored and coached must take into consideration such things as ensuring the presence of allied Afghan forces, minimizing the risk of collateral damage, using proper procedure to authorize an increase in the rules of engagement and paying attention to minute details such as ensuring the Afghan flag is prominent in joint operations.

While there is the occasional opportunity for Canadians to mount "kinetic" or combat attacks against suspected Taliban strongholds, the majority of the counter-insurgency exercise focuses on the less sexy aspects, such as intelligence gathering and the treatment of people injured by IEDs.

To assist the exercise controllers in gauging the competency of the battle group being tested, the centre has employed the cutting-edge technology of weapons effect simulation gear. Every soldier and every other participant is equipped with a sensor vest and a laser attachment for their personal weapon and all are monitored full-time from the centre's central operations room. Unlike previous generations of such battlefield simulations, the simulation gear focuses on the survivability of those "wounded" in action. The vest sensors calculate the extent of an injury and a timer kicks in indicating the soldier's remaining life expectancy. Once medical personnel are on site, the timer can be slowed to simulate treatment and following medevac and hospitalization, the soldier can be "saved."

The simulation system also maintains a complete database of who fired a weapon and who hit which target. Should Canadian troops clearing a mock village accidentally kill innocent civilians, a commander will be able to identify the culprits within minutes.

Traditional military exercises were staged simply as blue force versus red force. Now, Canadian soldiers are learning to operate in an environment where the enemy is not clearly defined, and allies can be less than reliable.

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At the risk of revealing too much of my own pride in the Canadian military, I think the Alberta facility is undoubtedly one of the most progressive counter-insurgency training centres in the world. And that is another reason why our defence minister should not have left Gates's slur unchallenged.

At the very least, MacKay should have kicked over some garbage cans and demanded an apology.

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