

Tanks vs. mountains

New Canadian commander in Afghanistan has to decide how armour works best in difficult terrain

By PETER WORTHINGTON, TORONTO SUN

The incoming commander of Canadian troops in Afghanistan, in an interview with The Canadian Press, outlined what he thought would be a change of direction for Canada's role in that country.

Brig.-Gen. Dennis Thompson is the former commander of the 2nd Canadian Mechanized Brigade, based at Petawawa. It's likely he has ideas on how our tanks in Afghanistan should be used -- one of the on-going (and largely unanswered) questions about heavy armour in that theatre.

Thompson's first priority is a prospective change of emphasis for our 2,500 soldiers -- hopefully switching from a security and combat role to one of development and reconstruction in support of increasing civilian authority. Of course, this implies close co-operation with an effective Afghan National Army (ANA), which the Canadians have been helping train for five years.

That's positive, but at the moment probably it's more good intentions than hard reality.

As Canada's former ambassador to Afghanistan, Chris Alexander (now special adviser to the UN Secretary-General on Afghan politics and security) has said, before full reconstruction can start, there must be security. In Kandahar, that in large measure hinges on Canadian soldiers being, well, Canadian soldiers.

What Alexander says is that it's all very well to talk of reconstruction and development -- which Canadian soldiers have been doing since the first contingent arrived in 2002 -- but until the Taliban have been dissuaded from violence, then peace and reconstruction don't have much of a chance.

In other words, Canadian troops will continue doing soldier stuff beyond the wire, as well as encouraging reconstruction. But don't expect too much until the enemy is further intimidated, defeated or kicked out. And that depends on how effective the ANA is.

Thompson knows this but makes it clear that politically it's desirable to stress the peace and aid aspects, and not the necessity of violence and combat, because that's what Canadians (and politicians) want to hear.

As it is, there've been complaints about CIDA, Canada's main foreign aid agency, which has a lousy record in places where disaster has hit. Just ask the soldiers in Afghanistan. Just ask soldiers of the Disaster Assistance and Response Team (DART), who brought fresh water and medical aid to victims in Sri Lanka after the 2004 tsunami.

Just ask members of the Senate committee on security and defence, whose chairman, Liberal Senator Colin Kenny, has said were prevented from actually visiting sites in Afghanistan that CIDA was supposedly working on.

Just ask John Manley's commission, which investigated Afghanistan and reported that CIDA left much to be desired and should refocus aid on immediate needs. Just ask the Senlis Council for security, development and counter-narcotics, that last May found aid so inept that it recommended "CIDA should be relieved of its responsibility for development efforts in Afghanistan."

Small wonder, perhaps, that Thompson and his bosses want the army involved in civilian aid and reconstruction.

By comparison, the army is pretty competent.

Another issue facing the new commander is likely to be the 20 upgraded Leopard 2 A6M tanks that Canada has rented (leased) from Germany for service in Afghanistan.

We've not read or seen much in the media about these tanks, apart from the fact that they're there, and that we are purchasing 100 of these tanks from the Dutch, 80 of which are to be shipped to Canada.

Armoured people I've talked to seem mostly pleased that our tanks are in action for the first time since the Korean War, where they were mostly used as dug-in artillery pieces on hilltops. Not the most satisfactory role for tanks. Other than that, no one is saying much. Our last use of tanks in mobile warfare was WWII.

My problem is that having been to Afghanistan and seen some of the ravages of war, what stands out in memory is the countryside littered with burned and destroyed Soviet tanks. My question: If Russian armour was vulnerable and destroyable in Afghanistan, why is Canadian armour considered invulnerable and effective? Or is it?

I know the Americans' mighty 70-ton Abrams tanks and Bradley fighting vehicles have proved somewhat of a mixed blessing in the mountains. The big guns in the tanks have limited elevation and in mountains cannot shoot at high ridges where the enemy lurks. Nor is the Abrams satisfactory in urban guerrilla warfare in Iraq, where it is vulnerable to ambush -- especially with anti-tank weaponry coming from Iran.

The same applies to 60-ton Canadian Leopards in Afghanistan, where roadside explosives devices are lethal. In flat country, these tanks with the 122-mm and 120-mm guns can be devastating at routing the enemy.

Wheeled armoured vehicles are vulnerable to powerful roadside explosive devices; 25-mm guns are not as lethal as tank guns. Increasingly mine-resistance ambush-protected vehicles (MRAPs) are necessary, with special armour and V-shaped hulls to deflect explosions.

I remember being in Eritrea in 1988 when fighters of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) ambushed an Ethiopian armoured brigade on a mountain road. The Eritreans knocked out the lead tank and the last tank, thus trapping the whole brigade, and then picked off those in the middle at leisure. It was like shooting fish in a barrel.

So helpless were the Ethiopians that their own air force bombed the trapped brigade to destroy their own equipment and ensure the Eritreans couldn't use it.

Without incurring one casualty, the EPLF annihilated the brigade, and then went on to destroy a division, subsequently winning the war and their own independence. (At the time I took photos of Canadian wheat flour intended for refugees, being used in army kitchens -- which CIDA ignored or denied when this eyewitness account was published).

Eritrea was a country of three million that, with little outside military aid, defeated a country of 44 million that (excluding South Africa) boasted the most modern army in Africa, supplied by the U.S. and then the Soviets.

So perhaps it's understandable why I and others are uneasy about the use of tanks in a mountainous country like Afghanistan, where a resourceful "enemy" is nervy and adept at innovation.

There's no reason to suppose they can't, or won't, do to our precious tanks what they did to Soviet tanks.

For what it's worth, at this writing requests to the department of national defence about our tanks and how many have been damaged by enemy action have not been answered.

A spokesman said the DND doesn't release information on the number of tanks in service in Afghanistan or enemy damage to them.

Such secrecy is disquieting, if not ominous. Remember, just five years ago tanks were considered unnecessary for Canada and were to be replaced by the wheeled Stryker with a 105-mm gun.

BIT THE DUST

That plan bit the dust, as did the decision to buy state-of-the-art helicopters. The Stryker did not live up to its sales pitch and expectations.

I hope the intrepid journalists embedded with our troops in Kandahar some day tell us more about Canada's aid program in Afghanistan, and the value of tanks -- assuming they are allowed to venture into the countryside with our tanks, or with our foot soldiers. Perhaps they are muzzled by those pages of documents and rules they must sign to ensure security -- often phony justification for censorship and control.

Lets hope Gen. Thompson, as well as the next chief of defence staff replacing Gen. Rick Hillier (who retires on July 1) are more open and forthcoming than their bosses in Ottawa (e.g. Prime Minister Stephen Harper), who thrive on secrecy and restrictions.