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Sci-fi writer helps military plot future strategies

First think piece was so popular that the army orders up sequel set in 2040

By CHRIS LAMBIE Staff Reporter
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The army has hired a science-fiction writer to help envision the battlefield of the future.

In 2005, the army contracted Karl Schroeder, a Toronto writer, to pen *Crisis in Zefra*, a 27,000-word book set in a mythical African state 20 years in the future.

"The popularity of the book is amazing because we've run out of copies," Lt.-Col. Mike Rostek said Thursday in Halifax.

Now the army plans to hire Mr. Schroeder again to write *Zefra II*, another sci-fi book about what Canadian soldiers may face in 2040, said Lt.-Col. Rostek, one of a small team of soldiers who advise the army about what may come to pass three decades from now.

"It's just a science-fiction think piece to identify technologies that are out there that are developing," Lt.-Col. Rostek said after giving a talk at Dalhousie University.

Zefra II is slated to come out in January 2010.

"It's actually just part of marketing, to say, 'Hey, we're out there; we're thinking about these things for the future, trying to get better bang for the buck and thinking about what it is that we're going to be doing in the future as part of Canada's national power structure,'" Lt.-Col. Rostek said. "The idea is just to put that out there and say, 'OK, this is fictional. It's science fiction. So have fun with it.'"

According to Mr. Schroeder's website, *Crisis in Zefra* concerns "a group of Canadian peacekeepers who are trying to ready the city for its first democratic vote while fighting an insurgency."

"Both the peacekeepers and the insurgents use a range of new technologies, some fantastic-sounding, but all in development in 2005. Needless to say, the good guys win, but not without consequences; the document explores everything from the evolution of . . . soldiers' kits to strategic considerations in (a) world of pervasive instant communications."

Lt.-Col. Rostek was taken with a tool the fictional future soldiers use in the book called smart dust, "which is dust you sprinkle over a city and it allows you to have mobile ad hoc networks that allow you connectivity wherever you go."

The fictional smart dust allows soldiers to establish communications anywhere in the city, he said.

"These are things that capture your imagination."

Collateral damage sensors on fictional soldiers' weapons helped limit civilian casualties, he said.

"It was not permitted to fire if it was assessed somehow that it could be unnecessary collateral damage. . . . A lot of guys in the military will raise their eyebrows over that and go, 'Uh-oh, I see all kinds of pitfalls with that one.' But it's an interesting idea."

In a telephone interview, Mr. Schroeder, 46, said he doesn't have a military background.

"I have the opposite. I have a Mennonite background.

"I was raised as a pacifist. But the way I reconcile that is I'm a strong believer in a foreign policy philosophy called human security, which is championed by Lloyd Axworthy, which basically states that the state doesn't deal just with other states. When there's a crisis, it

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doesn't really matter whether it's a military crisis or a natural disaster or whatever, you intervene to save people. And, actually, Canada has acted on that philosophy for a number of years, and as a way of employing the army, I'm entirely in favour if it."

The year 2040 "is just far enough in the future that nearly everything we say is likely to be wrong," he said.

"On the other hand, there are things that we know are coming down the pipe in the next 20 years or so and we can extrapolate from those what might be possible afterward. So although what we end up doing will have a hugely speculative element to it, the foundations of the speculation are likely to be pretty solid."

Most businesses and governments only look ahead a few months, Mr. Schroeder said.

"That's like painting your windshield black and driving out on the highway, as far as I'm concerned. You need to be able to look as far ahead as you can, even if it's foggy and you can't quite make things out."

When it looks to the future, the army is paying particular attention to nanotechnology, which involves the engineering of functional systems at the molecular scale, Lt.-Col. Rostek said.

"The best example . . . is a thing called the space elevator. This is an elevator, which is conceptual, that is built from carbon nanotubes. And it's a way to launch things into space. . . . Space is a new domain; it's going to be a big domain for us in 2040. Arguably, it already is. We have land, sea, air, cyberspace and space. So we need to pay attention to that."

Robots are bound to play a large role on future battlefields, he said.

"Just look at Iraq. Robots are already there."

But he concedes the idea of them engaging, shooting and killing an enemy is a sticky issue.

"How does that relate to the laws of war? When is it ethical and unethical to use them? Those are just some of the issues that we talk about and look at. But there's no doubt in my mind that robotics will play a part in the future."

The army also pays close attention to the PlayStation set.

"We actually look at the futuristic sort of gaming community and get ideas and see what the gamers are thinking. We do that sort of stuff. It seems a bit kooky, but we look at future games. I bought one, personally, when I took on the 2040 project. I went out and bought Battlefield 2142 just to get an idea."

The 48-year-old officer doesn't believe he's going to be able to predict the future of warfare with 100 per cent accuracy.

"We don't have a crystal ball and we fully expect to be wrong on many issues, but, you know, the idea is for us to try and get it right when it really matters."

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