

CANADIAN FORCES PREPARE FOR OPERATION ATHENA

OBSERVATION VISIT - CFB PETAWAWA, JUNE 21, 2003

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BACKGROUND

Following the terrorist attacks in September of 2001, Afghanistan, already a nation in difficulty became a nation in acute crisis. American-led operations to rid the country of Taliban and al Qaeda members continue at the same time that the international community begins to tackle the reconstruction and building of peace in the region. Canada has taken on a significant role in this process. The approach of the Canadian government has been three-pronged, featuring development, diplomatic, and defensive assistance. In addition to commitments already made to Operation Enduring Freedom and to the development and assistance of the Afghan Interim Authority, Canada has also recently committed to contribute to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) currently operating in and around Kabul with UN authorization. In August 2003, Canada will send a battle group and brigade headquarters to Kabul for a period of one year. In addition to such defensive commitments Canada also announced in March 2003 \$250 million in aid to Afghanistan. This marks the largest single-country pledge ever made by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) and will be applied specifically to four areas of need: natural resources management and agriculture; rural livelihoods and social protection; security and the rule of law; and continued support to the requirements of the ATA. Diplomatically, Canada is also making directed efforts in Afghanistan, including re-establishing a Canadian embassy in Kabul.

Operation Athena

Operation Athena is Canada's contribution to ISAF, a UN-authorized mission in Kabul, Afghanistan. ISAF is not a UN operation and will become a mission of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) on August 11, 2003. The mission of ISAF is to help maintain security in Kabul and the surrounding areas so that the Afghan Transitional Authority (ATA) and UN agencies can function effectively and safely. ISAF includes liaison with political, social and religious groups to ensure that operations under the ISAF mandate respect religious, cultural and ethnic sensitivities in Afghanistan. Canada's contribution to the ISAF mission is designed to assist in the stabilization and reconstruction of Afghanistan, thereby eliminating Afghanistan as a terrorist haven, while building a country and government that is capable of meeting the needs of its people while being actively involved in the international community of states.

ISAF is currently composed of about 5000 troops from 29 nations under the command of Lt.-Gen. Norbert van Heyst of Germany. Germany and the Netherlands are sharing the lead nation role until NATO takes over in August of this year. ISAF Headquarters in the centre of Kabul operates as the central point of the ISAF operations, while tactical headquarters are located at Camp

Warehouse where the Kabul Multinational Brigade is based. KMNB commands three battalion groups, two led by Germany and one by France, with all three groups including troops from other nations. Canada will replace one of the German Battalion Groups in August.

During the first rotation of Operation Athena, the Canadian Forces will deploy a battalion group based on the 3rd Battalion, The Royal Canadian Regiment, a brigade headquarters including members of 2 Canadian Mechanized Brigade Group Headquarters and Signals Squadron, a National Command Element linking the Chief of Defence Staff in Ottawa with the Task Force in Kabul, national support elements, an airlift element, and additional staff for ISAF HQ including Maj.-Gen. Andrew Leslie who has been appointed Deputy Commander, ISAF.

A battalion group such as is being deployed to ISAF, is a mission-specific tactical formation usually built around an infantry battalion or armoured regiment and supported by other army elements. The 3 RCR Battalion Group will deploy to Afghanistan with modern LAV III infantry fighting vehicles, LG1 Giat howitzers, and state-of-the-art Coyote reconnaissance vehicles. The Canadian contingent will also include logistical elements, as well as engineers, military police and medical support staff. Many of the forces deployed for the initial six month rotation will come from the Petawawa garrison, while it is anticipated that most of the personnel deployed for the second rotation will come from the Land Force Quebec Area. In total there will be 1,676 military staff deployed during the first six-month rotation, supplemented by contracted employees.

THEATRE SPECIFIC TRAINING - Observation Visit

In preparation for deployment, the Canadian Forces go through a series of training exercises which culminate in the theatre specific training and validation. On June 21, 2003, representatives from the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (DFAIT), the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) as well as several NGO representatives, were invited to visit CFB Petawawa and attend a briefing session on preparations for Operation Athena, as well as observe some of the exercises being conducted as part of this preparation. This aspect of training is particularly important in the case of Operation Athena since it is taking place in a country that is still experiencing significant security concerns where ethnic and religious tensions often run high. For this reason, the CF members deployed to Afghanistan are armed with robust rules of engagement.

When deployed, the Canadian contingent will be based in the Western portion of Kabul, an area currently patrolled by German troops who are billeted in the Eastern part of the city. The West and Southwest areas of Kabul are considered to be the most unstable of the city and it is anticipated that by increasing the

presence of security troops in the area significant positive steps can be taken to increase the safety and security of the area.

Theatre specific training for Operation Athena includes rules of engagement exercises, cultural sensitivity training and FIBUA (Fighting in Built-up Areas) exercises. These are the preparations we were invited to observe.

Rules of Engagement

While the specific rules of engagement for Operation Athena were not made available to the observers for security reasons, we were able to witness discussion groups where soldiers preparing to deploy are presented with realistic scenarios and asked what course of action they might take. These discussions were particularly interesting in that the commanding officers of each unit were taken aside and it was left to the enlisted soldiers to discuss their options and decide on the best course of action given the specifics of the scenario and the rules of engagement identified for this mission. If the officer running the exercise is satisfied that each group of soldiers clearly knows the ROE's for the mission they are given a 'good to go' validation.

Cultural Sensitivity Training

Given the religious and ethnic tensions and differences present in Afghanistan, Canadian Forces personnel also go through cultural sensitivity training. We were able to observe the validation testing for this component of training which operated much the same way as the ROE validation. Units of soldiers would be presented with scenarios in which they were confronted with a cultural component and asked to decide on a course of action. The scenario presented when we were observing involved encountering an Afghan woman with some dead sheep along the road and soldiers were asked how they would deal with the situation. The officer in charge made it clear that male soldiers are never to speak to or touch an Afghan woman, so the lone female in the group was identified as a possible medium of communication. This type of training is designed to prepare forces for the variables which they will face in the field.

FIBUA (Fighting in Built-up Areas) Training

Given that fact that the Canadian troops will be stationed in the city of Kabul, it is important for them to be prepared for the urban environment. As a result, part of the theatre-specific training being carried out in Petawawa included a simulated patrol exercise in which the patrol comes under fire from a hidden enemy. During this exercise we were stationed in one of the 'buildings', much like residents of Kabul, where we had an unobstructed view of the patrol and its actions once they came under attack. Throughout the exercise the teams are observed and evaluated by a senior officer in charge. Without having any experience with such exercises it is difficult to comment on the skills of the

participants, however, it certainly appeared that they were well-trained and dealt with the uncertainties and variables of the situation admirably.

CIMIC (Civil-Military Cooperation)

Recently, the Canadian Forces formally established a policy on civil-military relations, embodied in the form of the CIMIC unit which was established approximately eighteen months ago. While the traditions underlying this unit have been at work in the military since its establishment, only in the last few years has this become a specialized component of the Forces. The purpose of CIMIC is to cooperate, communicate and network with local populations, aid agencies, other national deployments and any other stakeholders in a given mission. Such negotiation, cooperation and assistance is designed to facilitate positive relationships and improve situations. CIMIC is not simply about conducting projects, however. Instead, the members of CIMIC are intended to connect those in need with those who can help them, to negotiate in situations where actions may have caused unintended consequences, to keep command informed, and to assist Canadian troops in the execution of their duties while in a foreign country. Part of the training for the Canadian mission to Afghanistan included briefings from CIMIC staff to those soldiers about to be deployed, highlighting specifically their role and the 'golden rule' of CIMIC staff - never promise anything, never guarantee anything. To this end groups of soldiers are given scenarios in which they may be inclined to make promises in order to defuse a potentially dangerous situation, or one where they may feel pity for a local resident and wish to help. CIMIC officers then discuss possible reactions and explain why what may appear to be a good idea may in fact harm the mission by establishing precedents or distracting soldiers from their primary tasks. After talking with several senior CIMIC members I was particularly impressed with their passion for their work and their incredibly memorable personalities. Recruited from the ranks of Canadian soldiers, both career and reservists, CIMIC looks particularly for those with a variety of life experience, usually in their mid-thirties and older, with strong people skills and interesting personality quirks which make them ideally suited to this line of work. The work of CIMIC is something all Canadians should be interested in and proud of, as it represents a codification of many of the ideals Canada and Canadians often pursue.

REACTIONS AND OBSERVATIONS

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the visit, however, was observing the interaction between, and listening to the comments of, the various participants. Staff from CIDA and DFAIT were joined by representatives from CARE Canada and the Aga Khan Foundation on the observation visit and it was extremely interesting to hear their comments on the military preparations. While it was clear that the group greatly appreciated the work of the military staff, and were indeed interested in the preparations for deployment comments made during and

after the visit indicated that they persisted in viewing the issue of Afghanistan primarily through their own institutional focus. While this was an important first step in bridging the institutional gap between diplomacy, development and defence, such efforts must be continued in order that each may better understand the others. One of the views that was particularly significant was the persistence of several of the representatives from CIDA to refer to the soldiers as peacekeepers, even inquiring as to what the difference between soldiers and peacekeepers was. Even after it was explained that peacekeepers are soldiers first and foremost the nuances of the definition seemed to be ignored or misunderstood by a few of the observers. This is the type of inaccurate view that can hamper cooperation between agencies now and in the future, and perhaps hints at the need for the military to more specifically define itself and its missions to the public.

Following the visit one of the CIDA staffers was heard to take exception to particular comments made by the military officers during their briefings regarding their task of referring local residents to particular international agencies when a problem arises (such as lack of clean water). Instead of seeing this as a positive step and an expansion of typical military duties, the sense was that this would be 'stepping on toes'. As an observer with none of these institutional ties I found such sentiments somewhat frustrating as they seemed to me to be missing the core of the mission, and that is to bring increased security and stability to a region in turmoil, while allowing aid agencies to work to help the local population. Perhaps continued outreach activities on the part of the Canadian military and a sincere effort from members of the aid and diplomatic communities in Canada will in time alleviate these institutional gaps.

Overall, the visit was extremely interesting, if rather hot, we were made to feel very welcome, and it was an excellent opportunity for civilians like myself to witness Canadian soldiers engaged in training activities. While most Canadians have likely seen our soldiers on television at some point in the last few years very few of us have had much, if any, direct experience. The preparation and skills of these men and women are much more impressive in person than is portrayed through a thirty-second sound bite on the evening news. Also impressive was the innovation and development of the CIMIC program. While the underlying principles of the program are clearly not new, the establishment of a specific policy and section in this area is something I look forward to following in the next several years as their mandate is put to work in the on the battlefields of the world.

* Included are several photographs taken during the visit depicting some of the training activities we were able to witness, including the FIBUA exercise involving a simulated patrol including two LAVs.