

# Psychological operations: The battlefield's human dimension

By Kristina Davis

FARNHAM, Que. — The children played soccer, while women drifted along the outskirts of the village. The men chatted amongst themselves sheltered only by tents in the searing heat. Then the soldiers arrived.

Conversation was initially slowed, reliant upon the rhythm of the translator. But it was friendly, even neighbourly. Yet, once soldiers passed out leaflets, suggesting the villagers disarm, the tension was palpable. Children ran in fear, while villagers balled up the leaflets, hurling them and insults at the soldiers. Attempts to diffuse the situation were met with chants and jeers.

While the village at the CF training area in Farnham, Que., was simulated, the training was invaluable to students on the first Tactical Psychological Operations (PSYOPS) Disseminator Course—one of a four course series—ever designed and taught by the CF.

Intended to influence the perception and behaviour of approved target audiences to achieve military and political goals, PSYOPS is not new to the CF. In fact, it has been used for years, but never based on a Canadian course.

Given the current global reality, says Major Benoit Mainville, deputy commanding officer at the Canadian Psychological Operations Directorate, it is important for the CF to have its own course and training, to create what he calls a "permanent capacity."

While there is a strong Canadian history of PSYOPS, once operators returned to their unit, valuable information and expertise was often lost. The Canadian Psychological Operations Directorate changed all that, centralizing the know-how.

In Farnham, with two simulated villages, approximately 40 civilians, including men, women and even children playing villagers, and 11 translators, the setting was as realistic as possible. Graffiti marked the walls of buildings, people spoke only through translators and cultural sensibilities were honoured.

For the 24 candidates, working in Tactical PSYOPS team of four, Maj Mainville says that kind of realism is not only beneficial, it is fundamental. Integral to any military operation, PSYOPS are conducted in concert with conventional forces, albeit with a different focus. As Maj

Mainville notes, "the psychological aspect of conflict has just as much importance as the physical one."

Divided into three modules, the course includes dissemination—the basis of the training in Farnham—production and target audience analysis and another still under development. "To validate their training," explains Maj Mainville, "we created two villages where they'll be exposed to diverse situations requiring their expertise."

And while the situations were diverse, so too are the students. Holding degrees in obvious disciplines—like psychology—communications, even journalism, and political science, students on the course, all Reservists, are highly educated and often fluent in many languages. Maj Mainville says their backgrounds make them ideal candidates. In a rigorous selection process, candidates are chosen based on communication skills, empathy, cultural awareness and openness and even, what he calls a "creative spirit."

And creativity becomes critical in the production phase of PSYOPS where operators actually design posters, leaflets, and even radio or television messages. Colours, symbols and images all have different meanings in different cultures, and knowing the potential impact of these products is key. But, cautions Maj Mainville, when the CF produces a leaflet, for example, it is always identifiable and the information it contains is true.

Lieutenant Philippe Zongibardi from Les Fusiliers Mont-Royal of Montréal, is attached to the PSYOPS directorate. The former journalist, who is currently working as a correctional officer, says knowing what media to use is just as important as the message. "If your poster is torn down or defaced," he says, "something is not working."

For some students, though, the training was more than timely. In fact, Sergeant Reginald Obas was counting down the days to his deployment to Afghanistan—in mid-July he had only 12 days left. A former high school teacher, and a Reservist for 13 years, this will be his third deployment. He says PSYOPS intrigued him because he quite simply likes interacting with people.

And while his communication skills are important for negotiations, he says communication within the four-person team is vital. "When it's difficult to control a situation," he explains, "communication

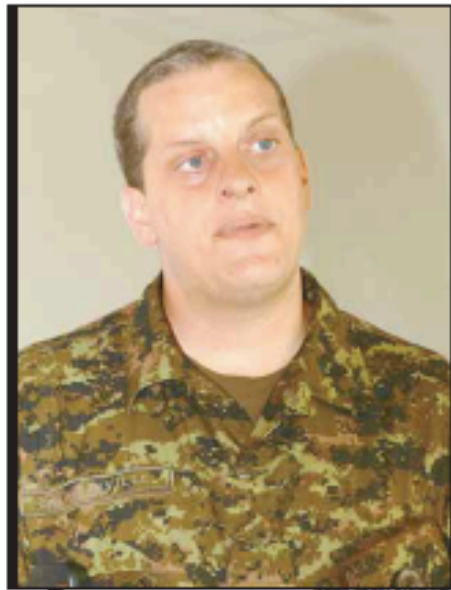
becomes even more important." And it is a tricky balancing act: negotiating with villagers—who could be hostile—and collecting information, all the while maintaining personal safety and that of the team.

**"The psychological aspect of conflict has just as much importance as the physical one"**

— Maj Benoit Mainville,  
DCO at Canadian Psychological  
Operations Directorate

**« L'aspect psychologique d'un conflit est aussi important que son aspect physique »**

— Maj Benoit Mainville,  
commandant de la direction des  
opérations psychologiques



Maj Benoit Mainville

Le Maj Benoit Mainville



Villages—played by Montréal-area civilian—used to teach recruits how to interact with the first PSYOPS course and designed and delivered by the CF.

Les villages (joués par des civils montréalais) aident à leur familiarité avec des situations du premier cours sur les OPS/PSY et préparé et livré par les FC.

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