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Small but resilient: Canadian Forces meet international challenges

By Tim Dunne

When the Iron Curtain between Eastern and Western Europe drew back, Canadians hopefully believed we were entering a time when “peace is breaking out all over.” But these are unrealized hopes, and Canada has been engaged in military operations virtually non-stop since the 1990-1991 Gulf War. Today, of Canada’s 22 operations, three in particular stand out.

- Afghanistan: Canada’s mission in Afghanistan is not as prominent as it was when we engaged in combat operations. But in 2009, when Canada joined NATO’s training mission in Afghanistan, our troops began delivering training and professional development support to the Afghan national army, air force and police.

Commanded by Maj.-Gen. Jim Ferron, this is the third major Canadian Forces contribution to multinational operations in that country. The training mission is concentrated in Kabul, with a satellite team at the northern regional military training centre in Mazar-e-Sharif.

Since July 2011, Canada’s engagement in Afghanistan has focused on four key areas: assisting with health and education of Afghan children and youth; promoting security, the rule of law and human rights; promoting regional diplomacy; and helping deliver humanitarian assistance.

The contingent has a maximum of 950 Canadian Forces members; however, the actual number fluctuates slightly within that limit to meet mission requirements. Their work will continue until the end of next year, leading to a seamless transition of authority to the Afghan security forces.

- Indian Ocean: HMCS Toronto deployed to the Arabian Sea just two weeks ago as the Royal Canadian Navy’s latest contribution to maritime security and counter-terrorism operations in the Arabian Sea.

Under Commander David Patchell and with a crew of about 225, Toronto will replace her sister-ship Regina to serve with the Combined Task Force 150, the 26-nation maritime coalition force operating in the Arabian Sea. She will assume Regina’s responsibilities: to detect, deter and protect against terrorist activity by patrolling and conducting maritime security operations in her area.

A Sea King helicopter detachment with its 19 aircrew and technicians has deployed from Shearwater with the ship.

HMCS Toronto will assume her place in the task force and begin her six-month operational deployment tomorrow.

Her presence in the Arabian Sea also gives Canada the flexibility and capability to respond quickly to any emerging crises in the region, such as HMCS Ville de Québec did when she was reassigned to provide protective escort to United Nations food relief to Somalia in August 2008.

Just two weeks ago, HMCS Regina disrupted a suspected night-time drug transfer off the coast of Yemen. Her unmanned aerial vehicle observed a boat transferring large bales to a small motorized skiff. Regina’s combat officer, Naval Lt. David Dallin, said the ship’s sudden appearance caused about 15 bales of probable narcotics to be dumped overboard.

This naval coalition has promoted security and stability in the international waters of the Middle East, which encompasses some of the world's most important shipping lanes, a crucial consideration for Canada.

- Mali: On Dec. 20, the UN Security Council authorized the deployment of the African-led international support mission in Mali, responding to the serious concern about extremist efforts to establish a global base of operations in that country.

The French began air strikes and launched a defensive operation in Mali on Jan. 11, in response to a terrorist advance to the south that could have endangered Bamako.

France requested Canadian air transport support to carry military equipment and materiel into the French area of operations. Canada responded with a CC-177 Globemaster from 8 Wing Trenton, Ont. The 40-member Canadian air contingent includes pilots and flight maintenance technicians from 429 Transport Squadron, and traffic technicians from 2 Air Movements Squadron who manage all passengers, cargo and freight which the Globemaster carries.

This aircraft will move equipment and personnel to Bamako until Feb. 15, but is not participating in combat operations.

In the past, conflict was frequently a result of disagreements between nations. These three operations are consequences of extreme ideologies. The Cold War's Iron Curtain does not have a modern face or façade and the military operations in which our forces engage give us little or no notice, and involve forms of fighting that are not governed by modern laws of armed conflict.

We are fortunate that our Canadian Forces, while small, are flexible and resilient, and have demonstrated that they are able to take the fight to the enemy, so that the enemy cannot take the fight to us.

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