

Reflections on the Canadian Amphibious Task Force

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The government of Canada has enunciated a foreign policy that links diplomacy, development assistance and defence activities with the pursuit of Canadian interests in the world. The current focus is upon failing or failed states where the three mechanisms can be brought together to assist the international community in salvage of a particular situation by allowing the people of that country to regenerate their national identity, institutions and infrastructure. In more urgent cases the requirement may include an expeditious evacuation of Canadian citizens or those of other countries. Canada intends to work through the United Nations, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), coalitions of willing states and non-governmental organizations to achieve its goals.

From the perspective of the Canadian Forces (CF), there are numerous opportunities flowing from the revised

foreign policy. For the CF the real challenge is to develop an integrated general purpose military capability that spans the full range military activities from fighting a war, as in Afghanistan, to providing humanitarian relief, as was done in tsunami-stricken south Asia. The full range of activities may be required simultaneously. The challenge for the Canadian Expeditionary Forces Command (CEFCOM) is to implement the required military options in a manner that is “relevant, responsive and effective.”¹

History has taught us that not all such situations will arise with advance warning or allow us time to respond. The 1964 Cyprus crisis, the 2004 tsunami in south Asia, the 2006 evacuation of Lebanon, and several natural disasters at home illustrate this point. Other events, such as the continuing troubles in Haiti, East Timor and Sudan



Photo: DND Combat Camera (2005)

The object is to move an effective fighting force ashore. An “O” group from “C” Company 1 PPCLI during an exercise in 2005 at CFB Wainwright.

have attracted our national interest at various times but there was time for reflection before national commitments were made.

Consequently, CEFCON must have the capabilities to respond quickly to any military commitment. Invariably, there will be a need to move military personnel, government officials, their equipment and adequate supplies to the effected country to support our integrated operations. There will be a requirement to move the reconnaissance party and its equipment within a few days to investigate the situation. Once the decision has been made to deploy forces, the vanguard, with its basic protection, communications, engineering, logistics and medical support elements, must deploy rapidly to pave the way for the main body and its equipment.

With the acquisition of the Boeing C17 Globemaster III, the reconnaissance and vanguard elements will be more readily deployable than in the past. The new aircraft can be supplemented by the existing strategic and tactical air transport fleet or commercial airlift. Even if destination airports are not initially available, it will be the task of the coalition to secure the necessary airfields. However, airlift is not the sole or most economic means for the movement of heavy equipment, bulky items and supplies into a theatre of operations. This is better accomplished through effective strategic sealift.

Frequently, the condition of infrastructure, or lack thereof, in the operational theatre will present a challenge. In many failing or failed states the local infrastructure is damaged or destroyed by internal strife or looting. If the theatre is in a coastal region or within easy helicopter reach of the littoral area, the concepts of sea basing and tactical sealift are useful as a means to overcome such challenges whilst deploying to the theatre. This will require a naval task force with a sealift capability that has the ability to move some personnel, much of the equipment and supplies over the beach. In the longer term, as facilities are built up in the port and ashore, the tactical sealift requirement will transform to a need for a strategic logistics transportation service which could be provided by commercial shipping.

So, what does this mean for CEFCON and its Standing Contingency Task Force (SCTF)? At present, these groups are preparing plans and concepts for the SCTF. With the assistance of the US Navy, the US Marine Corps and others the plans and concepts are being discussed, tested and evaluated. Undoubtedly the staffs are gaining a great deal of knowledge as they move forward. However, amphibious operations remain very complex and



USS *Gunston Hall* showing the well deck from which the landing craft operate.

Photo: WO Randolph/ND Public Affairs, Ottawa

demand considerable planning and unique resources.

Current Canadian thinking appears to favour a single two ship amphibious task group designed to land military forces in a permissive environment over the dock or over the beach.² A single Maritime Amphibious Unit (MAU) is being formed to conduct over-the-beach operations, which are inherently more complex than using an existing sea port. There would be a primary amphibious ship and a transport ship. The latter would likely be one of the three Joint Support Ships that are scheduled to be operational in the 2013-15 time-frame. The primary ship could be a Landing Ship Dock (LSD), like the USS *Gunston Hall* or the Dutch *Rotterdam*, or a Landing Platform Helicopter (LPH) ship, such as the FNS *Mistral*. The latter type is essentially a small aircraft carrier that would carry several hundred troops, their personal equipment, some vehicles, several medium helicopters, landing craft and possibly vertical takeoff and landing fighter jet aircraft or attack helicopters.

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To provide relief for refit and maintenance cycles, at least two primary amphibious ships would be required. The procurement cycle for such specialized vessels would be at least 10 years unless used units were made available by an ally. The costs and delivery times for the construction of the ships (or even the refit of old vessels), the acquisition of landing craft, helicopters, specialized beaching equipment and training of the MAU would be very demanding in terms of money and people. This would come at a time when the navy is struggling with the submarine project, the frigate modernization program, the Joint Support Ship Program and approval of new ships for command and air defence of the task force.



Photo: DND Combat Camera, November 2006

A US Navy crewman directs a Canadian Bison AFV into a landing craft aboard the USS Gunston Hall during the November 2006 Integrated Tactical Effects Experiment to test the concept of the Standing Contingency Force.

Taxpayers should not be afraid to ask some basic questions about the amphibious proposals. Can the amphibious capability be made operational quickly? Will such a capability allow us to intervene in a timely fashion to achieve our national interests? Is there another way to get the capability with a lesser call on resources?

With the programmed strategic airlift capability, the movement of people to a theatre of operations has been addressed. Subject to access to suitable airfields, the deployment of reconnaissance elements, a reinforced light infantry company or special forces troops and their basic equipment will soon be practical. The airlift of the remainder of the force will be possible over several days or weeks, but the heavier equipment and supplies must travel by sea. A non-combatant evacuation (NEO) may require both sea and air resources.

Strategic sealift of vehicles, equipment and supplies from Canada to the theatre of operations can be done by specialized naval vessels or by commercially built roll-on, roll-off container ships (ro-ro ships) that are chartered or owned by the CF. Using naval, contract or civil service crews, the ro-ro ships can easily move the required material from either a home port or a staging area to the port of disembarkation. As Canada is a long way from Africa, the Persian Gulf and South Asia, the pre-positioning of the sealift ships and embarked equipment would be necessary if the Canadian participation is to be timely and relevant. The public criticism concerning the timeliness of the Disaster Assistance Response Team (DART) to Sri Lanka after the tsunami in 2004 and the evacuation of Canadians from Lebanon in 2006 cannot be ignored. Speed has a quality all of its own and our politicians are well aware of this.

As ro-ro ships are commercial vessels, without the over-the-beach delivery capability and often without self-unloading equipment, they require a serviceable port with ramp space and heavy cranes. Such ships can unload in

a permissive environment. If the port must be first secured, the forces required will have to be airlifted into place or landed by ships. This implies the requirement for a naval task force with some tactical sealift for over-the-beach and pier operations along with command, air defence and sea-basing capabilities. It also implies that the naval task force must be in close proximity to the sealift ships and the theatre of operations. Therefore the issue of forward deployment of the naval task force must be considered.

Can Canada afford to pre-position complete naval and amphibious task forces in Gibraltar, Abu Dhabi, Singapore or another sea port? If not, is there an alternative method to transport the personnel, their equipment and supplies to the theatre? The answer to these questions would be easier if the CF had a generous budget. Lavish defence spending, however, is not the Canadian reality. Canadians do not see their country as an adventurer in world affairs, but they have compassion for the poor, the disadvantaged and downtrodden people of the world. Therefore, the government and CF must respond to crises in a way that makes the best use of financial, human, physical and political resources to address the situation effectively, efficiently and in a timely fashion.

Initial thinking in the CF envisaged a landing force built around an infantry battalion. Colonel (Ret'd) Gary Rice has described the battalion group in some detail as having 777 personnel and 91 vehicles.³ The force would likely be employed in either evacuations or intervention in a failing or failed state. There is a need in the former scenario for secure assembly points, protected convoy routes and a secure embarkation area. In the second situation there is a need to establish command, communications, accommodation and logistics facilities for longer term operations as well as to secure a sea port or beach-head and a helicopter landing zone or airfield. If this was an independent Canadian operation a battalion group would provide barely enough capability. In a coalition operation Canada could contribute effectively with fewer personnel and other resources on the ground. A November 2006 experimental amphibious exercise involved the landing of an infantry company which has fewer people and less material.

There are two Western states that have approached this issue from different perspectives – Denmark and New Zealand. A robust alternative is found in Denmark. Its government has, through the agreement of Parliament, developed a defence policy and structure for the years 2005-2009. The policy completes the transition of its

armed forces from a Cold War configuration to a flexible structure that supports Danish foreign policy. The policy is remarkably similar to that of Canada as it concentrates on the furthering of overseas interests using diplomacy, development and the defence organization.

The role of the defence organization is to prepare naval, army and air forces for limited expeditionary operations throughout the world in support of Danish interests. Denmark has jettisoned capabilities that are unnecessary in the post-Cold War era and depends upon coalition members to provide capabilities that are not found in its armed forces. The army is expected to sustain a 1,500 person commitment while the navy and air force must be able to sustain a 500 person commitment. Their tasks could, with coalition assistance, cover the full range of integrated military operations from combatting terrorism to providing evacuation and humanitarian aid.

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With a small force Lockheed C130J Hercules aircraft, supplemented by NATO-leased and owned airlift, the bulk of the army personnel will be airlifted to the theatre of operations. A naval task force comprising one of the two new *Absalon*-class flexible support vessels, two frigates, two mine warfare ships, a few transport helicopters and two chartered strategic sealift ro-ro ships (with a combined 5,000 lane metres of vehicle space or the capacity to carry 1,500 TEU containers) will provide the sealift. The naval vessels will protect the ro-ro ships, provide joint command facilities and move equipment and supplies for the army landing force to the port of disembarkation. The task force can also be used for independent military and humanitarian operations. The unique feature of the task force is found in the *Absalon* herself.

The *Absalon* is essentially a frigate with an extra deck for army vehicles, additional accommodation, and a joint operations command centre. The ship mounts a 127 mm naval gun, eight Harpoon surface-to-surface missiles, anti-missile defensive systems, Evolved Sea Sparrow anti-aircraft missiles, and can carry, in a hangar, one



A team of combat divers secures the beach prior to the main force being landed.

Photo: DND Combat Camera November 2006

medium helicopter. The ship has accommodation for 200 joint command staff and army troops plus she can carry a range of special forces, infantry, reconnaissance, armoured or logistic vehicles, as necessary, to support the embarked troops. The available space on the 6,300 ton ship is limited so the vehicle capacity equates to about 250 lane metres or one-half of the standard vehicle establishment for a company-sized unit.

The ship can make 23 knots and is capable of landing the troops over the beach by landing craft, long-range interdiction craft or helicopter. She cannot land the vehicles by landing craft but she is well equipped for over-the-pier unloading. The Danish have accepted the absence of an integral over-the-beach capability. One of the two ships will be at high readiness for deployment to the areas of the eastern Mediterranean Sea, Africa or the Persian Gulf. When the ships are not engaged in expeditionary operations they are available for domestic and NATO missions. It is likely that one will become the command ship for the Standing NATO Maritime Group 1 in a few years.

By foregoing the capability for the beach landing of vehicles and equipment, the Danish forces have accepted the need for a coalition partner to provide tactical sealift. As a result they have built a ship class that is flexible and meets their overall maritime defence requirements. It is also faster than most amphibious ships so it can move more quickly into a theatre of operations.

New Zealand has taken another route to create a strategic and tactical sealift capacity in order to cover its area of interest from the South Pacific Islands through South Asia. The Royal New Zealand Navy (RNZN) will take delivery of its multi-role vessel, HMNZS *Canterbury* in early 2007. The design of this new 19 knot, 9,000 ton ship is derived from an Irish Sea ferry. It is intended to land troops and vehicles by helicopter, by landing craft over the beach, or by side and stern ramps over the pier.



A Canadian Army AFV leaves a US Navy landing craft during the November 2006 Integrated Tactical Exercise.

The vessel will have accommodation for a company-size force, a command staff, and a helicopter squadron comprising one Sea Sprite maritime helicopter and four NH 90 medium-lift helicopters. The landing craft will be of 60 tonne displacement and can carry vehicles and/or troops. The ship can also undertake patrol, training and humanitarian operations. While the ship is fitted with weapons for limited self-defence, it is clearly intended for operations in a permissive environment with protection by accompanying *Anzac*-class frigates or coalition forces. Although it is a different concept for sealift than chosen by the Danes, the result is similar with considerable reliance placed upon coalition partners to provide the remaining capabilities.

So what should Canada do? Prior to the concept of a primary amphibious ship being conceived, the CF seemed content with the idea of the Joint Support Ship (JSS). These ships will have similar tactical sealift capabilities to the *Absalon* and HMNZS *Canterbury*. Are the JSS capabilities sufficient for our strategic sealift purposes? The answer to this question depends entirely on the size of the required landing force. Until this is determined by the CF, the arguments in favour of one solution or another remain largely theoretical. In developing the requirement for the three JSS ships, there was a perception that 7,500 lane metres of vehicle space was required to carry the vehicles and equipment of the vanguard force. Each ship will have a dedicated 1,500 lane metres of space and the helicopter deck can provide an additional 1,000 lane metres, for a total of 2,500 lane metres. There are two obvious problems. First, helicopters are sacrificed for vehicles. Second, there will never be three ships available simultaneously to fulfill such a mission. The ships may be committed to naval replenishment work or in refit and therefore out of position for sealift purposes.

The CF could task one JSS as the high readiness expeditionary response vessel. It could move an infantry company or an equivalent combat arms, engineer, logistics or medical unit to a port and provide command and

logistics support for some extended period of time. It would carry the bulk of the equipment and vehicles for the embarked troops. The landing of personnel, lighter vehicles and equipment could be by helicopter with heavier items being landed over the pier using ramps or a prepared beach using the embarked landing craft. Like HMNZS *Canterbury*, the JSS will require heavy cranes to handle and load the landing craft. However, unless pre-positioned, the ship would not provide a quick response to a crisis. It will require the protection of a naval task force, perhaps provided by a coalition partner. Without all three JSS being available, there will be a need for one or more ro-ro ships, with 5,000-6,000 lane metres' capacity, to bring the remainder of vanguard force vehicles, equipment and supplies. Creating this capability will be a significant challenge for the CF.



Members of 1 PPCLI during exercises at CFB Wainwright.

In conclusion, the CF should leave dedicated large-scale tactical sealift to those allies and partners who have the resources and experience to undertake such operations. As well, allies and partners that are closer to potential deployment areas should secure the points of entry. It is better for the CF to airlift the troops and their basic equipment quickly into the operational theatre and let the navy undertake the strategic sealift tasks with one JSS dedicated to sealift and joint operations supplemented by one or more ro-ro ships. 🇨🇦

Notes

1. The CEFCON Motto, available at http://www.cefcom.forces.ca/default_e.asp.
2. See Major R.D. Bradford, "An Amphibious Task Group for the SCTF," *Canadian Naval Review*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (Summer 2006), pp. 16-19.
3. Colonel Gary Rice, "Making Canadian Forces Amphibiosity a Reality," available at <http://www.cda-cdai.ca/pdf/SCTFALR.pdf>.

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