

Address to the Conference of Defence Associations

Annual Seminar

Public Expectations Military Reality

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Feb. 26, 2004

Ottawa

I've run into two extreme views of Canada's military. There are those who think that all soldiers are killers and instruments of political power. They don't believe Canada should be spending money on its military and they don't believe our military has any business in places like Afghanistan. The second view that I've seen is that Canadian soldiers are not soldiers at all, but a glorified police force and that the Canadian military is like some non-governmental organization whose job is to fix damage and spread Canadian goodwill throughout war-ravaged countries after the fighting is over. They have no concept of the tasks undertaken, the risks involved or the capabilities employed.

Of course, we all know that the truth lies somewhere in between these two extreme points of view. The average Canadian soldier is infinitely more complex and more human than most that I've met. He's also more than a glorified policeman. And Canada's military is not some kind of NGO. It is, however, an instrument of Canadian foreign policy. Canadian soldiers are probably the most visible Canadians in the world. I would argue that they are in more places, doing more good things in Canada's name than any other single organization in the country.

They are also the most exposed Canadians in the world. More often than not, they operate in high-risk areas with one hand tied behind their backs. Not because of a lack of equipment or training or manpower, but because they usually operate under extremely restrictive rules of engagement.

For example, the greatest single threat to Canadian troops in Afghanistan is the suicide bomber. I'm not a soldier but, to my mind at least, the only way to stop a suicide bomber is to keep your eyes open and to get him before he gets you. Yet Canadian troops are not allowed to patrol with readied weapons. They cannot travel with a bullet up the spout because their senior officers don't want them to act too hastily and shoot the wrong man or, worse, woman or child. Their commanding officer told me in Kabul this past fall that it is better that a Canadian soldier go down than an innocent Afghan civilian. The rationale is that if Canadian troops come under fire from, say, a sniper, they will dive for cover first and then return fire. Or if confronted with an opposing force, they can employ an escalating response – a verbal threat, a cocked weapon, a

warning shot, then – and only then – lethal force. The problem is, these kinds of threats do not exist in their theatre of operations. Taliban, al-Qaida, and HIG forces are not stupid. They know they'd be fools to take on a well-trained, *well-equipped*, highly skilled force like the Canadians. They know they can hurt us more and inflict more damage with random, suicide attacks or landmines than they could in any head-to-head confrontation.

Too often, I would argue, our soldiers are restricted by the label “peacekeepers” and all the misconceptions and baggage that word entails. I think our experience in Afghanistan the first time around was a wake-up call for many Canadians, for our government and even for some elements of our military. I think it proved that modern-day Canadians are more accepting of a Canadian war-fighting role in justifiable circumstances than any recent government was prepared to believe.

For all our talk about a lack of Canadian identity and so on, there *is* a *Canadian way* – and no where is it more evident than among our very capable soldiers overseas. I have seen it. An example came on the mountain known as the Whale in eastern Afghanistan. It was March 2002 and Canadian soldiers had launched their first combat offensive operation in 50 years. There were supposed to be between 60 and 80 highly motivated, suicidal al-Qaida fighters waiting for the Canadians on that mountain. The fact is, by the time we got there, they weren't there. Most had left. There was, however, a single, lonely donkey wandering around the cliffs and hillsides. It had probably humped more mortar rounds for the al-Qaida during the past month than Canadians had fired in decades. But it didn't matter. The animal posed no threat. There were 600 Canadians on that mountain and 100 American troops. For all we knew at the time, there was an al-Qaida fighter around every corner. It was a highly charged atmosphere, yet the Canadians – as Canadians are wont to do – feared for the donkey's safety. So they broke open some infra-red glo-sticks and smeared the stuff all over the donkey so he could be seen at all hours. Then they sent him on his way. A little while later, there was a volley of gunfire and the donkey was dead, shredded by hundreds of rounds of ammunition. The Americans had blown him away.

On that same operation, I saw up close and personal Canadian soldiers engineer the destruction of an al-Qaida bunker and cave complex. At least two enemy were killed. Granted, American troops did most of the dirty work, but they did it successfully thanks to the deadly efficient planning and tactics employed by a squad of Canadian reconnaissance troops under the leadership of Captain Ryan Latinovich. It was something to see, I can tell you.

I was in Afghanistan again this past summer and fall. I watched the transition when the Germans handed over their area of operations to the Canadians. I went on some joint patrols with the two forces and, later, I accompanied the Canadians on many patrols both inside and outside Kabul. The German style was very different from the Canadians'. Predictably, they were stiffer; more reserved; less personable. Likewise, the Afghans were a little stand-offish; a little less warm and, I would argue, a little less trusting. It was amazing to watch the change over the four months that I was there. The Canadians have what I call *the common touch*. They don't impose themselves or their lifestyles on people. They respect local customs. Under the Canadians, the Afghans opened up. They are a naturally warm, welcoming people, and they began to show that more every day. They grew to like the Canadians and, I would say, trust them. This contrasts with the experiences of some other ISAF forces in other sectors of the city, and certainly with the American

experience elsewhere in Afghanistan. And I would suggest this pays off in operations like the recent ones in which Canadian troops and Afghan authorities successfully took down operatives of the HIG terrorist organization with nary a shot fired in anger. (Just as an aside: On one recent operation, where Canadians raided two compounds, the troops didn't kick in any doors; , the officer commanding the operation knocked. The man they were out to get answered and the OC informed him he was under arrest). I suspect we have not seen the last of operations of this nature involving Canadians in and around Kabul. Like most Canadian operations that I have seen, they are typified by the precise and judicious use of force.

There have been two tragedies since the Canadians returned to Afghanistan last year. Much has been made of the role of the Iltis in these incidents. But I would suggest these incidents are more the result of a/ the distribution of Canadian assets in-theatre and b/ how Canadians insist on doing their jobs than any lack of equipment. I have seen most of the 34 ISAF nations at work. I can tell you, I would rank the Canadians' arsenal with any of them. Our 2,100 soldiers in Kabul want for nothing. They have the biggest and most lavish camp; they have the most armour; they have the latest technology, and they have the best personal protection of any troops in the force. They also have by far the largest and most diverse area of operations. It ranges from cramped village markets to alleyways to desert and mountain passes. It is a daunting challenge and our soldiers are stretched. Perhaps they should never have been travelling goat tracks in Iltises. And they don't any more.

But I would say our soldiers are ill-served by what I believe is a highly politicized debate over the Iltis.

We all know the Iltis is far from the ideal patrol vehicle. But as military men and women, you should know – as Gen. Leslie himself stated – that the ideal patrol vehicle does not exist. There is certainly no more protective patrol vehicle in ISAF for what the Canadians want to do. And Gen. Leslie has said the new G-Wagon is no better. How, I ask you, were they supposed to defend against three anti-tank mines?

The Iltis is an open-topped vehicle; it's underpowered, it's mechanically unreliable, it's dangerously cramped and it's unarmoured. But Sgt. Robert Short and Cpl. Robbie Beerenfenger didn't die because they were under-equipped. They died because Canadians insisted they do their *jobs the Canadian way* – up close and personal. I was on one of the first rural para patrols after the minestrike last October. They did it from the back of a Bison. And, I can tell you, it just wasn't the same. They were elevated, looking down on and removed from the people. Something was lost. Something Canadian.

Likewise, Cpl. Jamie Murphy didn't die because he was in an Iltis. Perhaps he died because Canadians insist their soldiers inflict no "collateral damage," that they travel with their bullets in their magazines and not in their chambers. These kinds of concerns are not an issue with some allied forces. To some allied nations, killing innocent men, women and children is part of the cost of doing business. In Canada, we hold public inquiries and disband entire regiments over such things.

In some ways, our soldiers are ill-served by the funding debate. I think Canadians tend to equate bad equipment with a bad military. That's not the case. Far from it. The arguments for more equipment and the political contention that our troops haven't got the tools to do their jobs, tend to overlook the fact that our soldiers can hold their own with any in the world. If there is a problem, it's that there are far too few of them.

Canadians have a disturbing habit of blaming themselves for everything. It's somehow *our* fault that an HIG operative planted three anti-tank mines along a goat track near the Canadian base. *We're* to blame when a fanatic with a mortar strapped to his chest steps out of a crowd and blows himself up next to a Canadian jeep.

I'm not saying our military doesn't need better equipment, or more money, or more soldiers. But we also need to remember that perhaps, *just perhaps*, incidents like these are part of the cost of doing business. Perhaps they are part of the price of the privilege of being Canadian.

In conclusion, I would say there *is* a gap between the military and the public's perception of it. I suggest the most effective means of closing this gap is to give people like me – the media – more access to military operations. To my mind, it's the only way Canadians will understand, trust and appreciate what their soldiers are doing.