

Clandestine Politics: The History and Evolution of Canadian Unconventional Warfare

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Within the arsenals of armed forces around the world are specialized units of highly motivated volunteers who are selected to carry out particularly hazardous and unconventional combat operations. These individuals form the ranks of Special Forces (SF) and their use by governments as specialized tools in dealing with unique military scenarios is not a new phenomena. Be it the Greek soldiers who alongside Odysseus infiltrated the Trojan stronghold¹, or the specialized rifle and sapper units used during the Napoleonic wars², the demand for and use of versatile combat units capable of operating beyond the conventional arena of battle is prevalent within the history of warfare. The allure of such fighting forces has been their fluidity and ability to self-sustain in the midst of combat and to have the initiative required to meet the evolving needs of warfare.

Canada has enjoyed a rich history of unconventional warfare capabilities ranging from its role within the joint-American 1st Special Service Force during the Second World War, through to the modern day Joint Task Force 2 (JTF-2). This essay will draw a parallel between the 1st Special Service Force and JTF-2 in order to see how Canadian Special Forces have evolved and what traits remain consistent in their overall establishment.

Furthermore, aside from the evolution of Special Forces in Canada this paper will also explore how the nature of threats to international security have also changed following September 11th and contend that though created with domestic policy and security in mind, JTF-2 has evolved into a vital tool for the Canadian efforts against global disorder as is needed due to the changing nature of international conflict.

¹ The Trojan War. n.d. <<http://www.stanford.edu/~plomio/history.html>> 11 Oct 2005

² Napoleonic Guide – Napoleon’s Imperial Guard. 1999-2004. <<http://www.napoleonguide.com/bonguard.htm>>

A Brief Comparison of Canadian Unconventional Warfare

World War 2 vitalized the military-industrial capabilities of Canada through the establishment of intensified weapons production and the training of soldiers from across the alliance. Found within this resurgence of military minded socio-economic policy was the exploration into the development and usage of Special Forces operatives. In the world of the Canadian armed forces at the time and that of unconventional warfare, one example of this phenomenon was the 1st Special Service Force based in Montana.

The Black Devil Brigade

The 1st Special Service Force created in 1942 was comprised of a variety of Canadians and Americans drawn from military and civilian posts³. World War two had seen wide usage of Special Forces through such examples as the creation of the British Special Air Service (SAS) in 1941⁴ and their subsequent campaigns in North Africa, and the US 1st Ranger Battalion activated in 1942⁵. Therefore when considering the creation of a joint Special Forces unit the impetus lay in creating a unit designed for a specific set of duties that no other existing force would be able to undertake therefore creating a niche for that new unit to grow within. For the 1st Special Service Force this specialized mandate would involve operations in Europe that involved special training in alpine warfare as

³ Burhans, Robert D. The First Special Service Force: A War History of The North Americans 1942-1944. 1st ed. Nashville. The Battery Press. 1947

⁴ James, Malcolm. Born of the Desert: With the SAS in North Africa. London: Greenhill Books. 2001

⁵ US Army Ranger Association-US Army Rangers:History: WWII Battalions. n.d. <
<http://www.ranger.org/rangerHistoryWorldWarIIBattalions.html>>

well as training in winter combat, all of which was to be provided on top of standard Special Forces training consisting of demolitions, reconnaissance and weapons tactics⁶. The 1st Special Service Force was a pioneer unit in the sense that it enabled Canadians to work jointly with their American counterparts in the area of Special Operations. It is this sense of unity that later enabled Canadian parachutists to train at Ft. Benning, GA and laid down the foundations for a virtually synonymous multi-national Special Operations mission in Afghanistan from 2001-2002⁷.

Special Forces, regardless of their country share the abilities of being able to conduct long-range reconnaissance, to operate covertly behind enemy lines, to engage in unconventional guerilla warfare, and to engage the enemy in his own country with a level of tactical intimacy that brings about a combat experience unlike any other. For example in the case of the 1st Special Service Force it was common place for member to leave stickers printed with the sentence “The worst is yet to come” on the bodies of dead German soldiers⁸.

The 1st Special Service Force would distinguish themselves in theaters of combat from the Aleutian mountains to southern-France. The unit was disbanded in 1944, having

⁶ Burhans, Robert D. The First Special Service Force: A War History of The North Americans 1942-1944. 1st ed. Nashville. The Battery Press. 1947

⁷ Springer, Joseph A. The True Story of the First Special Service Force in World War II: Black Devil Brigade – An Oral History. New York. Ibooks. 2001

⁸ Springer, Joseph A. The True Story of the First Special Service Force in World War II: Black Devil Brigade – An Oral History. New York. Ibooks. 2001

served its purpose of destroying strategic axis positions across Europe and capturing scores of prisoners as well⁹.

The Men in Black

Created in 1993, JTF-2 has had a secretive history within the Canadian armed forces.

This unit was developed with the mandate to take over Canada's Federal counter-terrorism activities from the RCMP's Emergency Response Team (ERT), which had been assigned that role from 1976 onwards¹⁰. JTF-2 troops have been actively involved in dealing with counter-terrorism issues facing the government of Canada from the unit's inception. Be it by being on standby to assist the Peruvian government in rescuing hostages following a siege by MRTA rebels in 1996, or being praised by the United States government for their role in hunting down Al-Qaeda members in Iraq, JTF-2 has been one of Canada's most active units internationally speaking¹¹.

For security purposes much of JTF-2's operational information is kept secret and therefore creating an accurate profile of this unit can only be based upon speculation.

However, the importance of considering JTF-2's role within Canada's commitment to fighting new challenges to peace and security go beyond the unit's framework. JTF-2's

⁹ Burhans, Robert D. The First Special Service Force: A War History of The North Americans 1942-1944. 1st ed. Nashville. The Battery Press. 1947

¹⁰ Pugliese, David. Canada's Secret Commandos: The Unauthorized Story of Joint Task Force Two. Ottawa. Esprit de Corps. 2002.

¹¹ Pugliese, David. Canada's Secret Commandos: The Unauthorized Story of Joint Task Force Two. Ottawa. Esprit de Corps. 2002.

role as a rapid responding, unit capable of engaging enigmatic Al-Qaeda guerilla forces in Afghanistan is a testament to the versatility of this unit in facing unorthodox security threats.

A hallmark of Special Forces operations amongst western-democracies is joint training and JTF-2 shares strong ties with its American and British counterparts. Though a relatively young unit, it has been able to maintain an operational tempo similar to that of better established Special Forces groups such as the British SAS as was proven by their actions in Afghanistan. This success can be credited to a combination of a highly motivated and professional unit composition as well as the Canadian government's willingness to invest and expand the potential of this force as is reflected in the 2001 Federal budget¹².

A Changing Battlefield

The threats against the preservation of international security are not static and are constantly changing. The global community has gone from an era of polarized spheres of influence and clearly marked battlefields with the Cold War to a global community now grappling with battles rooted within non-state based vectors such as religion and ideology. Globalization and the increased economic, political, and technological interconnectedness that has been created amongst states has also developed new venues for the proliferation of global insecurity. The United Nations Report of the High-Level

¹² Government of Canada. Privy Council Office. 2004. < http://www.pco-bcp.gc.ca/default.asp?Language=E&Page=publications&Sub=natsecurnat&Doc=natsecurnat_e.htm#ch8>

Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change outlines six focal points regarding international security¹³. On top of traditional causes of instability such as inter-state conflict, and the threat of nuclear war, the report also discusses potent new challenges for international security such as international terrorism, and transnational organized crime¹⁴. As postulated by the High-Level report, force can be used by member states of the United Nations to respond to instances of global conflict under the provisions of the UN Charter. However the report goes on to point out a few shortcomings faced by the international community and the UN in using force within this capacity. First of all, the report states that the numbers of available peacekeepers are steadily decreasing and that the demand is exceeding the current supply. However, what this statement overlooks is the need for new forms of intervention within a failed state that traditional peacekeeping may not be able to properly address¹⁵. For example the basis for a successful peacekeeping operation depends on the permission of the state requiring assistance for the peacekeeping troops to enter its borders.

Furthermore, peacekeeping is based on a form of geo-political refereeing in which this neutral force enters a territory in order to facilitate peace processes or to ensure the end to communal violence within the state. However, within the changing scope of security as

¹³United Nations. Report of the High-level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change. 2004. <<http://www.un.org/secureworld/brochure.pdf>>

¹⁴ United Nations. Report of the High-level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change. 2004. <<http://www.un.org/secureworld/brochure.pdf>>

¹⁵ United Nations. Report of the High-level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change. 2004. <<http://www.un.org/secureworld/brochure.pdf>>

mentioned in the UN High Level report a traditional mediation minded approach found within peacekeeping may not be sufficient to address the deeper problems within a state. Problems such as deep ethnic divisions and an internal history marred with several preceding clashes based on cultural demarcations. The harsh reality of contemporary peacekeeping operations is that they cannot succeed unless the state itself desires a resolution to the conflict, regardless of the humanitarian cost inflicted on its civilian population.

Taking into account the Canadian government inspired Responsibility to Protect report in which an onus on the international community to respond to failed and failing states is articulated, another problem for the use of conventional UN peacekeeping forces surfaces¹⁶. A state that is on the verge of failure and is no longer capable of ensuring the basic humanitarian and security needs of its populace may find itself without one certifiable group taking control. Therefore when attempting to render assistance to a marginalized civilian population, sufficient intelligence and contacts would need to be established with said population in order to differentiate the aggressors from the non-combatants. Take Afghanistan for example, traditional peacekeeping would not have been capable of distinguishing Al-Qaeda and Taliban fighters from conventional Afghan forces due to the cultural disconnect that Canadian troops many have originally faced. Furthermore, conventional peacekeeping tactics and equipment are not conducive for the protracted small-unit combat seen in the mountains in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Large

¹⁶ Report of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty. 2001. <<http://www.responsibilitytoprotect.org/>>

unit formations supported by heavy machinery and a well established supply line, would not have been covert and flexible enough to engage the enemy within the harsh mountainous terrain found within Afghanistan. This however is the type of combat environment Canadian Special Forces personnel have fought in from World War two onwards.

The Road Ahead

If we look at a comparison of the 1st Special Service Force and JTF-2, a clear continuation and detraction of policy becomes evident. First of all the international cooperation espoused by members of the 1st SSF is carried through by JTF-2's partnerships with other Special Forces units for a common objective as was witnessed in Afghanistan. However, JTF-2 is in a position to offer more to the international community than its predecessor was capable of and this is a testament to an evolution in Canada's unconventional warfare strategy. World War 2 demanded that units such as the 1st SSF adopted unconventional warfare tactics as a means to challenge the enemy and to force them into vulnerable strategic positions. However when contemporary Special Forces troops are deployed it is because the job at hand can only be taken on by troops with their specialized training. Whereas Special Warfare had once been an optional tactic used to disrupt the operations of the adversary it is now in cases such as insurgencies and international terrorism a tactical necessity.

Joint Task Force-2 continues onward with the principles of inter-state cooperation set in motion by the 1st Special Service Force. However the unit goes beyond by working with

non-traditional allies such as Peru as well as a developing Afghanistan government. What this shows is that though the need to work closely with foreign countries continues to exist within the world of Canadian unconventional warfare, the scope of those countries has expanded through the efforts of JTF-2.

JTF-2 has the ability to deliver a uniquely Canadian response to the emerging problems of international terrorism and the insurgencies that arise out of failed states. This response is centralized along the lines of military force used as a means to fight for the base human rights Canada has long championed in both its foreign and domestic policy. Within an increasingly interconnected international system, JTF-2 is a unique policy tool at the disposal of the Canadian government to serve as both a rapid response to pending international crises, thereby addressing the issue of response time raised by the UN high-level report, but is also a unit capable of going beyond the traditional peacekeeping lines to face contemporary combat challenges. What this means is that as was mentioned previously, the scope of international threats is evolving to include fluid, non-traditionally structured agents such as international terrorism. Facing off against such an adversary using the methodology developed for peacekeeping operations involving clearly defined state groups will not allow Canadian efforts to pierce deeply into the issue at hand. Whereas Special Forces units such as JTF-2 have the ability to seamlessly integrate themselves within a foreign society and can establish a rapport with its populace that may become vital in targeting loosely banded groups of insurgents and rebels. Furthermore such unconventional warfare units can use this rapport with local citizens in order to help offer training and assistance.

Following the end of the Cold War and more pertinently after the events of September 11th 2001, military forces engage in the current war on terrorism have been challenged to undertake new and innovative approaches in dealing with their enemy. What the experience in Afghanistan has shown Canadian forces is that such a statement does hold merit as far as our current military experiences in that country have been. Canadian Special Forces are a unique wing of our government's policy arsenal that has been established through generations of experience and is now in a position to come into its own due to the emerging security threats identified by the United Nations.

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