

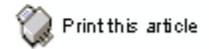
Are high casualties just our bad luck? Think again

The government should be expediting our military wish list to save Canadian lives

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What must be particularly galling to Canadian soldiers in Afghanistan is that their survival in recent months has depended less on whether they are good soldiers than on luck.

Fortune has always played a role on the battlefield. But in most wars, more noble elements have often played key roles in a soldier's odds of survival: intelligence, courage, toughness, training.

Sadly, these qualities have taken a back seat in Kandahar. Of the 26 Canadians killed in action there this year, 24 have died when their vehicles have detonated roadside improvised explosive devices. So many highly skilled warriors, so many victims of dumb luck. They were in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Of course, there is more useful way of looking at how Canadian troops are dying in Afghanistan: "Luck is the residue of design," as baseball sage Branch Rickey once said.

Between February, 2006, and August, 2007, the percentage of Canadians troops killed in action was 2.08, compared with 0.66 per cent for our British allies, 0.47 per cent for our U.S. allies and 0.31 per cent for our Dutch allies. Our rate is more than three times higher that of the British, four times that of the Americans and six times that of the Dutch. Yet these three countries are also operating in highly dangerous areas of Afghanistan. Are their soldiers luckier than ours? Or are they better equipped?

The government has said that it will do everything in its power to ensure that Canadian troops have the equipment they need in Afghanistan. To that end, 16 anti-IED armoured vehicles began being delivered to the Canadian Forces in Kandahar in September: six Husky vehicles (heavily armoured mine detectors), five Buffalos (for defusing, disabling or detonating) and five Cougars (for disposing).

Canada hasn't had access to these kinds of vehicles since 2006, when the North Atlantic Treaty Organization took over from the United States in leading the Afghanistan mission and the Americans began using their anti-IED vehicles for their own troops. So this is a good start.

One question, though: These vehicles weren't ordered until May. What took so long? Was the military slow in asking for them? Or was the government slow in approving the purchases? We have lost 24 soldiers to IEDs in 2007 whom we might not have lost had these vehicles been there.

The obvious reason Canadian troops are more vulnerable to IEDs is that they travel more often by road than do the troops of most of our allies, particularly those that have helicopters. Canada once owned a fleet of Chinook medium-to-heavy lift helicopters, but Brian Mulroney's government sold them to the Dutch in the early 1990s as a cost-saving measure.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper's government is supposedly negotiating to purchase some more Chinooks, but no contract has been announced, and if the normal delivery process is followed, they won't arrive until 2012. There is a designated pool of NATO helicopters, but they are in short supply in the Kandahar region, and the countries that own them take priority.

Canada has a fleet of 85 Griffon helicopters performing a variety of tasks in Canada. All these tasks are worthwhile, but none of them have the same urgency as saving lives in Afghanistan.

A Chinook helicopter can carry 33 to 50 troops, depending on configuration. A Griffon helicopter can carry only about five fully equipped soldiers - but it's the only alternative we have at the moment. What's wrong with sending six Griffons if 30 soldiers need to be moved?

The Griffons are also capable of providing intelligence and surveillance. They could keep an eye on the roads, for a start. Because they can be fitted with infrared systems, they could also be used at night.

Canada has been using SAGEM Sperwer tactical unmanned aerial vehicles to conduct reconnaissance. The Sperwers have been unreliable and difficult to operate in the wind, dust and heat of Afghanistan. They also tend to land hard on return, and repairs aren't always possible.

The government has been considering a bidding process to buy modern UAVs, such as the Global Hawk, a high-altitude long-endurance vehicle; the Predator, a medium-altitude long-endurance vehicle; or the Raptor, a high-altitude long-endurance vehicle.

Any of these would be a huge improvement over the Sperwers, but a bidding process won't get them to Afghanistan in the next two years. One thinks of a badly wounded man waiting for an ambulance in a country without health care. The ambulance finally arrives. "Wait," he whispers hoarsely. "I want to get two more bids."

The government should also consider bringing in the Aurora aircraft that it uses for surveillance on Canada's coasts. The Auroras have just been partially upgraded, and could be outfitted to play a valuable surveillance role in Afghanistan.

Whatever we do, we can't throw up our hands and wait for the perfect piece of equipment while our troops are being killed in ways we didn't anticipate. We need to move quickly to provide them with every bit of protection possible.

To quote Mr. Harper: "The men and women who put on the uniform of Canada must have the tools they need to protect themselves and do their job."

In Kandahar, our troops need every tool the government can give them. "Whatever it takes" should be the motto as long as we are there.