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April 27, 2003

Yesterday's army

Canada's military is underequipped and undermanned, but its real problem is that it's rapidly falling behind its largest ally's technological capabilities

By **DOUGLAS FISHER** -- Sun Ottawa Bureau



The debate over Canada's decision not to take part in the war against Iraq has focused almost exclusively on the possibilities of American economic retribution. Little has been said on the war's implications for our Armed Forces or defence policy. Yet both are likely to be severely challenged by it.

The war was a missed opportunity for our Armed Forces. It offered them a chance to see and participate in a military operation of unprecedented speed, complexity, precision, and power. Instead our warriors, but for a score or so, found themselves on the outside. This will seem of little import to many, but the United States is Canada's closest defence ally and the world's pre-eminent military force. For Canada's professionals at arms, not being there hurt.

Their segregation began weeks before the first missiles hit Baghdad when Canadians serving in Centcom's Florida headquarters were banned from meetings on coalition battle plans. Militaries operate on a "need to know" basis and the Canadians, not going to the war, did not need to know.

Their isolation from such councils will likely continue, but not because of American pique. (U.S. officers sympathize with their Canadian colleagues, and do not hold them responsible for their government's decision.) No, it's just that the American way of war is going through a revolution, and Canada's tiny, bankrupt military is in no position to join it.

Pentagon leaders believe the technologies their military has embraced over the past 20 years have endowed it with a unique capacity for rapid, devastating operations. Information gathered by a myriad of sensors, channeled through space-based communications, provide the U.S. commanders with real-time battlefield intelligence while reliable, precision guided munitions mean they can destroy enemy forces before they can engage U.S. forces. The result comes today in American operations which are potentially orders of magnitude more powerful than other similarly sized forces.

The triumph of relatively light American units over larger, heavier ones in Iraq is proof of this.

Some authorities -- notably military historian John Keegan -- caution against such judgments. (He argues the war "wasn't" because the Iraqi army did not prepare proper defensive positions in Baghdad, nor did it ever show a willingness to fight.) But for Canada's military and those who write our defence policy, what counts is that our principal ally believes a new way of war is upon us.



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If there's been a revolution in warfare, surely Canada is not alone in being caught out?

True. But just as Britain's introduction of the dreadnought battleship in 1906 made the world's war fleets obsolete, including Britain's world's largest, if the Pentagon is right, then all of America's allies, not just Canada, have a problem.

New technologies

Other nations began to acknowledge the technology gap years ago. France tried to rationalize its armament history, hoping the savings would go towards the new technologies, but with little success. Tory and Labour governments in Britain worked hard to close the gap. The U.K. now fields a new generation of precision guided munitions, and is bringing information technology into its forces' operations.

Canada seems uniquely ill positioned to respond. Our military is not just behind technologically, it is falling apart. New search-and-rescue helicopters face a serious shortage of spare parts, while 22 of 32 Hercules transport aircraft are grounded because of wing cracks. Sovereignty patrols over the Arctic are rarely flown, to save money. When HMCS Iroquois lost its helicopter, it had to sail to the Gulf without one. None of the other 40-year-old Sea Kings could be readied in time. (One is now being shipped to it, like an overgrown Purolator package.)

But the real challenge here is ignorance. Canadians see no real need for a fighting military, and their politicians prefer to talk of peacekeeping.

Might we see a change, post-Chretien?

Just before the war, Paul Martin's handlers spun publicly his take on defence. Understand this: Paul knows the problems; the U.S. must be mollified; Paul will act. But none of this multibillion nonsense pushed by outdated thinking. No!

Quickly deployed

Paul wants our military well equipped, but light enough to be quickly deployed overseas. Canada will get them there too -- no more lift-begging to the Americans. And our forces should have hard-hitting weapons like attack helicopters so they can be effective and protected.

But the bill for getting to there from here would take billions. Replacing most of our aging air transport: \$1.2 billion.

Enough attack helicopters to be worthwhile: \$1.2 billion.

New transport ships: \$100 million each.

Replacing the Sea Kings, which Chretien loves: \$3 billion plus.

And this leaves out the remotely piloted vehicles, night-vision equipment, satellite uplinks, heavy-lift helicopters, and the battlefield computers which made the war in Iraq possible. It also ignores one of the forces' most desperate needs -- more troops. When advisers to a future prime minister speak with such obvious ignorance on defence matters, is anything really likely to change? And why should the U.S., or anyone else, bother to listen?

Letters to the editor should be sent to editor@sunpub.com.

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