

A New Marine Commando Regiment

Dave Perry



Photo: MCpl Robert Bottrill, Canadian Forces Combat Camera

HMCS Ottawa's naval boarding party team practices weapon drills on the flight deck while sailing in the Arabian Gulf.

Of the various components of the leaked Canada First Defence Strategy and the subsequent series of articles by the *Ottawa Citizen's* David Pugliese, one item largely overlooked by the maritime community is the proposed creation of a 250-member Marine Commando Regiment (MCR) to be based in Comox, BC. As described by Pugliese, the MCR will be a special operations force (SOF) focusing entirely on maritime operations, with a primary mission of countering sea-based terrorist incidents, and responsibilities for non-combatant evacuation operations for Canadians in areas accessible by sea. Although the full details, to the extent they will ever be released, of the MCR await the long-overdue defence strategy, there is room to speculate about the role this new unit will play in the Canadian Forces (CF), and the challenges it will face. As with other aspects of Canadian SOF, the literature on this subject is slim, and

focused virtually exclusively on land-based capabilities. Accordingly, information on allied SOF, particularly in the maritime domain, will be used to speculate about the Canadian example.

Canadian Special Operations Forces

An expansion of SOF capabilities has been common in Western militaries post-9/11, and particularly following the decisive role of allied SOF and air power in the initial invasion of Afghanistan. The United States, for instance, has increased defence allocations for SOF units by 81% since 2001, Britain has called for increases in the strength of its special forces and investments in new equipment, and NATO is currently implementing a Special Operations Forces Transformation Initiative.¹ Canada too has seen significant attention focused on developing SOF capabilities since 2001. Two post-9/11 budgets



A member of HMCS *Regina*'s naval boarding party prepares to climb into a rigid-hull inflatable boat after a successful boarding of a suspect vessel in the Gulf of Oman during *Operation Apollo* in April 2003.

have allocated increased defence funding specifically for Canadian SOF. Budget 2001 increased the budget of Joint Task Force 2 (JTF2) by \$119 million with the goal of doubling its capacity, and more recently budget 2005 allocated an unspecified share of a \$2.75 billion increase for specialized facilities for the unit.²

Canada's SOF capability has furthermore been given significant policy direction, beginning with the 2005 International Policy Statement (IPS) which called for enhanced training capabilities, expanding the military's Joint Nuclear, Biological and Chemical Defence Company (JNBCDC), and enlarging JTF2 to increase its ability to undertake missions at home and abroad. The IPS also outlined the creation of a joint Special Operations Group encompassing JTF2, a Special Operation Aviation capability, the JNBCDC and supporting land and maritime forces.

Arguably the most significant development was the 1 February 2006 standing up of a new battalion-sized Canadian Special Operations Regiment (CSOR) and the creation of Canadian Special Operations Forces Command (CANSOFCOM) which encompasses all of the aforementioned components of the Canadian special operations community and, presumably, will soon include the MCR. In addition to generating SOF, CANSOFCOM can deploy domestically in support of Canada Command

(CANADACOM), and has assumed from JTF2 the responsibility for providing Canada's primary counter-terrorist response. CANSOFCOM can furthermore deploy outside the country, either in support of Canadian Expeditionary Forces Command (CEFCOM), or autonomously, conducting out-of-area operations ranging from small protection teams, to special operations task forces based upon a core of either the CSOR or JTF2.

Although JTF2 has deployed abroad in the past, CF operations in Kandahar since 2006 appear to include the most significant SOF mission to date, with the first operational deployment of the CSOR in support of JTF2 representing the first deployment of a Canadian SOF task force. As some authors describe the creation of Special Operations Command (SOCOM) in the United States as the 'coming of age' for American SOF,³ the creation of CANSOFCOM and its deployment to Afghanistan surely represents the coming of age for Canadian SOF. In this context, the creation of the marine commando regiment is one amongst a series of other changes to Canada's SOF, and follows previous policy direction by providing the supporting maritime forces called for in the International Policy Statement.

Why a Marine Commando Regiment?

Although a general assumption has been made that SOF capabilities are relevant, the creation of a new unit bears some examination, especially considering JTF2 currently has responsibility for both maritime counter-terrorism and non-combatant evacuation operations. While the creation of a maritime SOF unit in Canada might seem prescient given that our American allies have directed increased force levels for their Navy SEAL teams, SEALs are responsible for missions not yet envisaged for the MCR. In fact, it is most likely their extensive participation in direct action and special reconnaissance missions in Iraq and Afghanistan that is driving the desire for more maritime SOF in the United States. Although such an assumption may prove unfounded, given the clear tasking of the CSOR for direct action missions such as intelligence gathering and raids on enemy targets, it seems unlikely to this author that a new unit would be tasked with duplicating these direct action functions. Therefore, what is the requirement for a maritime counter-terrorist capability and evacuation response in Canada?

Measuring the probability of maritime terrorism is a complicated matter at best. While the potential for large-scale disruption exists, the same factors that warrant the creation of a maritime SOF, namely the challenges of operating at sea, simultaneously increase the difficulties involved in conducting a successful attack.

It is likely as a result of such complicating factors that seaborne incidents represent a mere two per cent of international terrorist attacks in the last 30 years.⁴ Nonetheless, as a maritime country Canada has multiple potential sea-based terrorist targets, and has been publicly targeted for attack by Al-Qaeda, the group behind the bombings of the USS *Cole* in 2000 and M/V *Limburg* in 2002. Furthermore, Al-Qaeda has previously counted a maritime-planner amongst its upper echelons, is reputed to possess a maritime fleet, and is known to target the type of infrastructure found in Canadian waters.⁵ These vulnerabilities include offshore oil platforms, commercial shipping, port facilities, cruise ships, and passenger ferries – the latter two having received specific mention by Rear-Admiral Roger Girouard when discussing the MCR's creation. Given these potential maritime targets, a special operations force dedicated to operating on the water appears to make sense, especially in the context of a new 'Canada First' defence focus.

According to a report by Business Research & Economic Advisors, cruise ships made 880 calls to Canadian ports, carrying over 1.5 million people in 2003.⁶ With the largest of these vessels carrying over 3,000 passengers, the potential for a terrorist incident that could cripple the cruise industry is very real. Similarly, with passenger ferries on either coast carrying over 1,000 travelers, there are multiple opportunities for mass-casualty terrorism in Canadian waters. While destroying a passenger ferry would be less dramatic than destroying a passenger aircraft, ferries lack a security regime comparable to the aviation industry and therefore present softer (and perhaps tempting) targets.

From an economic/strategic perspective, commercial ports and shipping as well as the oil and gas industry present several opportunities for disruption of economic activities on the water. Almost 450 million tonnes of shipping passes through Canadian ports, with 17 per cent moving oil and gas, upon which eastern Canada is highly dependent. Canada's offshore oil and gas industry produces billions in economic benefits annually, there are currently plans to create eight liquefied natural gas terminals at Canadian sites, and the country's largest oil refinery, slated to double in capacity, is serviced via tanker traffic off Saint John, NB. A terrorist attack on any part of this critical infrastructure could create significant economic hardship, and for this reason, the United States, Norway and the Netherlands have all moved in recent years to develop their maritime SOF capabilities. US Northern Command has increased the collaboration of its anti-terrorist 'Red Teams' with Homeland Security,



Photo: MCpl Frank Hudec, Canadian Forces Combat Camera

HMCS *Regina*'s naval boarding party makes its way to a suspect vessel in the Gulf of Oman.

and both Norway and the Netherlands have dedicated maritime SOF units with specialities regarding offshore oil platforms. For any of these scenarios, responding to a maritime-based terrorist threat would presumably require more than a basic ability to get in and out of boats, so following the example of our allies and dedicating one force to operating in and on the water seems prudent.

Our extensive experience in the Persian Gulf has demonstrated that the Canadian Navy has the ability to conduct boarding of vessels suspected of involvement in terrorist activities. To date, however, the navy does not conduct opposed boardings, so this may represent a key mission for the new MCR. Previous experiences, such as those with the successful boarding of GTS *Katie*, and JTF2's failed attempt to board a Spanish fishing trawler during the 1995 Turbot War, have demonstrated the need for an effective opposed boarding capability.⁷ Although the Department of National Defence (DND) has refined its contracting procedures since the *Katie* incident, Canadian Operational Support Command is reliant upon commercial options for strategic sealift, currently using ad hoc commercial shipping to support operations in Afghanistan until a contract for a full-time charter vessel is signed in the fall of 2007. While logistics officers are confident in the new contracting measures, maintaining an ability to protect vital CF equipment at sea seems prudent.

The MCR's secondary mission is non-combatant evacuation operations. The largest ever evacuation of Canadians – almost 15,000, from Lebanon in June 2006 – provided ample demonstration of the need for a maritime evacuation capability, so it is not surprising that the government would include such a role in the unit's proposed mandate. With the Lebanon extraction acknowledged to have been 'seat of the pants' by the Foreign Affairs official in charge, there is an obvious need for the development of a permanent capability.⁸ According to a report by the Asia Pacific Foundation, approximately 2.7 million Canadians live abroad; almost 650,000 in Asia, with over 200,000 in Hong Kong alone.⁹ This is one of the few re-

the government will come to the rescue in similar circumstances, it would be prudent for military leadership to explore this option. While we might not possess the ships to evacuate our people, there is still a need for on-the-ground special operations forces which can quietly slip into the war-torn state, establish communications between the embassy, the port and the embarking ship, coordinate the evacuees, and protect them while they go aboard. In this respect the MCR could fulfill a role similar to that of the American Marine Corps in evacuation operations.

Unresolved Issues

Despite a demonstrated need for such an organization in the roles outlined above, several issues remain unresolved. The first consideration is the associated costs involved with creating such a unit. SOF units are exceedingly expensive, in terms of equipment, personnel and training budgets. Such a unit would presumably require an equivalent of the MK-VIII SEAL Delivery Vehicle and Mark V Special Operations Craft, and it has been estimated that a US Navy SEAL takes three years to train at a cost of over \$800,000 for the first year of training alone.¹¹ With an estimated initial force of 250, where these funds would come from is a mystery, given CF-wide funding challenges and the looming replacement of the maritime fleet. Such resource scarcity might well lead to opposition from those who would view the unit as a drain on future funding. In this author's opinion, while such opinions are understandable, a desire to move Canada's maritime forces into the new security environment should take precedence.



Photo: MCpl Frank Hudec, Canadian Forces Combat Camera

Master Seaman Samir Saeed, a naval reservist from Victoria, BC, is an Arabic translator with HMCS Regina's naval boarding party in the Gulf of Oman.

ports on the subject and the numbers are debatable. Little work has been done to determine the exact number of Canadians living overseas and, as the Lebanon situation demonstrated, once the scope is expanded to "Canadian Entitled Persons," the numbers increase significantly.

While responsibility for extracting Canadians from potential hotspots is the purview of the Department of Foreign Affairs, a recent report by the Standing Senate Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Trade recommended that for large-scale evacuations like Lebanon 2006, DND and the Canadian Forces should coordinate and lead the government's evacuation effort.¹⁰ Canada lacks the ability to remove such persons on naval vessels and under current policy will not explore an amphibious capability until 2010 at the earliest. The navy nevertheless seems the logical choice to lead such missions. Given the high degree of public support for the operation in Lebanon, and public expectations that

Ultimately, however, the unit's location may not be driven by military utility.

A second consideration is where the unit would be located. Basing the MCR at JTF2's current, landlocked base at Dwyer Hill outside of Ottawa makes little sense. But with JTF2 slated to move to CFB Trenton on the shores of Lake Ontario, access to maritime training facilities in a central location would not be out of the question. However, given the need to conduct operations at sea, a base on the coast seems more reasonable. Presumably, fiscal restraints allow for the creation of only one base, and placing it in British Columbia will give Canada SOF capability in the region for the 2010 Vancouver Olympics.

A BC base makes more or less sense, however, depending upon the primary focus of the unit. If its proposed counter-terrorist mission is driven primarily by shipping considerations, the West Coast has the highest volume of both commercial shipping and cruise visits. However, if



Sailors or Marines? Members of HMCS Winnipeg's naval boarding party receive orders on the ship's deck prior to operations in the Gulf of Oman.

protecting critical infrastructure is more important, the East Coast would seem a more appropriate choice, as it hosts Canada's offshore oil and gas industry, largest refinery, and the majority of proposed liquid natural gas terminals. In terms of evacuation operations, the large Canadian diaspora in Asia makes a base on the West Coast advantageous, but the possibility of an amphibious capability located at CFB Shearwater would warrant location on the East Coast. Regardless of what coast ultimately receives the base, there surely remains a requirement for a similar capability on the other coast, given the flight times involved in responding. Ultimately, however, the unit's location may not be driven by military utility. Politically, the choice of Comox may well represent a face-saving means of partially fulfilling a Conservative Party campaign pledge to boost the military's presence in BC.

A third issue is how the creation of the unit will fit into CANSOFCOM and the Canadian Forces as a whole. While the unit would presumably reside within CANSOFCOM, rather than the navy, this remains to be fully resolved. If it is attached to CANSOFCOM, its relationship with other units will need clarifying, given JTF2's current responsibility for both counter-terrorism and evacuation operations. Through its Maritime Section, JTF2 is the current lead for counter-terrorist activities involving merchant ships, port facilities and offshore oil platforms, and was given the evacuation mission by the International Policy Statement. This has likely contributed, at least in part, to speculation that the unit might simply be staffed by the maritime component of JTF2. There would seem to be overlap as well with the newly

formed CSOR, as its commander has envisioned an amphibious beach assault capability and maritime counter-terrorism role.

Part of the answer might lie in applying a tiered differentiation to CANSOFCOM units. Thus, JTF2 could remain Canada's Tier One unit – i.e., capable of the full range of SOF functions – and the CSOR and MCR could function as Tier Two supporting organizations. The MCR might function as the supporting maritime forces envisioned in the IPS, rather than replicating all SOF functions in a maritime context, akin to the US Navy SEALs. Given the overall size of the CF, however, there seems little room for such duplication of effort, due to both cost and personnel deficiencies. It might, therefore, make sense to give greater emphasis to the unit's role in evacuation operations, which was only recently assigned to JTF2, and assign the unit a supporting role in maritime counter-terrorism.

Finally, and most importantly, is the problem of finding enough exceptionally fit, and well-trained CF members to staff the regiment. Having recently been forced to scale back the planned force expansion, the CF personnel situation is murky at best, and the navy in particular seems hard-pressed to retain its current strength. In June 2006, Rear-Admiral Girouard described a unit comprised of naval personnel, and the most logical sailors would be the members of naval boarding parties who already possess many of the desired skills. Given the proposed size of the unit, however, such a move would seriously affect the navy's ability to deploy standard boarding teams. Restricting the unit to naval members would furthermore



A new Canadian naval requirement? A group of SEALs take up positions after securing the beach during an amphibious landing exercise.

set it apart from both JTF2 and the CSOR which recruit from all three environments. Opening the ranks to all CF members would allow a greater potential pool, but with JTF2 and the CSOR both expanding, one wonders how the new unit would be able to recruit the needed talent. Alternately, the MCR might simply steal some, or all, of JTF2's maritime counter-terrorism personnel, but this would pose coordination challenges. Any of these options must ultimately fit into a rapidly expanding CANSOFCOM, which currently encompasses just under 1,000 personnel, and is slated to expand to 2,300 personnel by the end of the decade.

A brief examination of the American SOF community reveals that finding adequate personnel will likely prove troublesome, no matter what route is followed. To expand to its current two per cent of the American military, SOCOM was forced to offer significant retention bonuses, and adopt a controversial direct entry program.¹² The slated further expansion of SOCOM has caused great unease that it will dilute the SOF talent pool and create unhealthy competition, both between SOF units and between SOCOM and the conventional military for the best officers and NCOs. In Canada, the planned expansion of CANSOFCOM to 2,300 by 2010, would have made it relatively the same size, had the CF not already failed in its goal of expanding to 100,000 regular and reserve forces.

With naval SOF in particular, however, there seems to be even greater difficulty in attracting people. US Naval Special Warfare Command represents roughly 1.6% of the US Navy, while the proposed MCR would require almost 2.6% of the already understaffed Canadian Navy. These numbers might seem insignificant, but since 2001 the SEALs have failed to meet their authorized enlistment levels, while trying simultaneously to expand beyond present strength.¹³ Finding the requisite numbers within the Canadian Navy seems implausible, and it remains to be seen how even the entire Canadian Forces could generate 250 highly capable marine commandos, as the other components of CANSOFCOM expand.

Despite the challenges its creation will pose, a Marine Commando Regiment could arguably represent a significant positive development for Canada's maritime forces. We need both a maritime counter-terrorist force and evacuation capability, and a unit dedicated to the maritime environment would be prudent. So too would following the lead of the CSOR, and making the unit a public face of Canada's maritime SOF, rather than employing the stringent secrecy surrounding JTF2. With the navy in search of an image that will resonate with the public, a unit responsible for both protecting Canadians from a tangible threat at home, and rescuing them abroad might be it. Devoting real resources, in terms of personnel and finances to a marine commando unit's creation would serve the long-term interests of Canada's maritime forces. 🍷

Notes

1. United States, Department of Defense. *2006 Quadrennial Defense Review*, 6 February 2006, available at <http://www.defenselink.mil/qdr/report/Report20060203.pdf>; United Kingdom, Ministry of Defence. "Delivering Security in a Changing World: Future Capabilities," July 2004, p. 7, available at http://www.mod.uk/NR/rdonlyres/147C7A19-8554-4DAE-9F88-6FBAD2D973F9/0/cm6269_future_capabilities.pdf; and General James L. Jones, "Blueprint for Change: Transforming NATO Special Operations," *Joint Force Quarterly*, Issue 45 (2007), available at http://www.ndu.edu/inss/Press/jfq_pages/editions/i45/11.pdf.
2. Canada, Department of Finance, "Enhancing Security for Canadians," Budget 2001, 10 December 2001, available at <http://www.fin.gc.ca/budget01/bp/bpch5e.htm> Canada; Canada, Department of Finance, "Meeting our Global Responsibilities," Budget 2005, 23 February 2005, available at <http://www.fin.gc.ca/budget05/bp/bptoce.htm>.
3. Bernd Horn, "Avenging Angels," in Colonel Bernd Horn and Major Tony Balasevicius (eds), *Casting Light on the Shadows: Canadian Perspectives on Special Operations* (Kingston: Canadian Defence Academy Press, 2007), p. 168.
4. Michael D. Greenberg, et al, *Maritime Terrorism: Risk and Liability* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Center for Terrorism Risk Management Policy, 2006), p. 9.
5. *Ibid.*
6. Business Research & Economic Advisors. *The Contribution of the International Cruise Industry to the Canadian Economy in 2003*. Prepared for North West Cruise Ship Association, Vancouver Port Authority and St. Lawrence Cruise Association, October 2004, available at http://www.nwcruiseship.org/downloads/site1/Whole_BREA_Study_new_Footnotes.pdf.
7. David Pugliese, *Canadian's Secret Commandos* (Ottawa: Esprit de Corps Books, 2002), p. 48.
8. Richard Belliveau, presentation to the 2007 Maritime Security Conference, Dalhousie University, Halifax, June 2007.
9. Kenny Zhang, "Recognizing the Canadian Diaspora," Canada Asia Commentary Number 41, Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada, March 2006, available at <http://www.asiapacific.ca/analysis/pubs/pdfs/commentary/cac41.pdf>.
10. The Standing Senate Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Trade, "The Evacuation of Canadians from Lebanon in July 2006: Implications for the Government of Canada," May 2007, available at <http://www.parl.gc.ca/39/1/parlbus/commbus/senate/com-e/fore-e/rep-e/rep12may07-e.htm>.
11. Tony Balasevicius, "Finding the Right Stuff," in Horn and Balasevicius (eds), *Casting Light on the Shadows*, p. 37.
12. J. Paul de B. Taillon, "The Evolving Requirements of Future Canadian Special Operations Forces," in Horn and Balasevicius (eds), *Casting Light on the Shadows*, pp. 266-7.
13. Louis Hansen, "Navy SEALs Get a Tough Mission: Recruitment," *The Virginian-Pilot*, 7 May 2007.

Dave Perry is currently examining Canadian defence policy and the use of private military services. He is the Assistant Director of the Centre for Foreign Policy Studies at Dalhousie University.