

Canada may take on large share of Libya mission

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National Post
March. 20, 2011

The Canadian pilots about to do battle with Muammar Gaddafi are facing a Libyan enemy with out-dated weaponry and an already battered air-defence system.

The sometimes hair-raising experience from a similar mission 12 years ago in Kosovo, however, suggests those CF-18 aces could shoulder a disproportionate share of the mission's burden, be forced to dodge still-effective anti-aircraft fire and face the grim possibility of accidental civilian casualties, one of the pilots who flew over the Balkans said Sunday.

If the Canadians are ordered to strike at Col. Gaddafi's ground forces, collateral damage is almost inevitable, suggested Billie Flynn, commander of one of the CF-18 squadrons that fought in Kosovo.

"Flying an airplane and dropping a bomb from 20,000 feet can seem a lot like a video game," said the retired lieutenant colonel. "(But) at some point, you realize there are some serious consequences to what you're doing.... The Canadians at Kosovo had extensive experience with that. We were responsible for our share of civilian casualties, as well-trained as we were, as disciplined as pilots try to be."

As in Kosovo, military lawyers will probably screen all possible targets to lessen civilian deaths and try to ensure international law is obeyed, said Bob Bergen, a research fellow with Calgary's Canadian Defence and Foreign Affairs Institute.

The six Canadian fighter jets that have taken up position at a base in Italy, along with about 140 pilots and crew, should be entering the operation "within 48 hours," Peter MacKay, the defence minister, said Sunday.

It is unknown exactly what role the aging CF-18s will play, but analysts say they are capable of both confronting Libyan aircraft that flout the UN-authorized no-fly zone and hitting ground targets to protect civilians against Col. Gaddafi's forces.

It is all reminiscent of NATO's 1999 operation to end Serbian ethnic cleansing in Kosovo, the Canadian air force's last combat mission. Flying the same CF-18s, those earlier, under-equipped pilots had neither night-vision goggles nor encrypted radio communication, and actually had to buy bombs from the Americans when their supplies ran out days into the conflict, said Mr. Bergen.

Yet with just 2% of the alliance's air force there, Canada ended up leading 10% of the missions, recalled Mr. Flynn, now a test pilot for Lockheed Martin.

"We were given our chance early on and the American commanders found out how good the Canadians were and then we accepted more responsibility," he said. "In the end, we led half the missions we flew in: we planned them, we commanded them. I'm speaking about mass attack forces of airplanes, with Canadians in charge."

As in Libya, the NATO planes squared off against an adversary with less-sophisticated military technology, whose defences were pummelled early on. Yet even as the Serbians' command-and-control system fell apart, they were still able to throw up fighter jets and other weapons, recalled Mr. Flynn, who is married to Julie Payette, the Canadian astronaut.

"You can imagine how spectacular it is to see tracer bullets from anti-aircraft fire being shot at you or being around when somebody is shooting surface-to-air missiles," he said. "There is nothing in peace time that will get you ready for going into combat. That level of intensity is a magnitude more stressful."

At the time, the 1980s-vintage CF-18s were on their "very last legs," said Mr. Flynn, who now test pilots the controversial F-35 fighters Canada is poised to buy. The CF-18s have been modernized recently, though, and should do fine in Libya, he said.

Canadian personnel excelled in Kosovo despite lacking leading-edge equipment, but their exploits have largely gone unheralded, said Mr. Bergen. The National Defence Department refused to let media interview or even mention pilots' names because of an unwarranted fear their family members could be harassed, and for years the military itself failed to offer anything more than a standard peacekeeping medal to the crews, he said.

"The pilots all got a raw deal in terms of their contribution," said Mr. Bergen. "They were bitter and twisted but they couldn't complain about it."

Despite that history, though, the Canadian pilots and ground crew entering the latest conflict are undoubtedly relishing the fight ahead, said Paul Manson, a retired air force general and chief of the defence staff in the late 1980s.

"Nothing has changed since World War One, World War Two," he said. "The fighter pilots are very carefully trained and they look forward to an opportunity to show they have learned their skills well."