

Canadian navy divers in Afghanistan's Desert? Bet on it

When one thinks of the Canadian Forces slogging through the desert in Afghanistan, Canadian navy divers don't immediately spring to mind.

In fact, however, navy clearance divers from both Canada's east and west coasts are taking part in one of the great-untold stories of the Afghan mission.

Their demolition expertise makes them critical in countering the threat posed by homemade improvised explosive devices or IED's which are killing Canadian troops three times as fast as their allies.

The statistics are grim: up to 30 of the 71 Canadian soldiers killed in Afghanistan have died from IEDS and roadside bombs.

The Forces don't have Canadian helicopters at their disposal, which makes them particularly vulnerable to IEDs as they move from place to place outside the safety of the main base at Kandahar airfield.

Last year, from February to August, when the IED fatalities started to become particularly bleak, of the 16 Canadian demolition experts in Afghanistan, seven – or nearly half – were navy divers. Of them, three were from Joint Task Force Pacific on the west coast based at Esquimalt, B.C., and four were from Task Force Atlantic on the east coast based at Halifax, N.S.

The importance of countering the IED threat is deemed so great that the Forces announced in May that it will spend about \$29.6 million on heavy new detection and route clearing systems – the Husky, the Buffalo and the Cougar – the first of which arrived in Kanadar last month.

Four teams of them are expected to be fully operational by the end of 2007.

In the meantime and for the foreseeable future, the highly-specialized demolition experts will continue doing their work – disabling or blowing up IEDs – the old-fashioned way.

All Canadian Forces demolition squads undergo the same basic training whether they be infantry or engineers.

For the navy divers – obviously trained further to do their work underwater – that meant they had to acquire a whole new set of skills so that they could work with their army counterparts.

The divers, for example, had no training in driving or crew commanding the Bison troop carriers in which they travel.

They now are all channeled through the Canadian Maneuver Training Centre at Camp Wainwright, Alberta, for that training.

Operating in convoys was all new to them, as well, in addition to working in tandem with infantry who cordon off areas where IEDs or roadside bombs are suspected.

Lt.-Cmdr. Roland Leyte, director of Maritime Policy, Operations and Readiness at National Defence Headquarters, explained when navy teams first arrived in Kandahar in 2006, the army didn't have a set of Standard Operating Procedures for working with them.

Now, he said, it is a weekly – if not daily – occurrence when, after the army cordons off an area, the navy IED teams deploy from their Bisons with one or two robots which are able to inspect suspicious devices and transmit video images back to the team members.

At that point, decisions are made to blast the devices with water cannon, use hook and lever mechanisms to render them safe, pull them apart or simply blow them up.

The IED teams also specialize in reconstructing IEDs which have already detonated. The aim is to learn how they were put together, what they were made of and how they were set off to better counter them in the future.

In Afghanistan, Lt.-Cmdr. Leyte said he has seen everything from simple pressure plate triggering mechanisms to high-tech radio devices.

The insurgents in Iraq have even more sophisticated IEDS and one thing is certain, he said: "Sooner or later, we'll see some of in Afghanistan."

"Professionally, it was very interesting – suicide bombs, car bombs – you see it in training, but you have to see it first hand.

"Everything I trained to do, I got to do in Afghanistan. But, there was no diving."

Not unexpectedly and like the rest of the Canadian Forces, on Canada's west coast, Lt. (N) Serge Vidalis, acting commander of the Fleet Diving Unit, said the navy's dive teams are stretched thin

by the Afghanistan mission.

Joint Task Force Pacific has a core of 40 divers and, in all of Canada, there are just 120.

Lt. Vidalis explains the navy has been sending its divers to the war on terror since Operation Apollo in 2001 and to Afghanistan since 2002.

"We've got one guy there right now and we have three people preparing to go in the new year.

Along with our other mandates and missions, we're a busy group of guys," he said.

The Canadian navy has long been known as the silent service.

You can expect that to change in the very near future in the same way the army changed its warm and fuzzy "there's no life like it" image with its "Fight fear. Fight distress. Fight chaos" ad campaign.

With its unheralded divers slogging it out in Afghanistan's desert as but one example, it is about high time.

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