

Canadian tank squadrons' success in Afghanistan goes untold

You don't see, hear or read much about them, but Canada's new Leopard 2A6M tanks thundered into Canadian history recently when one crew destroyed a Taliban mortar detachment in Afghanistan with a 120-mm HEAT round.

The HEAT round is a High-Explosive Anti-Tank round which is a shaped-inverted cone that causes a chemical reaction when it hits its target, turning its surface into molten metal which is propelled inside by shear kinetic energy with devastating results.

Only Canada and Denmark have used the new tanks in combat and it was the first time Canadians with C Squadron of the Edmonton-based Lord Strathcona's Horse (Royal Canadians) have opened up on an enemy position with its devastating new firepower.

The tanks also figured prominently in combat that forced the Taliban to retreat from the Arghandab District in late October after it launched a major offensive north of Kanadahaar to seize the weapons cache of a former warlord.

There are many variants of the Leopard 2A6 tank and the Internet is awash with articles referring to as the world's most powerful tank, thanks to its 120-mm smooth-bore gun which is more powerful than that of the American Abrams' M1A2.

The "M" in the Canadian variant stands for its mine protection package that affords much greater protection than the 30-year-old Leopard C2s some of the Canadians are still using in Afghanistan. Still, in many ways, the 17 Leopards the Canadians first sent to Afghanistan in the fall of 2006 also made history, too, because it was the first time since the Korean War that Canadian tanks were sent to an active war zone.

They entered the field on December 2 and the very next day fired the first shots with their 105-mm high-pressure gun when insurgents launched a rocket attack.

The government announced in April this year that the old Leopards would be replaced with 20 Leopard 2A6Ms that would be borrowed from Germany and that Canada would buy up to 100 more of them from the Netherlands.

At the time, it was thought that the new tanks were needed both for the better protection they offered and for the air conditioning found on some variants to better deal with the 60 C heat in the Afghan desert.

The variant the Canadians have is not air-conditioned. Maj. Trevor Cadieu, second in command of the Lord Strathcona's who has served in Afghanistan, said it was found that cooling suits worn by the tanks' four-man crews were sufficient to deal with the desert heat.

"It's night and day. They didn't require air conditioning," he said.

"The key thing is the new tank has a 120-mm gun which has an even longer range than the previous tank, more armor protection and mine-blast protection," explains the Strathcona's commanding officer Lt.-Col. Pascal Demers.

"I did get information about one person who had the misfortune of commanding an old tank that hit an improvised explosive device (IED) and, six weeks later, he hit a second IED which was much bigger in the new tank. Had it been a LAV III there would have been many injuries."

"In terms of confidence in the equipment, it gives the infantry a certain amount of comfort. If the enemy wants to mix it up, they are happy to have that extra firepower and protection."

"And, the firepower is instantaneous – as opposed to air power or artillery – which can take a few minutes. There is nothing quite like firing right away."

There is another background story here and that is the lessons learned by the many soldiers who have already served in Afghanistan have been invaluable in the training those who follow.

The 1st Battalion Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry, the 1 Combat Engineers and others have constructed sophisticated ranges at Camp Wainwright that includes Bedouin camps, tiered compounds, mosques, markets villages, grape fields and grape drying huts mirroring those Canadians training there now will face overseas.

In that regard, history teaches us what was old is new again.

During the First World War, in March 1917, Sir Julian Byng directed the creation of a full-scale replica of Vimy Ridge over which Canadians repeatedly and realistically rehearsed their roles prior to one of the most decisive battles in Canadian history.

Tanks were there then but they did not play a major role like they do now in Afghanistan. Why Canadians aren't seeing, hearing or reading the news about the Strathcona's, their tanks and their successes is not diabolical; rather, it is unfortunate. Canadian journalists can embed with infantry units because they can travel with them in their LAV III's. It is not possible for journalists to embed with tank squadrons; the only people who can fit inside a tank are its four-crew members. As a result, the full story of the Strathcona's, their regular force and reserve counterparts, and their tanks will be told one day. Unfortunately, for Canadians trying to understand the war in Afghanistan now, it will more likely be told by historians than contemporary journalists.

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