

Once beleaguered Canadian submarines now a potent international force

They run silent and they run deep.

But, the problem with Canadian submarines being largely out-of-sight, out-of-mind and overshadowed by the army in Afghanistan is that Canadians can't connect with the notion that Canada's submarines have emerged as a potent force on the international stage.

Unfortunately, to date, the biggest news story involving Canada's four diesel-electric Victoria Class submarines – taken over from the United Kingdom in a 1998 eight-year lease-to-buy agreement – was the October 2004 fire aboard HMCS Chicoutimi while in transit from Britain, killing one Canadian submariner and injuring nine others.

There is good reason why the lethal fire received the negative news coverage: a fire is one of the absolute worst things that could ever happen aboard a submarine and it did.

But, coupled with the mostly-unfair criticism they received for being acquired second-hand from the British who launched them between 1990 and 1992, many likened them to used-car lemons. The British mothballed them in 1994 and 1995 in favor of nuclear submarines and there were numerous technical problems bringing them back into service for the transit between Britain and Canada, let alone their retrofitting for Mark-48 torpedoes and Canadian communications and sonar equipment.

But, seeing HMCS Victoria, formerly HMS Unseen, in dry dock in Esquimalt, B.C., while it was in retrofit in May 2004 was a little overwhelming for this prairie resident who had only seen diagrams and pictures of them.

No one picture captures the breath-taking size of the nearly seven-storey tall Leviathans, let alone their three-quarters-the-size-of-a-football-field length.

They look fearsome sitting still.

Now it has emerged in FrontLine Defence magazine and the newly-relaunched navy magazine Crowsnest, HMCS Victoria and Windsor have logged 268 days at sea, traveled some 32,450 nautical miles and participated in 27 exercises since resuming operations in May 2005 after the investigation into the HMCS Chicoutimi fire.

The articles were written by military personnel for largely other military personnel in military-speak which can cause otherwise interested civilians' eyes to glaze over.

But, Cmdr. Luc Cassivi was able to put in laymen's language exactly what the submarines typically do when they go on exercise.

Cmdr. Cassivi who has commanded three of the submarines – HMCS Victoria, Corner Brook and Windsor – is the currently the navy's Commander Submarine Division.

He explained the exercises' first priority is always to train their own submariners in living and working in the cramped quarters at sea, usually for 10 days to two weeks at a time.

When working with allies such as the United States, an exercise would typically include two to three frigates, a destroyer and sometimes a fuel tanker. The Canadian submarines often act as enemies.

In that way, American sailors learn what a submarine looks like on their sonar or what a periscope looks like at night from afar while the Canadians learn how to approach and acquire high-value targets.

As allies, the submariners learn how to provide covert surveillance for large surface fleets such as the USS Enterprise carrier strike group, which HMCS Windsor did in the spring of 2006.

Full-spectrum operations means the Canadian submariners have also been developing doctrine and procedures for the clandestine delivery of small specialist teams such as Army Pathfinders teams from the forces Advanced Warfare Centre at night against land objectives.

For example, when the specialists leave the submarine either by a zodiac deployed from the sub or by swimming, it submerges and leaves, but it must return at night, find them while the sub remains submerged and recover them.

The submarines also track ships known to Canada's three maritime security operations centres and other government agencies as environmental offenders or dangerous cargo carriers.

As recently as August 7 to 17, HMCS Corner Brook took part in the Operation Nanook 07 sovereignty exercise near Iqaluit around the Baffin Island and the Hudson Strait areas in the far north.

If more Canadians knew about these vital, yet dangerous missions and roles, they might have a better understanding of Canada's maritime interests which include national security, enforcing national and international laws for the oceans, self-defence and sovereignty assertion.

One key conduit for passing that knowledge along is the news media but in that regard, the navy faces the same challenges as the air force and certain army elements.

While it is possible to embed reporters with LAV III crews in Afghanistan, it is not possible to embed a reporter in a Leopard tank or in a one-seat CF-18.

With a crew of 48, there just isn't that much room on board a submarine and, for the vast majority of time, the objective has to be training the submariners, not accommodating journalists.

As a result, the sad truth is that it's the fire aboard the HMCS Chicoutimi that Canadians know about, not the Canadian submarines' silent emergence as a potent force on the international stage.

More is the pity.

Bob Bergen, Ph.D., is a Research Fellow with the Canadian Defence & Foreign Affairs Institute (CDFAI) in Calgary. The opinions expressed in this document are those of the author and not necessarily those of CDFAI, its Board of Directors, Advisory Council, Fellows or Donors. Bergen's column appears bi-weekly. Learn more about the CDFAI and its research on the Internet at www.cdfai.org