



Now, it's the Van Doos' turn to carry the load

But sending Quebec-based troops to Afghanistan carries extra political risk

May 12, 2007

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CFB WAINWRIGHT, ALTA.—"Ils sont motivé et prêt pour l'Afghanistan. Les vingt-deux ont hâte, nous avons hâte, et c'est maintenant notre tour."

That's the message from Maj. François Caron, commander of A Company of the 1st Battalion, Royal 22e Régiment: His troops are ready and eager to take their place on the front lines in Kandahar.

To press his point, he repeats it in English.

"It's our turn," Caron says. "They are motivated and ready."

But it's the "mots de français," heard in the back of the armoured vehicles, in the mess tent, in the barked orders, that tell the real story of the upcoming mission.

More than 2,000 Quebec-based troops have come to this sprawling military base for final drills before their summer deployment to southern Afghanistan,

It will mark the first time Quebec soldiers have gone to the dangerous region as a battle group.

Like pro hockey players itching for their turns in a playoff game, it hasn't been easy for these professional warriors to sit on the sidelines while troops from Edmonton, Petawawa and Gagetown, N.B., served their tours – and took their casualties.

The troops are keen. But the bigger question is whether Ottawa is ready for the casualties and the political fallout that could come after the six-month deployment of the Quebec contingent.

"It's dicey," military historian Jack Granatstein says.

At the heart of the deployment are close to 1,000 soldiers from the 1st, 2nd and 3rd Battalions of the Royal 22e Régiment, the famed "Van Doos." They'll be joined by a battery of artillery, engineers, an armoured reconnaissance unit, a service battalion, field ambulance – 2,500 troops in all. Of the total, 2,171 come from CFB Valcartier, just north of Quebec City.

It marks the biggest deployment yet of Quebec-based soldiers to Afghanistan, although some 200 of them are over there now, many of them Van Doos providing security for the provincial reconstruction team. As well, troops from the 5e Régiment Artillerie Légère du Canada, also based at CFB Valcartier, operate the unmanned aerial reconnaissance vehicles that serve as the eyes in the skies over Kandahar.

But the upcoming deployment promises to truly bring the front lines of Afghanistan home to Quebec, where support for the war is lower than in any other region of the country. Some say it could bring political consequences too, if casualties are steep, and Quebecers turn even further against Canada's presence in the troubled nation.

"It seems to me there are two possibilities: One is public opinion collapses; the other is that it might in effect rally around our brave (troops). I certainly hope it's the latter," Granatstein says.

That it is now CFB Valcartier's turn to deploy to Kandahar is just "luck of the draw," he says.

But it's not so lucky for the Conservatives who may be left coping with the fallout of an already divisive mission in a possible election over the coming year.

"I think there's political impact on all this. Heavy casualties in Afghanistan for Van Doos could have a major impact on an election, could have a major impact on deciding whether to have an election," Granatstein says.

He says a senior officer even confided to him that it would be folly for the government to consider going to the polls when the Van Doos and other Quebec troops are serving their tour. Still, he notes also that the upcoming deployment, with a contingent of Quebec media in tow, could put a spotlight on the mission within Quebec and boost approval of the mission.

"They will perform very well and, I dearly hope, stir some pride in the province in their soldiers and come through with colours flying," Granatstein says. "But we don't know how it will play."

Frank Graves, president of EKOS Research, agrees that the upcoming deployment is politically risky.

"Anything which focuses more attention on this in Quebec is problematic for the government because it's already the place that is leading opposition and consistently offside ... on issues about Afghanistan," Graves says.

However, he says public support for Canada's role in Afghanistan relies on more than just casualties.

"Casualties are not the main driver of the opposition to the mission. It hinges on the issue whether the mission can obtain the objectives that ... Quebecers support."

But Liberal MP Denis Coderre (Bourassa), the party's defence critic, downplays talk that the Quebec deployment is any different from the ones that have gone before.

"A human life, anglophone, francophone, from Gagetown or, I hope not, from Quebec City and from any other places ... is a tragedy – it doesn't matter where you come from," Coderre says.

Talk about the politics of the mission doesn't weigh on Caron or his soldiers, who are focused on their final preparations for a mission that for many will be the highlight of their career.

Standing on a windswept hill, only the bone-chilling wind belies the fantasy being played out here this month – that this patch of rolling Alberta turf is southern Afghanistan.

This elaborate exercise is no easy test, as troops endure daily mock bomb attacks and ambushes as they conduct patrols, do re-supply convoys and visit the mock "Afghan" villages built here like some movie set, complete with real Afghans playing the role of local citizens.

Their training for the mission started in earnest last October with refreshers on shooting, first aid, sessions on handling combat stress, lessons in the laws of war and rules of engagement.

The troops were drilled in mountain and cave operations, night manoeuvres and long-range patrols during a month of training at Fort Bliss, Texas, in February. After that, commanders had their decision-making skills put to the test in tabletop exercises.

Now, until the end of May, they're putting all pieces together in Exercise Maple Guardian.

For the troops of A Company, it means getting a taste of the hardships they're likely to experience stationed at a forward operating base – living in tents, eating rations and enduring harassing attacks from fellow Canadian soldiers who play the part of "insurgents."

"It's close to reality, not far from the reality that we're going to experience out there in theatre – except for the cold today," says Caron, who has done tours in Haiti and Bosnia.

Caron appreciates the chance to make mistakes here before his troops encounter insurgents who fire real bullets.

"It's very important. ... it's a matter of saving lives and bringing everyone back home. The better you get in training, the better you get when you're out there fighting and working for real," he says. "The guys are getting good at it."

Still, he does concede that last month's tragedies – when eight soldiers were killed in two separate bomb attacks – do spark sober reflections about the job they're about to take on.

"Families are scared and it's normal. It's not the kind of mission we used to have back in Haiti where we were patrolling and nothing was going on," Caron says.

"Guys are scared but the guys are well-trained and well-prepared for this mission. If something happens, we'll be able to deal with it."

That view is echoed by his troops, who chat during a break in their patrols.

"You won't be human if you don't stop and stress a bit and be scared," says Cpl. Maxime Richard, 23. "But we have a job to do."

"We take it as though it's bad luck, wrong place at the wrong time," says Cpl. William Comeau, 23, of Quebec City, of the deaths that have occurred so far.

Richard says that having Quebec soldiers in the media spotlight may already be boosting flagging support for the mission and the military in the province.

"They are opening up their minds that we're not just a bunch of killers," he says.

Pte. Martin Theriault, 23, adds the thought that the military hopes sticks with the Quebec population: "That we're actually helping people."

Still, Cpl. Jonathan Nolin's heavy medical bag is a sombre reminder of the dangers that lie ahead. It's loaded with tourniquets, emergency field dressings, plastic airways and other gear. And as a medic, Nolin, 32, has undergone hours of training in battlefield first aid.

He belongs to the 5e Ambulance du Campagne – the field ambulance unit at CFB Valcartier. It is deploying 83 personnel in all, from doctors to physician's assistants to medics, like Nolin, who will be with soldiers in the field.

"Some of them are scared, especially the older ones because they are more aware of the dangers," says Maj. Jocelyn Dodaro, of Montreal, a doctor leading the medical group.

"But they know it's also a chance to save a life, and not just a soldier's life but the life of an Afghan also," Dodaro says.

He dampens talk that his soldiers are carrying the weight of Quebec opinion.

"They have a pride to serve Canada but they also have a pride in their unit. But they're serving first as Canadians."

At CFB Valcartier, the reception so far from the local community for the deployment has been encouraging, even unprecedented, says base spokesperson Capt. Eric Chamberland. Radio stations have been calling to interview soldiers. Area businesses have been offering support.

"This is actually very different from what we're used to in Quebec. Quebec has never been, if you go back through history, very supportive of missions like this," Chamberland says.

But he knows the true test is yet to come.

"When the reality hits that we have casualties, we're going to see how people react. That's where it's going to be hard for everybody," he says.

Does he fear that casualties might cost public support in the mission?

"That's the beauty of our work. That's not our problem. Our problem is to make sure troops are ready, that our families have everything they need to live through this, that our soldiers have the best tools," Chamberland says.

"It's our work. It's like a firefighter. We don't pick the fires we go to. But we need people to support us."