

# Dispelling Myths of the Afghan Conflict

After recently returning to Canada, Brigadier-General Denis W. Thompson, the former NATO Commander for all deployed forces in Kandahar Province, is taking his message about Canada's achievements over there to Canadians during a cross-Canada speaking tour. Using straight-talk and showing an unapologetic pride in the Canadian troops who have been sent to the front lines of one of Afghanistan's most troubled regions, BGen Thompson talks bluntly about the misperceptions that some have about our mission in that nation.

The former Taliban government fell in late 2001, the result of an international military action arising from sheltering and supporting Al-Qaeda terrorists after the 9/11 attacks. Since that time, Canada's military involvement in Afghanistan has grown to some 2,800 people. The mission is composed of an infantry battle group

(numbering approximately 1,200); a provincial reconstruction team (250); an operational mentor & liaison team (210); an air wing (355); a field hospital (170); a national support element (430); an intelligence cell (85); and a military police company (100).

Added to this, are 65 civilian personnel from the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, the Canadian International Development Agency, civilian police, and Correctional Services, making it an integrated operation.

The Canadian area of responsibility has four principal security challenges, explains BGen Thompson.

First and foremost, is the Pashtun-led Taliban insurgency. The porous Afghanistan-Pakistan border also presents many problems. A third is the widespread corruption and crime that is centered on the narcotics trade, making it difficult to gain headway. And fourth, the fledgling national govern-

ment is beset with its own corruption and security problems that complicate all attempts to provide good governance to this unstable country.

On their side, the Taliban are intent on ridding Afghanistan of the foreigners and reestablishing their version of traditional rule throughout the country. Their abilities have grown, particularly since 2006, says BGen Thompson, making it a different conflict since its inception.

Some Canadians are uneasy about our mission in Afghanistan and have openly wondered if it is achievable, if it is worth the human, material and social price-tags the conflict carries, in both Canada and Afghanistan. We are one of 39 nations engaged in a country that has been fighting for decades, and we are one of 51 nations committed to the 2006 Afghanistan Compact, a comprehensive international aid program to support security, governance and development.

BGen Thompson's remarks speak to what he calls the four myths of the Afghan conflict that have grown since our initial deployment. The first myth says that we are in a downward spiral and the situation is desperate. However, he contradicts that assessment, saying the Afghan people's perceptions about security are lowered in response to changes in Taliban strategy, and that the general population recognizes the

*Discussing the battle to retake the Arghandab in June 2008 (from left): Task Force Sergeant-Major, CWO Christopher White; Bodyguard; BGen Thompson, Commander Task Force Kandahar; and Capt Scott MacGreggor, acting Commander of C Company (2 PPCLI).*







PHOTO: CPL JEAN-FRANCOIS NERON, COMBAT CAMERA

*May 2008 – The Kandahar Provincial Reconstruction Team provides security and works alongside locally-hired Afghan workers on the Foster Road pavement project in the Panjwayi district.*

authority of the regional and national leadership. He says support for the Taliban is down to between 10 to 15%.

From the beginning of the conflict to 2006, Taliban insurgents tried to command the terrain which they occupied, a task that proved to be beyond their capabilities. But in 2006, they began a series of bold acts of increased violence and intimidation, such as suicide bombings and a campaign of improvised explosive devices.

These tactics may have increased people's attention about security issues, but it did not increase their support.

BGen Thompson suggests that the allied forces should replicate the situation the Canadians have developed in Kandahar throughout the region. But this would take more troops, "more boots on the ground," which is happening with the arrival of 17,000 more American troops.

The second myth is that the Taliban are exerting shadow governance. As allied troops pull back to their bases and operating areas, it has been suggested that the Taliban move back in and re-impose their own governance over the population. What the Taliban are actually doing, according to Thompson, is applying brutality through

a "travelling hanging judge." While fair governance delivers some level of public service, the Taliban delivers only brutality.

The third myth is that air strikes are indiscriminate – yet there has not been a single civilian casualty in the Canadian AOR, the second largest ordnance area in Afghanistan, next to Helmand. The most effective way to dispel this myth is to have the NATO commander brief indigenous and visiting media each time an attack takes place. Media will thus be equipped to convey this information to the general Afghan and international populations, forcing our adversaries to react.

The final misperception is that everyone returning from Afghanistan is a psychological wreck, suffering post trauma stress disorder (PTSD). On the contrary, BGen Thompson contends that Canadians have a process in which they support each other. "We have developed a system that allows us to wrap our arms around those who need it." Also, many do not understand that PTSD is not a black and white issue, and that there are degrees of PTSD.

### **Addressing the Challenges**

Moving forward, BGen Thompson sees a clear, four-step pathway to addressing the challenges of the Afghanistan mission.

First, there is a largely U.S. chain of command, with U.S. Army General John Craddock as NATO's Supreme Allied Commander Europe, General David H. Petraeus as Commander Central Command, and the force commander General David D. McKiernan, who is responsible for an international force. The national contingents working within the force operate as national entities, but in Thompson's opinion, the staffs should be merged.

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Summer 2008 – BGen Thompson briefs the Commander of the Afghan National Army, Gen Bismillah Khan, in the presence of his Afghan counterpart, BGen Beshir.

Second, is the need to continue to work with the Afghan National Army (ANA). Canada's objective is to bring the ANA to capability level one, where they are able to conduct independent operations.

Third, is the need to accelerate the professionalization of the Afghan National Police (ANP). Kandahar province has 1,000 professionalized police, but according to BGen Thompson's assessment, it needs another 3,000.

And finally, tangible development and improvements must continue to raise the quality of life for Afghans. As an aside, Thompson points out that the Canadian Forces in Afghanistan employs some 600 Afghan males of fighting age on some worthwhile projects.

An impressive indication of improvement in the acceptance of the Canadian military in Kandahar is the increase in significant acts of trust. It is estimated that some 80 percent of the improvised explosive devices that local residents find are brought to the military.

However, the role that Afghanistan plays in the world drug trade has to be recognized. Helmand province produces 50 percent of the world's opium.

The challenge for the future in the Canadian area of responsibility in Kandahar province will evolve around the continuation of allied work around the three themes: *reconstruction and development*, coordinated by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA); *governance* coordinated by the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (DFAIT); and *Security*, coordinated by Canada's military.

The security environment includes the problems presented by the Pakistan-Afghanistan border, which has proved to be virtually impossible to seal, but equally important is the need to train members of the Afghanistan National Police, and accelerate their professional training. Canada, along with other members of the international community, contributes to the *Law and Order Trust Fund*, which funds the ANP.

Another aspect of the mission that has proven problematic for many to understand is that there will be no clear-cut military victory for NATO forces in Afghanistan, as there was at the conclusion of both world wars and the Korean conflict.

In an insurgency, however, the aim is for the military to marginalize the insurgent forces so they are sidelined and forced to join the political process, a process the Taliban cannot do at the point of an AK-47. "We are getting more and more right," says BGen Thompson.

If the Taliban recognize that their only realistic recourse is to join the political process and have members stand for election to promote their ideology and beliefs, then they will draw political support from the electorate in proportion to the popular support they receive.

We all hope that at the end of the day, the Taliban will want to rejoin Afghan society, contribute to the development of the nation and draw equally from the community's benefits. ■

Recently retired after 35 years in the Canadian Forces, Tim Dunne is currently an Advisor, Military Affairs, for Nova Scotia Intergovernmental Affairs.

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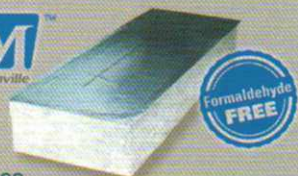
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