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Does Canada Require a Special Boat Service?**

Lieutenant-Commander Andrew Castelli

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MARITIME SPECIAL OPERATIONS: DOES CANADA REQUIRE A SPECIAL BOAT SERVICE?

AIM

1. The Canadian Special Operation Forces Command's (CANSOFCOM) mission is "To provide the Government of Canada with agile, high-readiness Special Operations Forces capable of conducting operations in defence of Canada both domestically and abroad."¹ Within this mission statement, Joint Task Force 2 (JTF 2) is the unit responsible for maritime special operations and would lead a response to a maritime counterterrorism incident within the Canadian Economic Exclusive Zone (EEZ) or a Canadian maritime special operation abroad. This service paper will explore the ever changing and challenging maritime environment, the need to develop domestic and expeditionary maritime special operations, and finally, provide recommendations.

INTRODUCTION

2. Canada has a lengthy history of maritime endeavours. With one of the longest coastlines and its proximity to three oceans, Canada's maritime tradition, international security commitments, and rights to the ocean have all contributed to a vast EEZ and potential claim to a portion of the continental shelf. But more than that, Canada is a maritime nation due to its dependence on what happens in the ocean--directly or indirectly--in order to trade and survive. Events at sea have an immediate impact on Canadian's lives.² This fact highlights the obvious need to protect our security and interests.

3. The Government of Canada is asking its armed forces to safeguard Canada and help guard North America, as well as promote international harmony and protection. Our aim in this modern, interconnected world is to recognize our special role in upholding the national interest in our new maritime era by "defending the global system at sea and from the sea, both at home and abroad."³ It is clear that Canada needs a modern, powerful navy to protect its shipping lanes. But Harpoon missiles aren't the answer to every challenge on the high seas. Some situations require more subtle solutions, which can only be provided by a top-notch Royal Canadian Navy (RCN), backed up by a team of highly trained Special Boat Service (SBS) personnel.

4. Changes to the maritime environment are happening quickly and the release of Canada's Indo-Pacific strategy shows why Canada must possess the right skills and

¹ *Beyond the Horizon: A Strategy for Canada's Special Operations Forces in an Evolving Security Environment* (Ottawa: National Defence = Défense nationale, 2020).

² *Canada in a New Maritime World LEADMARK 2050* (Ottawa, ON, CA: National Defence, 2016).

³ *Canada in a New Maritime World LEADMARK 2050*.

capabilities. The Indo-Pacific region is essential for preserving global stability, and it's also home to a number of security concerns that could have far-reaching effects. Canada's strategy specifically mentions China's efforts to expand its influence in the area. China has developed its offensive and technological capacities, which have gotten the attention of other countries.⁴ If Canada wants to support peace, resilience, and security in the Indo-Pacific region, it's critical for Canada's Special Forces Command to be prepared for maritime special operations there.

DISCUSSION

Challenges of Maritime Special Operations

5. At the outset, we must understand what maritime special operations are and the difficulties that arise from them. Maritime special operations execute missions in areas like the coastline, riverways, and ocean waters. They utilize small, mobile teams that can manoeuvre both in and on the ocean. These activities have to have the key elements of subtlety, velocity, and accuracy. Types of operations include infiltration and removal by sea, covert beach scouting in preparation for seaborne attacks, route scouting for similar operations, coastal surveillance, ambushes and attacks near coastlines, salvaging of vessels and installations at sea, and maritime counterterrorism.⁵

6. The nature of maritime special operations presents several obstacles that make them complex and difficult. These include environmental conditions such as temperature, salinity, depth, currents, waves and visibility must all be considered when executing a mission in the water. In addition, the weather can make it even more challenging with wind, rain, fog and storms all playing a role. Operational issues are much more complicated; planning and executing a mission with speed and accuracy requires top-notch coordination between naval and air force personnel. Moreover, they have to be able to adjust course when facing shifting scenarios such as enemy movements or unexpected events. Technological requirements are a factor as well; specific vehicles, weapons, drones, sensors and communication devices must all be in top condition and regularly updated for maximum effectiveness. Lastly, the personnel must meet high physical and mental standards through intense training and selection processes. With that comes the need for discipline and team spirit to succeed.

⁴ *Canada's Indo-Pacific Strategy* (Ottawa, ON Canada: Government of Canada = Gouvernement du Canada, 2022).

⁵ *AJP-3.5 — Allied Joint Doctrine for Special Operations.Pdf* (NORTH ATLANTIC TREATY ORGANIZATION, 2019).

Current Capabilities – An Estimate

7. CANSOFCOM does not make public the sizes of its units or the exact specifications of its equipment. This service paper will depend upon information obtained from open sources only.

8. As a starting point, in June 2010, MGen Day (Retired) was interviewed by David Pugliese about maritime counterterrorism (MCT) within CANSOFCOM and JTF 2. The conversation revealed that JTF 2 had a troop dedicated to boat operations and the unit even developed a designated Special Operations Coxswain job intended for the rigid hull inflatable boat fleet. MGen Day also said that in order to manage MCT domestically, CANSOFCOM must collaborate with the RCN. He noted that there were no plans to create an expeditionary maritime SOF capability or for CANSOFCOM's MCT abilities to be spun into a separate organization within the command. However, RAdm (retired) Girouard (former CANFLTPAC) sounded a different tone and implied that future naval threats could necessitate a re-think for JTF 2's MCT capabilities to be transferred into a separate specialized organization within the command.⁶

9. Research of special operations forces in the western world uncovered two possible maritime capabilities that may be adopted by JTF 2 for its maritime operations. MetalCraft Marine Inc. created a 9m Special Operations Craft (SOC)⁷ for CANSOFCOM, affording JTF 2 the capacity to intercept and engage high value targets (HVTs) within Canada's EEZ at high speed. As it stands, we can assume that the Assaulters within JTF 2 are skilled in Close Quarters Battle (CQB), fast roping from 427 Special Operations Aviation Squadron (SOAS) and diving operations among other skills. It is uncertain whether the SOCs can be hoisted onto an RCN Halifax-Class Frigate or Harry DeWolf-Class offshore patrol vessel to preposition equipment to extend their reach. Moreover, it is unknown whether these SOCs can be parachuted out the back of a C-130J Hercules. Lastly, the Dräger LAR 5000 rebreather⁸ is possibly the unit JTF 2 combat divers call upon. This oxygen-based system will limit depth and range of operations. As such, it is highly unlikely combat divers utilize a diver propulsion vehicle (DPV) as it would likely be a waste of capability given the constraints of the LAR 5000 rebreather. Combat diving within JTF 2 is likely linked to covert insertion for maritime Special Reconnaissance (SR), Direct Action (DA), or MCT missions all in the domestic sense. These capabilities strongly suggest that CANSOFCOM has not increased their capacity to the expeditionary maritime domain.

⁶ David Pugliese, 'Canada's Special Operations Forces Command Faces Challenges of Maritime Counterterrorism', 2010.

⁷ '9M SOC MetalCraft Marine Inc Flyer' (MetalCraft Marine Inc, n.d.), <http://metalcraftmarine.com/html/rib.html>.

⁸ 'Dräger LAR 5000' (Dräger, n.d.), https://www.draeger.com/en_me/Products/LAR-5000.

10. It is also extremely useful to investigate the capability resident within the RCN as maritime special operations must be heavily supported by navy assets. Ever since it began in 2014, the Naval Tactical Operations Group (NTOG) has been aiding RCN vessels and personnel across the globe. This is a full-time dedicated unit based in Esquimalt, with an additional detachment located in Halifax. Their primary responsibilities include maritime interdiction operations, which is the interception of ships suspected of transporting contraband, as well as force protection, which involves safeguarding RCN ships, infrastructure and personnel all over the world. When NTOG is deployed on a mission, they augment the crew of a naval vessel, enhancing their capacity to conduct maritime interdiction operations with a higher than usual risk and providing more extensive force protection in high-security areas like during transit or when visiting ports. This unit reports directly to Commander Canadian Fleet Pacific.⁹

11. Canada's RCN Clearance Divers are trained to take part in a wide variety of underwater activities. This includes the use of common scuba diving equipment, portable surface diving gear, commercial-grade mixed gas surfaces and rebreathers, plus fixed and moveable hyperbaric chambers. The two diving units consist of clearance divers and port inspection divers, who complete core tasks such as battle damage repair, maritime explosive disposal, mine countermeasures, etc. Other activities related to these core operations include improvised explosive device disposal and submarine search and rescue. Diving support roles include underwater ship and infrastructure maintenance, salvaging, seabed search, demolitions, medical support in hyperbaric chambers, JTF2 support and operating the Experimental Diving Unit at DRDC Toronto for research related to CAF dive tasks.¹⁰

12. Combining these capabilities, it can be deduced that CANSOFCOM fills its domestic MCT mandate with unknown or very little reliance on the RCN, with some reliance on the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) 427 SOAS for possible insertion onto HVTs at sea. It can also be deduced that the RCN has competent NTOG and Clearance Divers but not at the level required of a Tier 1 unit to conduct MCT, SR, and Hostage Rescue Operations (HRO) in the expeditionary maritime special operations domain.

Future Capabilities – An Estimate

13. A thorough investigation of the Capability Investment Database (CID) on the Defence Wide Area Network (DWAN) has yielded the Next Generation SOF Maritime Capability Project.¹¹ This project is costed at \$53M and is due to reach Implementation in 2028 with Project Close-Out in 2031. The planned deliverables can be described as “the

⁹ ‘Naval Tactical Operations Group’ (Government of Canada, n.d.), <https://www.canada.ca/en/navy/corporate/fleet-units/specialized-units/ntog.html>.

¹⁰ ‘RCN Clearance Divers’ (Wikipedia, n.d.), https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Canadian_Armed_Forces_Divers.

¹¹ ‘Next Generation Maritime Mobility Project’, n.d., https://cid-bic.forces.mil.ca/Cid/project-home_e.asp.

project will procure a modern maritime craft incorporating the prescribed equipment and weapons load, mobility, survivability of the crew and craft and sustainment inherently required in the execution of maritime special operations.”¹² Given the cost and the description, this project is very likely just a replacement project for the 9m SOC built by MetalCraft Marine Inc.

14. Searching through CANSOFCOM’s strategic documents does not yield much either from a maritime special operations point of view. However, in the *Future Operating Environment*, it does state “[...] SOF to more frequently Act in the maritime special operations role against peer and near-peer adversaries that develop littoral A2AD capabilities and in the MCT role against pirates and terrorist groups operating within congested shipping routes.”¹³ Strangely enough, this likely future did not inform the command to invest in this area as stated in the *Future Operating Concept*. More specifically, “The results informed Command as to the following major investment areas: Intelligence, Cyber, Communications, and Info Sharing, Stealth, Air Power, Force Development and Personnel Policies.”¹⁴ These major investment areas have nothing to do with maritime special operations against peer and near-peer adversaries with littoral A2AD capabilities. The likely impact is that when the *Future Integrating Concept* is released, it will not mention any integration with the RCN’s future fleet. Lastly, it can be suggested that this approach is at odds with Canada’s Indo-Pacific Strategy and will likely continue to be a challenge in the future.

A Possible Future Operating Concept

15. To meet the demands of the maritime special operations environment, CANSOFCOM should invest in the following roles for a potential SBS unit:

- a. MCT – Not only should MCT operations cover domestic needs in territorial waters, but they should also provide the Canadian government with maritime abilities abroad. This would include rescuing personnel on cruise ships, oil rigs, and ferries, as well as Non-Combatant Evacuation Operations (NEO) in non-permissive scenarios;
- b. Drug Interdiction – These procedures will allow operators to approach and board drug-running vessels in any area of the world linked to Canadian interests;

¹² ‘Next Generation Maritime Mobility Project’.

¹³ *Future Operating Environment* (CANSOFCOM, 2017).

¹⁴ *Future Operating Concept* (CANSOFCOM, 2019).

- c. Anti-Shipping Tasks – This entails sabotaging ships and harbour structures in enemy territory, infilling via ships, submarines, helicopters, or parachute drops;
- d. Shore Reconnaissance – This involves surveying beaches before amphibious landings or infiltrating coastlines for strategic targeting by assets; and
- e. Covert Special Warfare – This entails stirring up unrest or revolution among hostiles countries, diffusing dangerous situations (like national leaders) or discreetly training foreign fighters.¹⁵

16. To meet the demands of these potential SBS roles, CANSOFCOM would need to invest in the following skills for an SBS Operator:

- a. Combat Diving – An expert level of underwater performance is required for missions like Submarine Infiltration, Underwater Reconnaissance, Shore Reconnaissance, and Underwater Demolitions;
- b. Close Quarters Battle (CQB) – To be successful in tasks like Room Entry and Clearing and Weapons Handling, proficiency in MCT, HRO, and Direct Action (DA) is a must;
- c. Parachuting – Maritime mobility does not always mean infiltration by sea, above or below. SBS Operators must be proficient in High Altitude Low Opening (HALO), High Altitude High Opening (HAHO), and Wet Jumping which entails parachuting Operators and equipment (like SOCs) into the sea. Lastly, fast-roping is an essential skill of the SBS Operator as it is very likely the method of transport to assault a ship or oil platform;
- d. Concealment – After infiltration into coastal targets, SBS Operators might need to conduct SR for long time periods, so the ability to hide from sight is crucial; and
- e. Arctic Warfare – For survival and combat under Arctic Ocean conditions, SBS Operators must be able to survive and fight in the harsh environment.¹⁶

¹⁵ ‘Roles Of The SBS - The UK’s Naval Special Operations Unit’, n.d., <https://www.eliteukforces.info/special-boat-service/roles/>.

¹⁶ ‘SBS Skills & Techniques’, n.d., <https://www.eliteukforces.info/special-boat-service/skills/>.

CONCLUSION

17. The establishment of a maritime-focused unit within CANSOFCOM to execute special operations, such as infiltration, reconnaissance, and counter-terrorism, would require the employment of highly-trained personnel, specialized gear, and specialized vessels. This unit would need to work in conjunction with other CANSOFCOM divisions and RCN formations. There may be drawbacks to this plan such as augmenting complexity to the military structure and budget, potentially duplicating existing capabilities or units within CANSOFCOM or RCN, or facing political resistance or disapproval for expanding Canada's special forces role. Nevertheless, Canada cannot overlook the security threats in the maritime zone that could put us and our allies in jeopardy. The advantages of this unit could be an improved capacity to carry out maritime special operations in a variety of scenarios, greater interoperability with like-minded countries - such as the UK's SBS or the US's Naval Special Warfare Development Group (DEVGRU) - and additional options for Canada's national security strategy and foreign policy.

RECOMMENDATIONS

18. The following proposals are submitted for analysis and deliberation:
- a. CANSOFCOM has been approved to grow by over 600 personnel.¹⁷ The Command could devote half of those spots for the creation of an SBS unit;
 - b. To avoid duplication of effort with the RCN, the NTOG and Clearance Divers on both coasts should be amalgamated into the new SBS unit. This would enable a credible starting point to grow the unit initially but would mean the SBS unit would be forever linked with the RCN to cover off those mandates;
 - c. The gear and personnel in JTF 2 should be redistributed to either coast and CFB Trenton. It is suggested that the CO and HQ of the SBS unit be situated in Trenton along with CJIRU, and two squadrons created; one placed in Halifax and the other in Esquimalt. These squadrons will liaise with the RCN formations on each coast; and
 - d. A Request for Assistance (RFA) should be sent to the United Kingdom Special Forces (UKSF) to form a liaison team from the SBS in Poole to help construct the SBS unit in Canada. The mandate will determine functions which will shape skills and techniques to form capability and

¹⁷ *Strong Secure Engaged: Canada's Defence Policy* (Ottawa, ON, CA: National Defence, 2017).

force development. The liaison team will also help bring SBS Operators up to a Tier 1 standards through development of selection, courses, training, and TTPs.

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