

JTF2: Canada's super-secret commandos

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If truth is one of the first casualties of war, secrecy is one of war's first exigencies. There is no better instance of this than Canada's elite commando unit, which is so secretive Canadian authorities are hesitant even to refer to it as an elite commando unit.



But the United States is well aware of Canada's Joint Task Force 2 (JTF2). The U.S. was impressed by JTF2's performance in Afghanistan and has requested more of the same for any campaign in Iraq.

JTF2 consists of volunteers from three branches of the Canadian Armed Forces. JTF2 began in 1993 when it took over counter-terrorist duties from the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. Its numbers are said to be about 350. Its Canadian base is Dwyer Hill Training Centre in Ottawa's rural west end.

JTF2 works with a budget of \$25 million, though Defence Minister John McCallum hopes to increase this. The average age of a JTF2 commando is 28, considerably more experienced than fresh-faced recruits. As Canadians, JTF2 soldiers are acknowledged to be specialists in cold-weather fighting, having done extensive training in the Canadian Arctic.

This is Canada's special force, our elite fighters. They are selected and trained as rigorously as any elite force in the world, which includes Britain's Special Air Service (SAS) and, in the United States, the Green Berets, Rangers and Delta Force. The requirements of the U.S. super-elite Delta Force probably also apply to Britain's SAS and Canada's JTF2, which means a quarter of those who volunteer – and these are top soldiers – are routinely washed out. Of those who go on, one in 10 makes it to the elite unit.

These are the units deployed to trouble spots to act with stealth and deadly force. They are trained to rope down from helicopters, live off the land for months, break a combatant's hip with a kick to the upper femur. They are expected to play a vital role in any campaign in Iraq, especially in street battles in Baghdad.

Much of what we know of the value of JTF2 comes from U.S. sources.

We learned just before Christmas that JTF2 was part of a seven-nation operation called Task Force K-Bar during the

campaign in Afghanistan. Task Force K-Bar took part in 42 reconnaissance and surveillance missions, as well as what U.S. military authorities call "direct action" operations. JTF2 soldiers were part of commando operations that killed at least 115 Taliban and al-Qaeda fighters and captured 107 senior Taliban leaders over a six-month period.

JTF2 commandos led a mountain climb in Afghanistan to reach a high-altitude observation post. The Canadians also entered caves looking for enemy forces and intelligence. One of their missions, called Operation Anaconda, took place last March when JTF2 soldiers stationed themselves high in the Afghanistan mountains to feed information to army units on the ground.

The Canadians worked with U.S. Navy commandos and elite forces from Australia. U.S. Navy Commander Kerry Metz, director of operations for Task Force K-Bar, praised the work of the "foreign" commandos to members of Congress.

"We were fortunate to have the finest special operators from a coalition of seven nations," Metz said. "We challenged our operators to conduct missions in some of the most hostile environments ever operated in. For example, we had special reconnaissance teams operating in the mountains of Afghanistan above 10,000 feet for extended periods without resupply."

Before this, the only direct reference to the work of JTF2 in Afghanistan was the embarrassing photograph of JTF2 soldiers escorting captured al-Qaeda prisoners on a tarmac. It resulted in a parliamentary uproar and an investigation into why then-defence minister Art Eggleton did not immediately inform Prime Minister Jean Chrétien that JTF2 had been involved in taking prisoners in Afghanistan.



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Scott Taylor, publisher of *Esprit de Corps* magazine has said JTF2 is as good as the American Delta Force and Britain's SAS. It is believed JTF2 was on the ground for a time in Kosovo, finding important targets and using lasers to guide military aircraft and smart bombs toward them.

When Conservative MP David Price told the House of Commons that JTF2 was on the ground in the Kosovo campaign, the government heatedly denied it – but with covert operations, this is the requisite government response. To do otherwise would be to risk JTF2 lives. JTF2 almost certainly was deployed to Quebec City in April 2001 as back-

up during the violent protests during the hemispheric trade talks.

As for its role in Afghanistan, Taylor of *Esprit de Corps* said, "This is exactly the role for them. These guys would go in. They would be a special covert operation. They would just simply be putting their lives on the line. Every one of these guys, they joined for that purpose...."

David Rudd, with the Canadian Institute of Strategic Studies, told CBC News the soldiers of JTF2 are not trained to take and hold ground. "What they do is infiltrate into dangerous areas behind enemy lines, look for key targets and take them out. They don't go out to arrest people. They don't go out there to hand out food parcels. They go out to kill targets."

In any urban warfare in Iraq, one of the prime vehicles could be the UH-60 Black Hawk helicopter, each of which costs \$6 million. The Black Hawk carries 11 equipped troops and a crew of four, two of which operate "miniguns" that can fire 4,000 rounds a minute. These helicopters bring Special Ops soldiers to a target, where the soldiers slide down ropes to the battle.

Worth noting, however, as we head toward what feels like an inevitable conflict in Iraq and the streets of Baghdad, is that even elite forces sometimes aren't up to the task. As documented in the book *Black Hawk Down* by Mark Bowden (and the movie of the same name), the U.S. Rangers and Delta Force were deployed to Somalia in the early 1990s to kill or capture Habr Gibr clan leaders, especially warlord Mohammed Farrah Aidid.

The elite unit came with heavily armed, troop-carrying Black Hawk helicopters and the speedy, bubble-topped AH-6 attack choppers known as Little Birds. Eighteen U.S. soldiers were killed, along with nearly 1,000 Somalis. This was the ugly street battle remembered by the ghastly photograph of a Black Hawk crew member dragged on his back, naked and dead, through the streets of Mogadishu.

The elite soldiers knew where Aidid was hiding – the city, the street, the building – but they were never able to get him.