

# Combat SAR

## The Next Wave?

Canada has not possessed any capability for Combat Search and Rescue since the end of the Second World War when Canadian squadrons participated in the rescue of many downed allied airmen, however, this may have to change – and very soon.

With the new Defence Policy Statement and its companion statement on International Policy, the Canadian government could well be forced to put Combat Search and Rescue (CSAR) units to protect Canadian air crew, as well as the lives of the aircrew of our allies, back into the inventory of Canadian Air Force tasks.

Although it may be argued by some to be an unnecessary action, and that such activities might best be left to our allies, any Canadian government would be hard pressed to explain to its citizens that it was willing to sustain the loss of personnel when a modest investment in aircraft, equipment and personnel could have easily achieved the requirement.

As members of the USAF's CSAR units will tell you: "You can always get another airplane quickly, but the loss of an experienced, combat-savvy aircrew takes years to replace." The same can be said for two platoons of Canadian infantry and the Joint Task Force subunit that were forced to land in enemy territory. It is a strong position that is hard to argue against when we are acutely aware that we cannot easily afford to lose these units under any circumstances.

The original concept of an armed Search and Rescue team had been necessitated by the ditching of combat aircraft in the littoral waters of Europe and North Africa and the threat of attack by enemy forces during World War II. It was impossible, until the arrival of the helicopter, to rescue aircrew that had parachuted or crashed on enemy territory.

Despite the *Geneva Conventions*, many Air-Sea rescue amphibian aircraft were

shot down by the opposing side to deny the enemy the return of their valuable aircrew and to dampen the hopes of aircrew about their likelihood of survival. In order to protect the aircrew conducting search and rescue operations as well as the downed aircrew, fighters were often dispatched to patrol near the recovery area to provide air cover against forces that sought to interfere.

Finding yourself in enemy territory was a different matter altogether. Instead of waiting for rescue, you were taught to get away from the crash scene as fast as possible. You must then escape the geographical area and evade both military and civilian forces with only general instructions on potential sources of assistance and refuge. Once safely under the protection of the underground, you would hopefully be brought by resistance fighters to a clandestine airfield for a night time recovery by a light aircraft after they had made contact with Allied Forces.

This technique was abandoned after the arrival of the military purpose built helicopter. Aircrew were still taught to escape and evade but they were now to be rescued by aircraft that were armed, and escorted by aircraft that were prepared to fight enemy ground troops for the downed aircrew. The rescue unit still required the assistance of fighters but the ability of the helicopter to repel lightly armed ground troops saved the lives of many downed aircrew. The techniques, tactics and practices that evolved from the ground combat in Korea were readily picked up and refined by the combat in Vietnam and subsequent conflicts. Other nations also developed similar tactics and capabilities which have been successfully employed in operational theatres.

Today, CSAR squadrons are often thought of as "Special Forces" units that are skilled in both infiltration and exfiltration of hostile enemy territory. Their

equipment allows them to use the night to shield their rescue operations by getting to the area quickly using passive night illumination complete with their supporting aircraft. They are equipped for in-flight refueling which enables them to operate in a much larger flight envelope and permits deep incursions into hostile territory to recover downed aircrew and other forces. The aircraft have excellent communications equipment and can locate radio beacons and transmit long distances to small survival radios in order to precisely locate the downed personnel.

Once the team is within the general locality, reconnaissance teams are dispatched to determine if the contact is in fact the downed personnel or an ambush. The remainder of the ground personnel secures the perimeter of the landing zone and prepares to defend the aircraft and the reconnaissance and the recovery team. The supporting aircraft, usually helicopter gunships, remains on station overhead to repel and concerted attacks and to provide fire support to the ground units. Once the operational task has been achieved, the CSAR unit then exfiltrates out of the area using a different route.

These units have also been used to extract units that have been cut off from their units and isolated units where their position is no longer tenable. In short, it is search and rescue with the ability to recover personnel who have been shot down, cut off or lost in hostile enemy territory. There should be no doubt in anyone's mind that the knowledge that these resources are present and available will have a major effect on the morale and fighting spirit of all soldiers, airmen and sailors.

The essential question here is the will to do it. If Canada is to take on an increasing role on the world's stage then the military will need to have the resources to carry out the roles and tasks assigned it in an operational theatre. Canadians cannot continue to believe that somewhere there is a military from another nation that will meet those requirements that we cannot ourselves fulfill. If we want to play in the big leagues then we have to realize that the price of admission will always be higher. The acquisition of a Combat Search and Rescue capability is a component of that higher admission cost. **FL**

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