

# Canada's DART – Does it Miss the Mark?

Canada's Disaster Assistance Response Team (DART) has now returned, and its personnel have dispersed to their respective units. Another chapter in CF humanitarian operations has ended and statistics are flowing from the NDHQ Public Affairs desks to anyone who wants to listen to the usefulness and success of the DART deployment. No doubt the after-action reports are being crafted by the staff at all levels, and these will dwell on the details of what was done, should have been done, or could be done next time.

There is no question that the men and women of the DART acquitted themselves, as our military always does, in an exemplary manner. There can be little dispute that the services that the DART provided in the Ampara region of Sri Lanka were needed and appreciated by the locals who suffered grievous losses from the December tsunami. In fact, there appeared to be lots of work left to do in this underdeveloped part of the world even when the DART re-deployed to Canada.

It may be time to reflect upon the larger picture concerning the DART.

This is the third time that the DART has been deployed in its ten-year plus existence. One can see why when it was announced that the 40-day deployment would cost approximately \$20 million. Crudely calculated, that is about half a million dollars a day – a hefty price tag for any operation by any government department, let alone one that is suffering from chronic underfunding and shortages of people and equipment. Does the reported \$20 million cover the normal military Operations and Maintenance (things like salaries) or is it mainly new incremental cost? Will DND really, in the final analysis, get an extra \$20 million to cover the DART deployment? Or will that sum have to be absorbed by the military budget, a sort of 'contribution in kind' by DND to Canadian foreign aid? The past track record of supplementary funding to DND for the incremental costs of short-notice taskings is not good.

No doubt the hefty price tag was one of the reasons for the delay in making the final decision to order the troops out of

barracks. In fact, it appears that public opinion in the media played a pivotal role in moving politicians finally to do something concrete.

We know that the DART is not really a standing unit. The various elements rely upon pre-planned augmentation personnel to leave their home units and join to form the necessary task organization for each deployment. The largest part of the unit is composed of medical and engineer resources, military occupations suffering chronic manning and retention problems.

The CF Medical Services are a skeleton of their former self after many years of re-structuring and turning over some of their core functions to the civilian sector. Any unit commander who has ever deployed anywhere knows that there are never enough engineer resources to go around, any time. Engineers have been one of the more heavily tasked military trades over the past 10-15 years. So the question becomes: what was the effect of the DART deployment on those units that provided the people for the deployment? Were unit capabilities degraded? Were there extra costs to hire Reservists or civilian resources to back-fill positions for the DART deployment period, or did units just soldier on and do without?

Looking at a globe, one can easily see the problems of moving the DART halfway around the world to Sri Lanka. The DART has a lot of heavy containers, large vehicles and assorted engineer bits and pieces. The decision to deploy that far with neither military nor domestic lift capability, certainly must fall into the category of a country too far, to paraphrase



history. The CF transport deficiency is well known and public debate has been ongoing for years on the subject, in and out of the military. What was the government thinking when it decided to deploy DART, inevitably drawing attention to this lack of lift capability once again?

Obviously, the government painted itself into a corner. By its very name, the DART raised expectations in the public perception. The tsunami disaster was of momentous proportions. Therefore, Canadians had every right to wonder why the touted DART was not being deployed. No amount of rational talk about lift capability or technical military planning considerations was about to dampen the ardour of the ordinary Canadian's desire to see its government help. Fanned by media attention, the perceived delay on the government's part drew massive attention to our lack of lift capability.

Returning to first principles, however, one may logically ask whether DART is a core capability of the Canadian military. Probably DART could be deployed as part of a military contingent or task force just as easily as on a humanitarian mission. If that is the case, it is probably useful to keep in the order of battle as a putative medical/engineering support unit, camouflaged and protected somewhat from budgetary cuts. Right now, however, it seems to have the same cachet as the Snowbirds or the RCMP Musical Ride – not really a core capability, but hard to cut because it is a political and popular favourite.

If the DART's only role is to provide military support for non-military situations, is DND the correct place for it to be housed? If it has to move globally by rented civilian air or sea transport, why should the CF be involved at all? Even if it were to be used only domestically for some sort of disaster in Canada, are there other agencies able to respond more quickly and efficiently? Since the DART is only intended to be deployed into permissive environments, there is no reason that civilians could not man the organization.

If it were necessary to deploy the DART somewhere in Canada, would that requirement be better handled by an agency other than DND? Health Canada already has some responsibility for responding to domestic disasters. Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness Canada (PSEPC), the Federal govern-



ment, s new super security department, may be better situated to be the home for a DART-like organization. Plans and agreements already exist for responding to provincial Emergency Measures Organizations for domestic disaster relief.

Canadian contributions to international disaster relief, one assumes, will normally be coordinated by DFAIT. One could see, perhaps, that department being responsible for DART. Generally speaking, however, DFAIT might be better suited to funding the DART and leaving the execution of its task to some other agency that is more hands-on oriented.

It may be possible to contract out the operation of the DART to an NGO like the Red Cross or CARE Canada, organizations that have existing links both domestically and internationally. NGOs do not seem to have any difficulty in attracting volunteer or paid staff to man their operations on a temporary basis. Most NGOs have the administrative infrastructure, along with the local and international contacts to assess the disaster needs and to employ resources. Naturally, clear agreements would have to be devised with the NGO chosen to ensure that the Canadian government's and, by extension, the Canadian public's wishes were followed in the DART's deployment. Length of stay, publicity for Canadian aid generally (as opposed to the NGO only) and any restrictions on the use of the NGO-operated DART would have to be some of the conditions contained in such an arrangement.

By using an NGO, the government would, however, probably lose the ability to hide any part of DART's cost in a larger departmental accounting maze since any NGO would want to be properly and completely funded if it took on the role. Would any NGO would find it economical and efficient to run the DART the way DND does? Costs may rise.

In summary, then, we have a military unit capable of doing good humanitarian work but seldom deployed. It needs a permissive environment because it cannot fight or defend itself. When the call does infrequently come, it is expensive to use and disruptive to other units across the military spectrum. Deployment to a theatre of operations is difficult, not to mention probably untimely, because of the CF air and sea lift deficiency. It is designed to be useful for a short duration stay but, by its very nature, will be deployed into areas that are underdeveloped and that need long-term help.

If the DART were to be presented as a problem for a business management case study, the chances of its surviving the first round of critique in its present form would be slim. Perhaps DND planners and the government need to re-visit the concept. **F**

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