



Civilians Behind the Wire

Special Report from Bosnia, by Trevor Cole

Trevor Cole recently travelled to Bosnia, intent on providing our readers with an update to the Contractor Support Program which began operation in September 2000 at Canadian bases in Bosnia. Three years later, the program has transformed into CANCAP, the Canadian Contractor Augmentation Program, which hit Bosnia on September 14, 2003.

There was certainly a time, in the early days of the Contractor Support Program, when some Canadian Forces (CF) personnel in Bosnia wondered why they had to work alongside civilians. There were elements of friction, and even what a famous movie line once termed “a failure to communicate.” But, between the start of ATCO-Frontec’s three year contract in 2000 and the end in September of 2003, all of that changed.

“So much so,” says Lt. Col. Tom Endicott, commanding officer of the National Support Element, “that the guys on the ground, the soldiers, were saying, ‘Well, why do they have to leave?’”

That choice was dictated by matters of hard business. Canada’s SNC Lavalin, one of the largest construction engineering company in the world, had teamed up with Los Angeles-based PAE Government Services Inc., one of the world leaders in the field of operations and maintenance, and outbid ATCO-Frontec (along with other large firms, including DynCorp and Brown & Root) for a contract that could

last ten years, depending on renewals, and wind up being worth \$400 million.

The Learning Curve

But while ATCO-Frontec wasn’t able to build, as it might have hoped, on its three-year investment of effort, the knowledge gathered in what everyone understood to be a trial run – learning how best to utilize civilian labour in theatres of operation to supplement the effort and expertise of Canadian soldiers – was a boon to the CF, and it led to a number of refinements to what is now called CANCAP.

The transition, by most accounts, was a relatively smooth one. A vast majority of the personnel that ATCO-Frontec had signed to one-year contracts, including ex-pats and LEEs (locally engaged employees), kept their jobs as SNC Lavalin-PAE took over, which aided the process at the four Canadian Forces bases at Velika Kladusa, Zgon, Drvar and Bihac.

There was a tense period after the CANCAP contract had been awarded to the new company, when SNC Lavalin-PAE sought to glean the knowledge of ATCO-Frontec employees and a brief intellectual property tussle ensued over operating procedures, engineering diagrams and the like. Until the issue was resolved, it wasn’t always clear to those working in the camps, particularly the functional managers, where their royalties really lay.

But it wasn’t a lasting issue. “In the end,” says Steve Sinclair, CANCAP’s deputy project manager, “DND convinced them that well, we paid you to develop that so therefore we own it.”

And between SNC Lavalin-PAE and the Canadian Forces themselves, there was no confusion. Once it had completed a large brigade-level warm-up exercise in Wainwright, Alberta, supporting nearly 5,500 soldiers in training for upcoming missions to Bosnia and Afghanistan, and once it began to learn what soldiers do, and how they do it, SNC Lavalin-PAE was ready to focus its efforts on camp services and the four main areas of support under the National Support Element NSE umbrella – maintenance, supply, transport and engineering.

The operation of CANCAP reflects the knowledge gained from the ATCO-Frontec experience in a number of ways. The first is in the contract’s financial structure. SNC Lavalin-PAE is working under what’s known as a “cost-plus” contract. The company gathers the invoices it pays out, then adds one percent to the total for its profit and three percent for its overhead. At the end, if they exceed expectations, they receive a bonus. The benefit of this method to DND, says Brandt Thomson, CANCAP’s feisty camp manager at Zgon, is that “it’s transparent. They get everything, all the invoices.”

“Unless you’ve lived in an environment like this before and know how this all works, it can be overwhelming. You never know until you get on the ground.”

Ex-military vs. Non-military

CANCAP employs far fewer ex-military personnel than did the original Contractor Support Program. Where as much as 80% of the ATCO-Frontec group had military experience, only about 30% of the SNC Lavalin-PAE group does. The views on the impact of this are mixed. Says Steve Sinclair: “It helps to have people on board who understand the military psyche and understand how their thought process works and what the expectations are on an operation like this, but on the other hand it’s nice to have people with non-military backgrounds who bring a different business sense.”

On the other hand, there are CANCAP personnel in some camps who think having fewer ex-military is a shortcoming. “It helps a lot when a person has the background,” says Art Power, transportation supervisor at Camp Black Bear in Velika Kladusa. “ATCO had an advantage there I think.”

But Dan Clarke, head of CANCAP in Bosnia, says he has no doubt the new proportions of ex-military to non-military are just about right. “From my own personal point of view, we’re better off,” he says. “Because if you have military experience, you come in here and expect things to operate a certain way. And now you’re a civilian, and it’s not necessarily going to operate that way.”

Embedding

The wrinkles in the relationship between military and civilian have been ironed out in one other major area as well, and this has to do with the issue of “embedding.”

The previous program entrenched the soldier and the civilian in the same chain of command. In some sections both military and civilian employees would be working under military command, while in others,

they’d be working for a civilian manager. “I think culturally it didn’t work that well,” says Sinclair. “The military recognized it, ATCO recognized it, and in our contract they’ve very deliberately written it so that the embedding is absolutely minimized.”

Operationally, this means that in each camp CANCAP employees have been given very clear roles to perform. In the maintenance section, for instance, military personnel at most camps work on “A” vehicles, which include armoured vehicles, weapons systems and fire control systems. Civilians, meanwhile, work on the “B” vehicles, including the wheeled standard military pattern vehicles, commercial vehicles such as staff cars and vans, along with “mat tech,” that is, working with materials, from welding auto bodies to repairing canvas.

In the transportation section, it means someone like Art Power has to adjust. Where the ATCO-Frontec contract stipulated that civilians could drive certain military vehicles, the SNC Lavalin-PAE contract restricts them. When he arrived during the previous administration, says Power, “I could drive everything that was on the camp. I’m not allowed to now.”

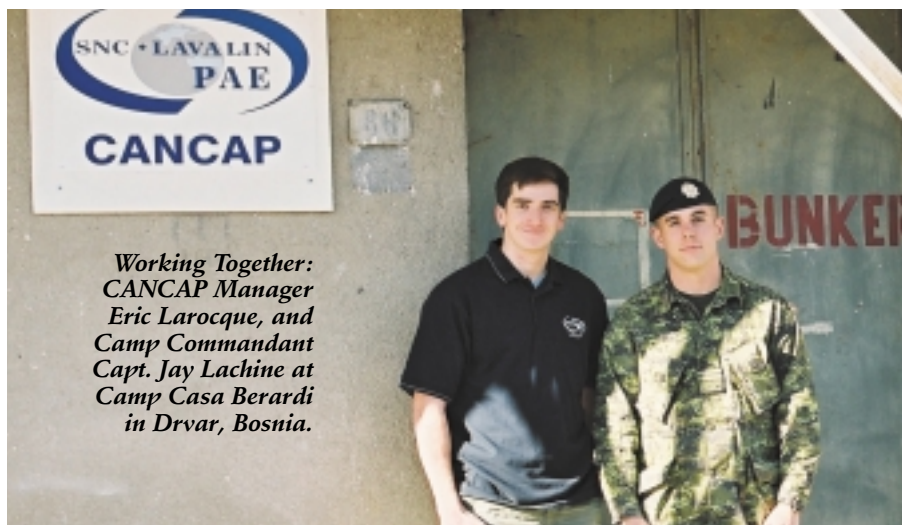
But no longer is there confusion over who’s really in charge here. Before, in the maintenance services section, for example, the military platoon commander who looked on paper as though he had command often had very little say in the work carried out by ATCO-Frontec employees. “The shift now,” explains Tom Endicott, “is the platoon commander is in charge of the entire platoon, which includes civilian employees, and he can decide if the work

is going to be done by soldiers in uniform, by technicians in uniform, or by CANCAP employees and their technicians.”

This means that someone like Ray Foley, a CANCAP maintenance manager who has been in Bosnia since the early days of the ATCO-Frontec contract, has less to be in charge of now, and he seems a bit wistful about having fewer areas of responsibility, and about the lack of mixing between military and civilian staff. “I thought the embedded system worked rather well,” he says. “When the ex-pats would go on vacation for example, it was easy to have a military guy slide into that position, cover it off for two weeks.” With some time to adjust to the new system, however, he’s adapting. “There was definitely a bit of a learning curve there. But this rotation has been on the ground roughly two months [as of December 2003], and it’s coming together. It’ll work.”

But in the Kitchen...

There remains one area in the realm of CANCAP responsibilities where military and civilian workers do mix. It’s in the kitchen, where army cooks work alongside civilian chefs so as to be ready, should circumstances require it, to deploy with a platoon into a hostile area, where civilians aren’t allowed to go. But these military cooks follow the lead of the civilians employed under CANCAP by the subcontractor PTI, and whether it’s due to the military experience, the talents of European chefs, or the combination of the two, the results have been widely applauded. “The service provided by PTI Foods has been of an extremely high qual-



*Working Together:
CANCAP Manager
Eric Larocque, and
Camp Commandant
Capt. Jay Lachine at
Camp Casa Berardi
in Drvar, Bosnia.*

PHOTO: TREVOR COLE

ity,” reported a customer satisfaction survey of soldiers at Camp Maple Leaf in Zgon. “The variety in the menu and exceptional meal planning has led to a very satisfied customer.”

The Camp Maple Leaf Kitchen has been singled out for exceptional praise by many who pass through, but each camp kitchen has its strengths, and its own way of executing the menus established by DND — whether it’s baked trout in Velika Keladusa, lamb curry in Drvar, or real surf and turf (with lobster tails) in Bihac, the eating at CF bases in Bosnia is uniformly good, and created with the tastes of military personnel in mind.

Rotations

Each six-month camp rotation comes in a wave from one Canadian base or another, and each comes with its own expectations and preferences. This requires the adjustment of all CANCAP employees, who are in theatre for a year, but it’s especially true for those in the kitchen. “The guys from Alberta were big on beef; they wanted steak twice a week,” says Steve Sinclair. “These guys here [in VK’s Roto 13] from Petawawa, they’re a little bit more health conscious. They want a little bit more fish, they want a little bit more pasta. So we adjust the menu to do that. We’ve already been told that the Québécois [arriving from Val Cartier] want their poutine every day.”

Health & Safety

It’s all about meeting the needs of the military, as far as CANCAP is concerned. But what about the needs of the civilians performing the work? In this area, CANCAP and CF administrators are doing their best.

When employees complained about the \$100 deductible clause in their health insurance coverage, SNC Lavalin-PAE found a new insurer and negotiated a contract that does away with the deductible, which took effect this January. When civilians need emergency medical services, they can get it from camp doctors under the standard of care established by DND for in-theatre operations (which assumes a high level of health and fitness among deployed personnel). Routine and elective procedures, meanwhile, are taken care of through an arrangement between CANCAP and a doctor in Zagreb, Croatia.

The safety of civilians is another high priority, and the CF handles that through strict regulations. Though the gorgeous, rolling hills of Bosnia present little danger of conflict these days, civilians can never leave base without armed escort, which must be arranged in advance. And the Canadian Area of Responsibility is one of the most heavily mined in the region, posing real hazard to anyone stepping off the hard-pack surfaces. That threat, and the danger of traffic accidents on the winding mountain roads that have already claimed Canadian lives, are the subject of thorough briefings and steady reminders for each new arrival.

Workplace safety is an ongoing process. Pollution levels, for instance, are high in Bosnia, exacerbating air quality problems for people who work in certain sections such as maintenance. But the goal is to meet the same high standards on each Canadian base that apply to workplaces at home. “Given the fact that we’re a long ways from Canada,” says Ray Foley, “it takes probably more time to get things done. But usually when we identify something it gets actioned. And it happens relatively quickly.”

For civilians, especially those without any prior military background, the biggest issues relate less to safety than to living “behind the wire.” Accommodations in tents or ISO units are vastly better now than they were just a few years ago, but the general lack of privacy in combined quarters, the inability to step off base to, say, visit a local restaurant, and the strict adherence to the military code of conduct can take some adjustment.

“This is new for a lot of these kids,” says Zgon’s Brandt Thomson. “First time away from Canada, this is an experience. Unless you’ve lived in an environment like this before and know how this all works, it can be overwhelming. Some kids I’ve talked to, they’re, ‘Wow, I’m kinda scared here. This is not what I expected.’ You never know until you get on the ground.”

Discipline can pose particular challenges for CANCAP administrators. Like the military personnel, for example, civilians are restricted to two alcoholic drinks a day, after dinner, in one of the CANEX messes. And there’s no fraternization allowed on base, even among spouses. This is a given for soldiers, and when they step out of line, the military has a tiered system of disciplinary responses it can

impose, from fines to charges. “As a civilian contractor, you can’t do that,” says Steve Sinclair. “It’s not part of the Canadian labor code. With us it’s basically a tiered system of verbal warnings, written warnings, formal warnings.” But when the disciplinary breach is serious, CANCAP has shown its response can be decisive. Recently, just two days after receiving their briefing regarding the prohibition against fraternization, two CANCAP employees were caught by the military security patrol engaged in something more than friendly discussion, and they were quickly sent packing.

Says, Sinclair, “We don’t have much tolerance for people who break the rules.”

Motivation

Those events, naturally, are rare. And despite the adjustments required of employees, retention is not a problem. The hardship pay earned in Bosnia – from 5% to 25% extra, depending on the job – likely has something to do with it. But so too does the experience itself. Now that the CF has made clear its intention to reduce its commitment of personnel to Bosnia by about half for the next rotation, there will be fewer civilian jobs available, and for many, the opportunity for this adventure will be missed. “It’s been unique, and yet it’s been, to me, fantastic,” says Alice Ross, a human resources manager at Camp Black Bear. “You get to know people on a level here that would probably take 20 years in an office back home. I personally enjoy that more than anything.” She says this in the cozy smoker’s tent situated just outside the dining hall.

“That’s something that happens in this environment too,” she says, grinning. “I never smoked coming in.” **FL**

Trevor Cole is a journalist whose work recently appeared in a 25-year retrospective of the best in Canadian magazine writing. After an acclaimed stint as a senior writer at the Globe and Mail’s Report on Business Magazine, for which he twice won gold at the National Magazine Awards, he is now a regular contributor to Toronto Life. His fiction has appeared in Descant and his first novel, Norman Bray, In the Performance of His Life, published in March 2004 by McClelland & Stewart.