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Canadian Pathfinders dive into exercise that lands paratroopers near submarines; Canadian Pathfinders dive into exercise that lands paratroopers near submarines

Chris Lambie Staff Reporter

Four paratroopers floated out of the sky Tuesday and touched down on St. Margarets Bay before starting the long swim to a nearby submarine.

The exercise, dubbed Joint Express by the military, is meant to test how Pathfinders, an elite unit of paratroopers, can work with subs like HMCS Windsor to sneak onto foreign shores.

"It was absolutely great," said the Pathfinders team leader, who would only give his first name, Tim, for security reasons.

"You don't get to parachute into the ocean and link up with a submarine every day."

It took about an hour for the paratroopers to swim several hundred metres to the sub after they jumped out of the Hercules aircraft that had flown them out from CFB Greenwood. Part of the problem was that one of the paratroopers had a broken swim fin, and the wind was also causing difficulties, Tim said.

But he stressed the military is still in an "experimental" phase with this type of operation.

"We're trying to determine what our limitations are."

The jumpers can't land too close to the sub because their parachutes become a hazard to navigation. But if they land too far away, the swim

becomes difficult, as was evident Tuesday, with the wind kicking up a one-metre chop about two kilometres off Mill Cove.

"If we could get it down to a few minutes, it would be fine," Tim said of the time it takes the paratroopers to shuck their chutes and swim to the sub.

The Pathfinders completed two similar jumps Monday, said Lt.-Cmdr. Scott Healey, the captain of HMCS Kingston, the coastal defence vessel standing by at the drop zone in case anything went wrong.

After one of Monday's jumps, it took the paratroopers about 45 minutes to get to Windsor, Lt.-Cmdr. Healey said. In the other jump, they shaved that down to about 15 minutes.

"The slightest little equipment failure will slow you down," Lt.-Cmdr. Healey said.

The Pathfinders - based at CFB Trenton in Ontario - started working with Windsor in March to see how the air force, army and navy can combine efforts.

"We're making certain that we can connect the tremendous flexibility that an aircraft has and the legs that an aircraft has - they can get somewhere very far, very fast - with the stealth of a submarine," said Cmdr. Randy Truscott, a submariner.

The ultimate aim is to be able to slip small numbers of advance troops into foreign countries undetected, then extract them again.

"But clearly, there is no intent to do that on our part in the middle of St. Margarets Bay in the light of day," Cmdr. Truscott said.

Ideally, paratroopers would make the transfer to a sub hundreds of kilometres off an enemy coast, out of radar range, he said.

In a real mission, the Pathfinders would get ashore from the sub either by swimming or using small rigid-hull inflatable boats. Both methods would probably be employed under cover of darkness.

Before Tuesday's jump, Cmdr. Truscott cautioned that this is a new type of work for the military.

"It's going to look like organized confusion, and that's about as good as it can possibly be at this point," he said. "If it all goes really well and smooth and slick, it's as much to do with good luck as it is good planning."

Despite the long swim, the Pathfinders eventually made it to Windsor and hooked on to several lines drawn taut between the sub's conning tower and deck. When the sub surfaced completely, they were standing on its deck and waving.

Military planners are examining the idea of acquiring an amphibious ship to take large expeditionary forces to hot spots around the world.

With a little help from a sub, the Pathfinders could serve as scouts for such a force, Cmdr. Truscott said.

"When the Pathfinders go ashore, part of their job is to look at beach

conditions, to be able to look at what other obstacles there might be in the area, and certainly in their particular job, they can take on other combat-related missions if necessary."

The army wouldn't want the paratroopers to spend weeks on a submarine, sailing to an enemy shore.

"These guys are fit beyond belief," Cmdr. Truscott said.

"We could put them on the submarine, but it might take days or even weeks for the submarine . . . to get there. And in that intervening time, they're going to have difficulty maintaining their level of fitness and preparedness for the mission."()

Figure:

A member of the elite Canadian Pathfinders paratroopers unit prepares to land near an already submerged colleague near the Canadian submarine HMCS Windsor during a military exercise in St. Margarets Bay, off Mill Cove, on Tuesday. (Tim Krochak / Staff)

The Pathfinders hang on to safety lines as the HMCS Windsor surfaces.(Tim Krochak / Staff)

Four Pathfinders tumble from a CFB Greenwood Hercules transport plane to a rendezvous with HMCS Windsor.(Tim Krochak / Staff)

A member of the elite Canadian Pathfinders paratroopers unit prepares to land near an already submerged colleague near the Canadian submarine HMCS Windsor during a military exercise in St. Margarets Bay off Mill Cove on Tuesday. (Tim Krochak / Staff)

Four Pathfinders tumble from a CFB Greenwood Hercules transport plane to a rendezvous with HMCS Windsor.(Tim Krochak / Staff)

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