

Canadians Observe an Exercise in Armed Neutrality



Canadian observer Colonel Megill speaking to Swiss soldier during exercise.

From November 20 to 23, 1989, two Canadian officials watched as over twenty-five thousand Swiss troops turned the north-eastern corner of Switzerland into an armed fortress as part of a military exercise. The exercise was designed to demonstrate the rapidity with which the Swiss could mobilize and deploy to defend against an attack.

The Canadians — Mr. Gordon Vachon, Senior Verification Research Officer at EAITC, and Colonel William Megill, Military Adviser with the Canadian delegation to the CFE and CSBM negotiations in Vienna — were invited, along with officials of the other participating states of the CSCE, to observe the exercise in accordance with the Stockholm Document on confidence- and security-building measures, signed in 1986. They were to confirm that the exercise was carried out in conformity with the exercise notification. The Swiss authorities arranged for observers to receive briefings and witness activities at all levels of the corps exercise.

One mechanized and one field division were involved in the exercise, including 150 main battle tanks, 60 heavy artillery pieces, 22 helicopters

and some 250 aircraft sorties for reconnaissance and ground attack. The observers saw elements of all of this, including such rarities as bicycle battalions and fully operational — but empty — hospitals on constant standby, awaiting casualties they hope will never come.

Half of the troops had already completed two weeks of refresher training at various military installations, in the classroom and on the ranges. When the call to mobilize came, these troops were deployed to provide a screen for forces reporting to depots, drawing mechanized equipment and heavy weapons, and moving to pre-arranged defensive positions. Virtually all of the troops were militia. Within hours the defences were taking shape, under pressure from the exercise's invading force. What the observers saw was the partial transition of a corner of Switzerland from a peacetime to a wartime footing.

The observers had an opportunity to gauge the meaning of armed neutrality and the national commitment involved therein. Not only does it mean that every able-bodied male is liable for a period of basic training; it also means that he must attend regular refresher

training over the next thirty years, including participation in mobilization exercises such as the November one. The active regular force is minimal in size, with some 6,000 personnel, but there are over 600,000 militia capable of being mobilized within 24 hours and of being combat-ready in less than 48 hours. Heavy equipment is stockpiled and maintained in depots, while each soldier keeps his own weapon and ammunition at home.

During the exercise, troops and vehicles moved freely through towns and countryside. Vehicles hid among buildings; headquarters and bivouacs were established in factories, warehouses and underground parking lots; units had the use of public buildings; and, wherever they were, the troops had access to hot, fresh rations obtained locally. Nonetheless, there was genuine discomfort, not to mention the disruption of daily lives and the hidden costs to the Swiss economy, all of which the Swiss are willing to accept. The Canadians spoke to the Chief Executive Officer of a large private bank (regimental commander), a Swissair pilot (air operations officer), a civil engineer (cyclist soldier), an architect (bridge demolition guard commander) and many others whose employers had long ago become accustomed to the absences required by such an exercise.

The Swiss exercise succeeded in the following: demonstrating that the mobilization system, properly prepared and regularly exercised, works; demonstrating that the country's military potential was essentially defensive, not offensive, in the way it was configured and deployed; and conveying to all observers the important political message that an attack on Switzerland would be a costly and lengthy undertaking. The exercise also demonstrated to the Canadian observers that defending the national sovereignty of a neutral state carries with it sizeable real costs. ■