

Youth Perspectives on Military Culture Change

AYSHIA BAILIE, OSKAR MANSFIELD, HANNAH MEAGHER,
KATHRYN REEVES & ELLEN SMITH

The Transforming Military Cultures Network includes a Youth Advisory Board (YAB) that consists of diverse youth who are interested in providing insight and ideas to improve and transform Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) culture. This piece introduces the YAB members and discusses their perspectives on what culture change in the CAF might look like. YAB members share their hopes for how the CAF environment can be improved. Their priorities for CAF culture change include increasing attention to diversity, equity, and inclusion; improving education and training; giving non-commissioned and lower ranking members a voice; continuing to improve health and wellness services for CAF members and their families, including military children; demonstrating a positive work environment; and, including the diverse voices of youth.

Ayshia Bailie is a Master's student at Carleton University in the Health: Science, Technology and Policy program. She has a passion for military research, motivated by her sister. She describes her sister as a strong role model because of how she has overcome gender-based barriers and achieved success in her career in the CAF. Ayshia would like to become a CAF medical officer and hopes that she can have a positive impact on military culture in this role. However, identifying as a BIPOC woman with Canadian Indigenous heritage, Ayshia believes that without having her sister as a role model, she would not have considered a career in the CAF due to the lack of diversity represented in such a male-dominated and masculine institution. As such, she thinks diversity, equity, and inclusion are key to improving military culture and to improving recruitment, retention, and the mental health and wellbeing of serving members. As a federal workplace, Ayshia thinks it is important for the CAF to effectively celebrate and represent all the cultures, values, and diverse populations within Canada.



Cooks from Joint Task Force Atlantic's Immediate Response Unit prepare dinner for members on Operation LENTUS 23-02 in Shelburne, Nova Scotia on June 14, 2023.

Image by: Warrant Officer James Roberge, 5th Canadian Division Public Affairs,
Canadian Armed Forces photo

Oskar Mansfield is a second-year undergraduate student at Mount Saint Vincent University, studying sociology and anthropology. He served briefly in the CAF as a vehicle technician in the Royal Canadian Electrical and Mechanical Engineering (RCEME) Corps. Throughout his training at both the Canadian Forces Leadership and Recruit School and at RCEME School, Oskar observed and experienced how new soldiers are negatively treated by the institution. He believes that the values and standards non-commissioned members learn start in Basic Military Qualification and are reinforced throughout training. However, he also believes that power relations inherent in the military are not problematized, and that lower-ranking members should have a greater voice and open lines of communication with leadership to share their experiences

without negative repercussions. Considering how toxic the military working and learning environment can be, Oskar is interested in the wellbeing of military members, specifically, how the CAF education system standards and practices can be improved. He hopes to further this goal by becoming a Training Development Officer in the CAF.

Hannah Meagher is a second-year undergraduate student at Dalhousie University in both the law, justice and society program and health studies. In high school, she was a member of the Royal Canadian Air Cadets. Throughout her time there, she was able to immerse herself in interactions with the military by participating in summer camps on base. As she got to more advanced courses, she felt like she had to prove her worth to the other cadets simply because she was one of the few women accepted into the Glider Pilot program. Her time as a cadet has inspired her to learn more about gender in the military and how she can help make the CAF culture a more welcoming environment for all those involved. Hannah thinks that the CAF has a duty to promote healthy lifestyles for all its members through health and wellness initiatives that prioritize mental health needs. She believes that there are key steps the CAF can take to do this work, including by developing policies that amplify the voices of marginalized groups, making initiatives more accessible, working to destigmatize access to supports, and overcoming the “push through the pain” mantra. Hannah thinks that knowing that those in the military have the support they require is an important step in recruiting and retaining members and improving public perception of the military.

Kathryn Reeves is a fourth-year honours undergraduate student at Mount Saint Vincent University in the Psychology program. She has an intergenerational connection to military culture, having grown up in a family with longstanding roots in military service. Kathryn was previously involved in the Canadian cadet movement, where she achieved the rank of Chief Petty Officer First Class, performed the duties of the regimental Sergeant Major, and was a recipient of the Lord Strathcona Medal. Kathryn believes that military culture has intergenerational effects that are largely unaddressed in current understandings of military life and culture which have social, psychological, and environmental impacts for military children. Unique stressors of military life, such as frequent relocations, separation from family members, and heightened awareness of the risk of military duties are frequently felt by children but inadequately addressed. As such, she believes that persistent stigma around supports must be eliminated so that

military children can have better access to them, especially as their parents act as gatekeepers and may be hesitant to allow their children to access supports.

Ellen Smith is an undergraduate student at Mount Saint Vincent University taking a double major in Political Studies and Women’s Studies. She was born and raised in Nova Scotia and joined the Air Cadets at the age of 12 to earn her pilot’s license. During her time as an Air Cadet, she learned a lot about the CAF, from being on bases, having instructors from the military, wearing a uniform, and using military language and acronyms. These experiences have shaped how she sees the CAF. After aging out of the Cadet program, many of her fellow cadets who thrived in this orderly environment didn’t join the CAF for various reasons. Some of these reasons revolved around CAF culture and the tendency to be treated poorly. As such, she believes that the CAF needs to incorporate youth perspectives to improve military culture, as youth are potential future CAF members. Further, when cadets and those in basic training have a more positive first impression of the CAF, it will make them feel more welcome in the institution and may help improve recruitment and retention.

The Youth Advisory Board members believe CAF needs to prioritize diversity, equity, and inclusion; education; accountability and leadership; and, health and wellness for culture change. CAF culture should be one where all members feel valued and respected. Everyone should feel welcome to join the CAF and serve their country without being worried about whether they will be treated negatively because of who they are. In order for the culture to improve, anti-oppression training needs to begin early—in cadets and basic training. Further, as the Arbour Report and the Minister’s Advisory Panel on Systemic Racism and Discrimination report have demonstrated, the CAF has systemic issues that disadvantage junior members and sometimes protect abusive or toxic senior members. This needs to change, and leadership accountability is essential. Culture change should also include the voices, perspectives, and experiences of marginalized groups. Likewise, leaders must be supportive and proactive, including with regard to health and wellness policies and initiatives, in order to make them accessible to their subordinates. Finally, the CAF needs to move beyond individualizing mental health exemplified through the mentality of “push through the pain,” and de-stigmatize access to mental health supports so that all members get the help they need.