



JSPA Combat Camera Photo IVD-02-056 by Sgt David Snashall

A sergeant from the 3rd Battalion, Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry receiving a handover briefing from a US Army NCO at Kandahar airport in Afghanistan, February 2002.

## A TIMELESS STRENGTH: THE ARMY'S SENIOR NCO CORPS

by Lieutenant-Colonel Bernd Horn

*Non-commissioned officers [NCOs], promoted from the ranks, enforced discipline, managed routine administration, and socialized recruits — and sometimes their commissioned superiors — in military ways. By common consent, they formed the backbone of their unit.<sup>1</sup>*

Desmond Morton

**D**esmond Morton's description of the senior NCO in the First World War seems timeless. One could argue that his description was as accurate in the 19th century as it is today. However, the role of the senior NCO, as so many things in contemporary military affairs at present, is being scrutinized. In light of what some consider a new epoch in warfare, many have begun to question whether the traditional functions and responsibilities of the senior NCO are still relevant. In the Canadian case, there is a touch of irony to the new debate. To understand this provocative comment a slight digression is necessary.

### THE CHANGED NATURE OF CONFLICT

“Normal soldiers,” observed the renowned military theorist Basil Liddell Hart, “always prefer the

known to the unknown.”<sup>2</sup> This rumination accurately depicts the mentality of the Canadian military in the decade that preceded the new millennium. With the passing of the Cold War, the nation's military leaders were reluctant, if not incapable, of recognizing and adapting to the changes that struck them in the 1990s. These changes were profound, and they rocked the very essence of the Canadian Forces (CF).

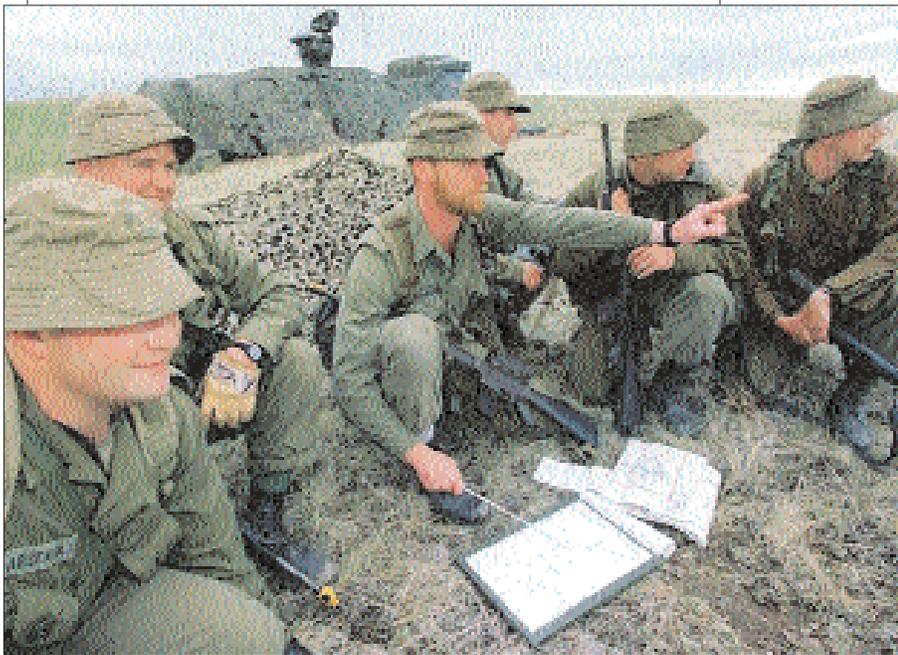
In the post-Cold War era, the sanctity and security of the old conventional wisdom that held true for almost half a century was shattered. Overnight, the carefully prepared plans for the defence of Germany became irrelevant. Gone was the familiar and carefully-templated Soviet enemy.<sup>3</sup> Senior officers, whose entire careers were rooted in and defined by the comfortable predictability of the Cold War, were faced by a brave new world. Conflict had become exponentially more complex and unpredictable.

This is easily explained. The often tense, but always stable stand-off between Superpowers in Europe and elsewhere in the world was housed within a framework where players were clearly delineated and

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rules universally understood. The Cold War, in many respects, artificially divided much of the world into two distinct camps aligned with one or the other Superpower. As such, states were often artificially

But conflict was not the only change that military leaders had to deal with. Dramatic scientific and technological developments paralleled the transformation of conflict. These developments, combined with globalization, introduced the concept of a 'knowledge economy' and 'post-modern world.' They also fueled what many believe to be a Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA). Digitization, data fusion, precision-guided munitions and cybernetic devices are but a few concepts that are put forward as evidence of a new epoch of warfare. To those who place an unbridled faith in technology, war is now depicted "as a predictable, if disorderly, phenomenon, defeat a matter of simple cost/benefit analysis, and the effectiveness of any military capability a finite calculus of targets destroyed and casualties inflicted."<sup>6</sup> This phenomenon, at the very least, has forced the CF to re-examine the manner in which it fulfils its mandate and conducts its operations.



DND Photo 02enc4 by Sgt. Don Clark

A warrant officer from 4th Air Defence Regiment, RCA briefing the crew of a Skyguard anti-aircraft gun, Macedonia, April 1999.

propped-up and maintained through economic and military assistance. These tools were both the carrot and stick used to keep proxies and allies in line. However, with the fall of the 'Wall' in 1989-90, many of these states were abandoned, and thus drifted towards total collapse. The resultant chaos transformed the international security environment. Where conflict in the Cold War was based on an inter-state paradigm, it now took on an intra-state posture. Failed states spiraled into anarchy, creating a vacuum of power that was often filled by warlords, paramilitary gangs and criminal organizations. The civil wars and unrest that ensued were incredibly savage and frequently threatened to spill beyond their borders. In 1995, Boutros Boutros-Ghali, the Secretary General of the United Nations wrote, "the end of the Cold War removed constraints that had inhibited conflict in the former Soviet Union and elsewhere...[There] has been a rash of wars within newly independent States, often of a religious or ethnic character and often involving unusual violence and cruelty."<sup>4</sup>

As a result of this new international turmoil, many Western nations, including Canada, embarked on peace support operations that no longer resembled the classic peacekeeping model of simply juxtaposing a force between two belligerents who had agreed to a third party presence monitoring a mutually agreed cease fire. In a clear rejection of principles enshrined in the Treaty of Westphalia, the West now selectively embarked on peace enforcement operations. Moreover, the tempo of operations increased dramatically. During the 1990s, the CF underwent a three-fold increase in missions compared to the previous four decades.<sup>5</sup>

alteration that caught the CF and its leaders totally by surprise. The revolutionary shift in societal expectations and values, described by Canadian author, Peter C. Newman, as a wholesale movement from public deference to authority and government to one of defiance, was so profound that it altered the way in which the CF conducted its affairs.<sup>7</sup> Disclosure, transparency, fair treatment of its personnel, quality of life, and accountability by those at the controls were simple and reasonable concepts in theory, but alien in practice and comprehension to those who had navigated through the seemingly threat-laden and uncensored Cold War. Unaccustomed to justifying their actions or their existence, the Departmental and CF leadership clung to their myopic and very narrow understanding of the world around them. As a result, they endured a stormy decade that in the end eroded the trust of both the public and the government in their military.<sup>8</sup>

Although slow in coming, by the end of the 1990s, a realization began to emerge that things must change. "The Canadian Forces and the Department of National Defence [DND]," wrote General Maurice Baril, the former Chief of the Defence Staff, "like many other Canadian institutions, have not always been quick to anticipate and react to these new transitions" He conceded that "...some of our slowness to change was because of prevailing institutional attitudes and cultures..."<sup>9</sup> The CF now embarked on a quest to ensure that it would never again be caught so unprepared. As such, a number of initiatives were taken to examine and make recommendations on changes that would be necessary to enable DND and the CF to meet the challenges of the next twenty years.<sup>10</sup>

Not surprisingly, a zealous effort was now underway to correct the deficiencies of the past. Change was often embraced with a fanatical fervidness, an oft-perceived indication of a progressive, unfettered mind. However, although it is necessary to conduct a reassessment of 'how we do business' and 'who should do what,' particularly in light of the evolution, if not revolution, in society and military affairs, it is equally important not to discard all that has stood the test of time. Simply put, we must not be too quick to cast away those things that have always represented an institutional enduringness. Specifically, as the role of the senior Non-Commissioned Officer is examined, it must be remembered that the senior NCO corps has consistently exemplified a timeless strength. Senior NCOs represent the cerebral cortex of a unit and have always been, and will continue to be, essential to the effectiveness of the army, specifically because of their traditional roles and responsibilities.

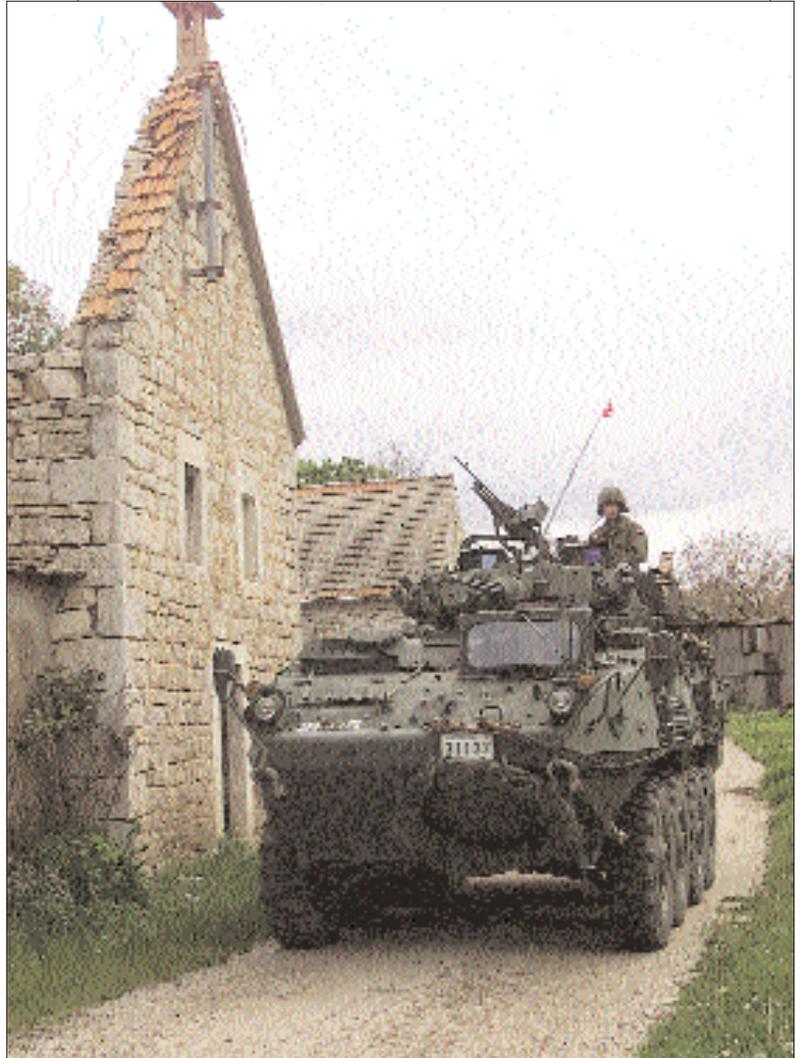
Some may dismiss this thought as the musings of a dinosaur. But, regardless of the ascendancy of technology and the Buck Rogers science fiction projections of future warfare, the senior NCO corps will always be required to satisfy a function that is indispensable to the viability of a military institution. Technology changes the tools with which armies fight, but it does not change the reality of man's role in conflict. War will never be clean or sterile. Clinical strikes by stand-off, long range precision-guided missiles, designed to limit collateral damage and minimize friendly casualties, are only effective if the damage wrought is of significance to the recipient. As US Marine Corps Lieutenant General Paul van Riper has postulated, "what if the enemy simply ignores the attack?"<sup>11</sup>

Although technological and scientific breakthroughs cannot be ignored, the technological edge potentially provided by an RMA can be of limited utility in situations such as were experienced in Rwanda or Somalia. "The warrior's trade," argues George Friedman, chairman of Strategic Forecasting in Baton Rouge, "will remain one of courage, dedication and suffering." He adds, "Precision-guided munitions will not render war antiseptic, any more than did the tank or crossbow or bronze armor. Technology changes how men fight and die, but it does not change the horror and glory of battle, nor does it change the reality of death."<sup>12</sup> Similarly, Dr. Williamson Murray, a retired army officer, commented, "What makes this techno-craze so dangerous is that it flies in the face of 2,500 years of history, not to mention modern science. Friction, ambiguity, chance and uncertainty are not merely manifestations of inadequate communications and technology that U.S. military organizations in the next century may overcome, but rather manifestations of the fundamental nature of the world, where if something can go wrong, it will."<sup>13</sup> Van Riper argues that "Real war is an inherently uncertain enterprise in which chance, friction and the

limitations of the human mind under stress profoundly limit our ability to predict outcomes; in which defeat to have any meaning must be inflicted above all in the minds of the defeated..."<sup>14</sup> Quite simply, technology can assist and enhance the capabilities of fighting soldiers, but in the end it will never be able to totally replace them. War will always remain a truly human endeavour.

### THE GLUE HOLDING AN ARMY TOGETHER

It is within this context, namely the ugly reality of conflict, complete with its ambiguity, fear, friction and uncertainty, that the prodigious importance of the



A senior NCO from the 2nd Battalion, Royal 22e Régiment commands his LAV III on a patrol near the Canadian area by Tomislavgrad, Bosnia-Herzegovina, May 2002.

senior NCO emerges. In spite of the changing nature of conflict, society or technology — there are a number of core responsibilities of the senior NCO corps that cannot change without imperiling the effectiveness of a nation's military. This is plainly visible when the actual functions of the senior NCO are examined. First, he provides the critical link between the soldiers and the officer corps and vice versa. In this vein, the senior NCO often fulfils a role similar to that of an ombudsman for the rank and file. Furthermore, he is

an administrator, trainer, mentor and, at times, parent to those entrusted to his charge. In addition, he is also a motivator and disciplinarian, as well as a combat leader and tactician. It is clearly evident from this superficial summary that the senior NCO corps is the moral cement — the glue that holds an army together. It is for this reason that in 1942, General Bernard Law Montgomery described non-commissioned officers as the backbone of any unit.<sup>15</sup>

Needless to say, Montgomery was neither the first nor last commander to make such a resolute assertion in regards to the senior NCO cadre. The reason for this merits closer scrutiny. After all, it is important to

Simply put, the senior NCO conducts the daily business of an army. He is expected to carry out instructions to achieve the institutional aim, as well as ensure the well-being of the soldiers. He is also trusted to pass on the ethos and traditions of the military in general, and the respective regiment in particular. Furthermore, he is required to pass on and explain directives from his superiors to his subordinates, as well as ensure that all direction is efficiently and effectively executed.

In addition, there is a justified expectation by officers that the senior NCO has a more up-to-date and accurate insight into the general feeling and morale of the rank and file, and that potential problems or discontent are passed up the chain of command. This sentiment was clearly articulated in 1880, by then Colonel William Otter, in his *Guide: A Manual for the Canadian Militia*. Otter explained that it was essential that NCOs know intimately all of the characters and capabilities of their men. In regard to the Sergeant Major, he insisted that he must be an advisor to the unit Adjutant and, in general, act as “the eyes, ears and conscience of the battalion.”<sup>18</sup>

It is in this knowledge of, and closeness to, the men that the senior NCO proves his greatest strength. For only with a complete and proper understanding of an individual can you truly elicit his or her greatest potential. Moreover, the NCOs’ full comprehension of their subordinates, as well as their piv-

otal role as the link between the soldiers and the officers, positions them to act as an ombudsman for their men and women. Discontent and morale problems can often be avoided or quickly resolved by timely intervention or advice. In this vein, senior NCOs provide clarity and context to transgressions in behaviour or perceived affronts or injustices. In addition, they provide a voice for aggrieved, intimidated and/or over-anxious subordinates, particularly young soldiers.<sup>19</sup> In essence, their maturity, experience and knowledge provides a steadying influence in an institution that is steeped in human endeavor, with all the confusion and frailty that inherently accompanies such enterprise.

### THE NCO AS TRAINER

Notwithstanding the importance of the aforementioned roles, instrumental to the vitality of any army is the quality and capability of its fighting forces. Herein lies a fundamental and all-important role of the senior NCO — that of the trainer. Training is of immense importance in influencing behaviour. It is also critical in imparting those abilities and skills that

understand the past and present before one takes such a bold and consequence-ridden action as to try to define the future. It is sheer folly to attempt any changes to the senior NCO corps without a full and comprehensive understanding of their traditional roles and responsibilities.

Land Force Command, in its seminal doctrinal publication *Canada’s Army*, states that senior NCOs “...are the link connecting soldiers to their officers and officers to their soldiers. Their role is to translate the intentions of commanders into action.”<sup>16</sup> This interpretation is rooted in law. The *Queen’s Regulations and Orders* specify the general responsibilities of all non-commissioned officers. These include the observance and enforcement of regulations, rules, orders and instructions; promoting good discipline, welfare and efficiency of all who are subordinate to the member; and reporting to the proper authority any infringement of the pertinent statutes, regulations, rules, orders and instructions governing the conduct of any person subject to the Code of Service Discipline.<sup>17</sup>



A 105 mm Howitzer crew from 5<sup>e</sup> Régiment d’artillerie légère du Canada firing on a range at Glamoc, Bosnia-Herzegovina, May 2002.

DND Photo BK2002-0156-65d by Cpl Grant Rivallin

will determine the survival of individuals in combat and the success of an army on the battlefield. Although seldom articulated in this manner, the performance of an army rests largely on the skill and professionalism of its senior NCO corps. They teach young recruits the basics of soldiering and military life, and later, in their unit, also teach soldiers the advanced skills necessary to fulfil their role as combat troops. The proficiency of the individuals creates the foundation upon which collective training can be conducted. "We had exceptionally good sergeants," recalled Corporal Denis Flynn, of the 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion in the Second World War. "They knew how to organize and prepare soldiers," he explained. "That was their key function — teaching soldiers how to do their job and survive."<sup>20</sup> His simple recollection underlines a salient point. If the senior NCO corps is deficient, the foundation of a unit and the army in general will be weak, and thus condemn the entire structure to collapse. It is not surprising that Colonel Otter believed that the success of a unit was "in a great measure dependent on the alertness and skill of the NCOs."<sup>21</sup>

What must be remembered is that the NCOs' skill in training is not limited to soldiers. It is commonly recognized as an age-old truth that there is nothing more dangerous than a second lieutenant. This threat is mitigated to a large extent by the senior NCO corps. Notwithstanding the fact that a young officer of this rank is in a superior position to senior NCOs, in reality the education and training of these officers is shaped to a great degree by their NCO subordinates. *Canada's Army* institutionalizes this concept. It articulates that senior NCOs "... have an important responsibility in teaching newly joined officers hands-on skills in the mechanics of soldiering and leadership. This includes offering advice, helping to solve problems, and providing feedback and information."<sup>22</sup> Similarly, American First Sergeant Jeffrey J. Mellinger in an open letter to his NCO corps explained, "Training your platoon leader is not only your job but your responsibility. If he fails, the platoon fails, and so do you." He added, "As the senior and most experienced NCO in the platoon, you must pass on the benefit of that wisdom and experience to your platoon leader as well as to the soldiers."<sup>23</sup>

The importance of the NCO's role as a trainer was clearly recognized by the German military. For example, in the inter-war years, NCOs were career professionals who were carefully selected and enjoyed considerable prestige in society. Upon completing his military career, the German NCO was guaranteed a pension of 1,500 marks, as well as preferen-

tial hiring in the civil service, railroads, and the postal system.<sup>24</sup> Tom Clancy, a recognized expert on military affairs, and American General Fredrick M. Franks, a former commander of Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) and the Commander of VII Corps during the Gulf War in 1990-91, provide a more contemporary view of the importance of the senior NCO corps as trainers. They wrote:

The years of fighting in Vietnam had drawn Europe-based forces down to unacceptable strengths. Worse, the insatiable appetite for personnel had stripped our forces of officer leadership, and almost destroyed the Army's professional noncommissioned corps, long the backbone of the Army. A series of hasty training programs to fill depleted ranks had left the Army with NCOs who all too often were poorly trained in basic leadership techniques. Because the NCO is the first-line leader in the Army, the one person primarily responsible for the basic individual soldier skills on which every successful operation depends, training and discipline suffered. In some cases, it went to hell.<sup>25</sup>

## DISCIPLINE

**L**ockstep with the requirement to train individuals is the imposition and enforcement of discipline. Once again, the senior NCO has always been the linchpin. He inculcates discipline through personal example and training. By his words and actions he defines to the soldiers what is acceptable behaviour and what is not. It is the senior NCO that most effectively promulgates, explains and enforces directives, orders and policies. This should not be surprising, for it is the result of the close, direct and daily contact



A Lord Strathcona's Horse Cougar on patrol in central Kosovo, July 1999.

between a senior NCO and his troops. "From the perspective of a line company enlisted man," explained one Second World War veteran, "our day to day lives were impacted intensely by NCOs. They were the flesh and blood leaders we knew."<sup>26</sup> This is why, historically, senior NCOs have been an invaluable resource to the army, and often the difference between success and failure on operations.

An example of the catastrophic results of a failure in discipline was clearly evident in the Canadian Airborne Regiment during its deployment to Somalia in 1992-93. Years of poor manning practices, a large number of weak NCOs (as well as officers) and a failure to maintain discipline within the unit led directly to the torture killing of a Somali youth. Incredibly, although evidence has shown that both NCOs and officers were aware, and/or should have been aware that a beating of a detainee was transpiring, nothing was done to stop the killing in time. This transgression became cataclysmic, and combined with other events, eventually led to the disbandment of the unit, the first in Canadian history as a result of perceived disciplinary problems.<sup>27</sup>

### MENTOR AND MOTIVATOR

The importance of discipline in the military to ensure the subjugation of personal will to that of the institution, as well as the NCO's role in achieving this, is unquestioned. But the true value of the senior NCO cannot be really appreciated by simply detailing individual responsibilities. That is to miss their historical contribution to the army. Beyond being administrator and trainer, the senior NCO is a mentor, motivator and often parent figure to his soldiers. His actions instill trust, loyalty and ensure performance in the most trying conditions. During the Second World War, 'mother' became German slang among the field soldiers to denote the senior sergeant in a company. The rationale behind this is not difficult to comprehend. For instance, Karl Fuchs, who served in such a position, wrote home to his father during the war, "I've become such an integral part of my company that I couldn't leave it ever again."<sup>28</sup> Similarly, Hans Werner Woltersdorf asserted, "my unit was my home, my family, which I had to protect."<sup>29</sup>

Dr. John McManus's study of the American combat soldier in the Second World War replicated the German experience. He found that in most cases the natural leaders in combat were the NCOs. One veteran's account was typical of his finding:

[The platoon sergeant] was caring and wanted to make sure his men had what they needed. He boosted morale. He checked weapons every day, made sure the men had dry socks. He hovered over us like a mother hen.<sup>30</sup>

As already eluded to in the anecdotes, nowhere is the senior NCO's importance easier to ascertain than during combat or operations in general. It is here that the senior NCO proves his undisputed title as the backbone of the army. He becomes the key to operational

success, turning the commander's intent into action. It is in operations that the sum of all responsibilities and tasks of the senior NCO are welded together — where he acts as technician, tactician and leader.

### TECHNICIAN, TACTICIAN AND LEADER

The senior NCO's role as technician is clearly evident. His comprehensive knowledge of weapons and equipment as a result of his technical training and the instruction of others makes him an invaluable advisor to officers and instructor/supervisor to soldiers. His ability to ensure the care, maintenance and first line repair of various unit material is instrumental to unit effectiveness, particularly during the immediacy and stresses of operations.

But of paramount importance to the success of a unit is the senior NCO's role as tactician and combat leader. Many may argue the sobriquet of tactician. After all, he simply carries out orders. During the First World War, the German NCO, similar to that of most other nations, "primarily served his men as a model of military toughness, a disciplinarian and enforcer of military regulations and 'discourager' to the *Drueckeberger* (slacker) in combat, but not as a model battlefield tactician."<sup>31</sup> But this soon changed with the evolution of mechanized warfare. In the Second World War, the concept of the senior NCO as a tactician was simply unavoidable. If for no other reason, casualties forced them to take on this responsibility. "As a Platoon Sergeant, 4 Platoon, 'B' Company, [1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Parachute Battalion]," recalled Sergeant R.F. Anderson, "there were many times in the field when I had no Officer by reason of casualty or illness. This meant a delay in getting a replacement which had to come from England, so in many cases companies were led by senior NCOs."<sup>32</sup> Fellow paratrooper Corporal Dan Hartigan agreed. "We lost over 50 percent of our officers on D-Day," he explained, "15 of the 27, I believe."<sup>33</sup> He added, "the fighting in the weeks that followed turned from an officer's war to a senior NCO's war." McManus's study supports this anecdotal evidence. "With surprising frequency," he concluded, "combat soldiers looked to their sergeants for leadership day in and day out in combat. A major reason for that was the turnover in officers."<sup>34</sup>

But the claim of tactician is not built exclusively on the senior NCO's ability to become a battlefield replacement for officer casualties. The nature of his position within the army, not to mention the established doctrine, necessitates this. One of Israel's outstanding field commanders, Yigal Allon, proclaimed that the great battles of the 1948-49 War, the Sinai Campaign in 1956 and the Six Day War in 1967, were "won in the NCO courses of the *Haganah* and the *Palmach*." He explained:

The most brilliant plan devised by the most capable general depends for its tactical execution on the section-leaders. Poor section-leaders may ruin the best-laid plans; first-rate section-leaders will often save badly devised plans. This is for one simple reason: the section-leader is the sole level of command that maintains

constant and direct contact with the men who bear the brunt of the actual fighting. It follows, then, that the section-leader is to be trained as a tactical commander and as an educator of his men. [In the Israeli Defence Force] section-leaders are trained to command independently in the field in every instance in which they are required to operate alone with their units. In regular combat, moreover, when the section-leader acts within the framework of his platoon and under orders from his superior officer, he still requires a high standard of knowledge and an ability to sum up the situation.<sup>35</sup>

Whether the designation of tactician is accepted or not, in the end, the NCO's primary function in combat is still one of leading his men against an enemy to achieve a military objective. To accomplish this he must provide leadership, direction and guidance. Moreover, he must render psychological as well as physical support by furnishing an example of courage, a sense of calm and a presence of mind, regardless of surrounding turmoil. In addition, throughout the operation, the senior NCO must remain with the element that is closest to the enemy and, therefore, danger.

This reality is the ultimate proof of the NCO's undeniable importance to the efficiency of the army. It is generally accepted that leaderless groups usually become inactive. The provision of this leadership, often in the face of chaos, routinely falls to the senior NCO. This is only natural: after all, in relation to his men, he represents the first level of command. To the NCO cascades the easily quoted, yet more difficult to execute, task of 'closing with and engaging the enemy.'

In this endeavour, the NCO's presence becomes all-important. Of a group of combat veterans surveyed, 89 percent emphasized the importance of getting frequent instructions from leaders when in a tight spot. They felt that coolness in combat was contagious. In fact, 94 percent of the respondents believed that "men feel they fought better after observing other men behaving calmly in a dangerous situation."<sup>36</sup> Quite simply, "men like to follow an experienced man.... [An] experienced man knows how to accomplish objectives with a minimum of risk. He sets an example of coolness and efficiency which impels similar behaviour in others."<sup>37</sup> For this reason, it is not surprising that studies of Second World War combat veterans indicated that in respect to courage, 42 percent expected it of their NCOs, who they most closely related to and relied on, while only 30 percent expected it of their officers.<sup>38</sup>

Anecdotal evidence provides some graphic examples. "I was getting jittery," confessed Private Alexandre Huton, "but the sergeant was steady as a rock. What a soldier!" He further elaborated:

We moved again, this time over a cratered field, the sergeant always moving in front of us. Twice he stopped and dug his toes in the dirt, then he lead [sic] us around a mine. That was typical of the sergeant; he tried everything

himself first before he would allow the rest to follow. When we came to wide dikes the sergeant swam across first to see if we could make it across. We moved up on the main road again, the sergeant stopping to cut the Jerry telephone wires with his bayonet and again we had to fall flat while Jerry field guns rolled past us. The sarge was always taking note of their equipment and direction. He didn't miss a trick...I'd lost track of where we were going but the sarge was leading us and we took his word for it.<sup>39</sup>

Similarly, the actions of another NCO, Company Sergeant-Major (CSM) John Kemp, reinforce the above image. One official report recorded, "CSM Kemp, who had assisted in organizing the men for the attack, with complete disregard for his own safety, led his men against the farm house in spite of the heavy fire. By his personal example, he enabled the small force to overrun the enemy defences and capture the position."<sup>40</sup> In a similar vein, assessments of combat soldiers provide a clear idea of not only the expectations of the men, but also the importance of the NCO. For example, CSM Charlie Martin of the Queen's Own Rifles was described by his men as a rifleman's dream sergeant. He was by all accounts 'an outstanding soldier,' who could always be found up front "even if there was only a small patrol action." To those who knew him, he "was a 'come on' not a 'go on' leader."<sup>41</sup>

Undisputably, the senior NCO's responsibilities as administrator, trainer, disciplinarian, mentor, leader and tactician are pivotal to the efficacy of an army. Their example, close proximity and relationship to their soldiers enable them to motivate individuals in the face of fear and danger while accomplishing tasks. Quite simply, they are the glue that holds an army together. Thus, regardless of technological and scientific developments, as long as human conflict exists, the requirement for men and women to go in harm's way will remain. And so too will the traditional roles and responsibilities of the senior NCO.

## EDUCATING THE PROFESSIONAL NCO

That being said, there are of course some things that must evolve. The previously discussed new complexity in conflict,<sup>42</sup> combined with the CNN effect, often couched in terms of the 'strategic soldier' and exacerbated by societal expectations, necessitates that a greater emphasis be placed on the education of the NCO instead of the long-standing exclusive focus on training.

"The large formation, closely controlled and highly supervised troops in the warfare models of the Cold War era have given way to scattered small units in distant countries," argues Colonel Paul Maillet, the DND director of Defence Ethics, "who have reduced support readily available in ambiguous and high intensity ethical situations." He adds, "A wrong decision in the glare of the media can have far reaching consequences that can affect peacekeeping mandates and strategic and national policies and aims."<sup>43</sup>

Herein lies the paradox. This realization underlines the need for both the retention of the traditional roles and responsibilities of the senior NCO corps, as well as the requirement to change the manner in which the individual NCO is prepared to fulfill his function. The traditional stress on training — “a predictable response to a predictable situation” — must be better balanced with education, defined by Professor Ron Haycock as “the reasoned response to an unpredictable situation — critical thinking in the face of the unknown.”<sup>44</sup> Simply put, the prescribed application of ideas and methods, as well as drills and checklists, have a purpose and functional utility, but this methodology is no longer enough to equip leaders to cope with and function in the complex post-modern world. “There are no standard ‘drills,’” remarked Art Eggleton, the former Minister of National Defence (MND), “for the many complex challenges that our troops confront in places like Bosnia.”<sup>45</sup>

Undeniably, senior NCOs, in the same manner as officers, must be taught how to think and use abstract concepts to assist in the resolution of the practical problems they may face. They must expand their knowledge and acquire a broader outlook, as well as develop greater socio-political skills. Furthermore, they must become comfortable with ambiguity and change. Critical thinking and innovation must become their guiding light, instead of the traditional heavy reliance on written procedures given in technical publications and uni-dimensional experience. To achieve this, education must be aggressively pursued.

The requirement for greater education is also rooted in the necessity of dealing with today’s soldiers. Pierre de Reil, French Minister of War in 1793, wrote “as long as the soldier believes himself equal in intelligence and knowledge to his commanders, he will not obey.”<sup>46</sup> With the average recruit entering the CF increasingly with a minimum of a high school education or better, the senior NCO is required to continually advance his own base of knowledge so that he can not only deal with the ambiguity and complexity of operations, but also so that he can teach, train, motivate and lead progressively more sophisticated subordinates.<sup>47</sup> The old days of drill sergeants castigating recruits or soldiers with derogatory, expletive-filled expressions, or taking a ‘problem individual’ out behind the wood shed to ‘sort him out,’ are not only inappropriate but are also long gone. Senior NCOs

must understand and be capable of motivating their new charges, despite generational differences and new societal expectations, norms and values. Once again, education is the key.

## EMPLOYING ABILITIES AND SKILLS

**I**ncreasing the education of the senior NCO corps is linked to another fundamental change that must occur — employment of individuals by abilities and skills. With the evolution of military affairs and the increasing educational profile of both NCOs and officers, the traditional practice of filling organizational positions exclusively by rank must evolve into a more flexible system of focusing on individual capability. For instance, staff positions in various level headquarters or schools that are normally filled by junior officers — UN staff positions or military observers, or even some operational positions such as platoon commander billets — can be filled as a normal posting (and not just as a temporary expedient) by qualified senior NCOs. This dramatic change is necessary for a number of reasons. First, it helps alleviate organizational shortfalls that stem from the current CF recruiting and retention crisis. Second, it fulfils the requirement to recognize individuals for their abilities, and rewards those who have put forth the effort to increase their education and skill sets. Third, it allows for personal and professional challenge and growth, so necessary for attracting and retaining individuals in the CF.<sup>48</sup>

The challenge before the CF is a daunting one — how to retain the timeless strength of the senior NCO corps that has made it the veritable backbone of the army, yet ensuring its evolution to keep it a viable and relevant force in the future. The key to success lies in understanding the role and responsibilities of the senior NCO corps, and ensuring that they are given the educational foundation to provide them with the necessary knowledge and thinking strategies required to deal with ambiguity and change. In addition, it is also important to recognize that as long as there is human conflict, regardless of technological and scientific breakthroughs, the ability of the senior NCO to train and lead well-trained soldiers into chaos, danger and turmoil will remain the definitive test of an army’s efficacy.



## NOTES

1. Desmond Morton, *When Your Number's Up* (Toronto: Random House of Canada, 1993), p. 95.
2. B.H. Liddell Hart, *Strategy, 2nd ed.* (New York: Meridian, 1991), p. 25.
3. In 1987, Georgi Arbatov, advisor to Mikhail Gorbachev, announced to the West, “We are going to do to you the worst thing imaginable — We are going to deprive you of your enemy.” Pascal Boniface, *The Will to Powerlessness. Reflections on Our Global Age* (Kingston: Queen’s Quarterly, 1999), p. 37.
4. Boutros Boutros-Ghali, *An Agenda for*

5. *Peace* 1995, 2nd ed. (New York: United Nations, 1995), p. 7.
5. Since 1989 the CF deployed on approximately 67 missions, compared to 25 missions during the period 1948-1989.
6. Paul van Riper and Robert H. Scales, “Preparing for War in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century,” *Parameters*, Autumn 1997, p. 5.
7. Peter C. Newman, *Canadian Revolution 1985-1995: From Deference to Defiance* (Toronto: Viking Press, 1995).
8. Evidence of this was clearly manifested by the government’s decision in 1995 to estab-

- lish a Commission of Inquiry into the Deployment of Canadian Forces to Somalia and, in 1997, to institute the Ministers’ Monitoring Committee to oversee the implementation of recommendations stemming from the aforementioned Commission of Inquiry. The message was simple and clear — the government no longer trusted its military to investigate or correct itself. See also John A. English, *Lament for an Army. The Decline of Canadian Military Professionalism* (Toronto: Irwin Publishing, 1998), pp. 1-8.
9. General M. Baril, “Officership: A

- Personal Reflection," in *Generalship and the Art of the Admiral*, Eds. Bernd Horn and Stephen Harris, (St. Catherines: Vanwell Ltd., 2001), p. 138.
10. Examples abound. For instance, the promulgation of the Department's strategic vision document, *Shaping the Future of Canadian Defence: A Strategy for 2020* in June 1999; the establishment of the Special Advisor to the CDS (Professional Development) in May 1999; the release of *Canadian Officership in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* in May 2001; and the distribution of *People in Defence Beyond 2000* in May 2001.
11. Van Riper and Scales, p. 11. See also Charles J. Dunlap, "21<sup>st</sup> Century Land Warfare: Four Dangerous Myths," *Parameters*, Autumn 1997, pp. 27-37. The four myths are: 1- Our most likely future adversaries will be like us. 2- We can safely downsize our military in favor of smaller, highly trained forces equipped with high-technology weapons. 3- We can achieve information superiority and even dominance in future conflicts. 4- Modern technology will make future war more humane, if not bloodless.
12. George and Meredith Friedman, *The Future of War* (New York: St Martin's Griffin, 1998), p. xi.
13. Williamson Murray, "Does Military Culture Matter?", *Orbis*, Winter 1999, pp. 37-38.
14. Van Riper and Scales, p. 5.
15. John A. English, *Failure in High Command* (Ottawa: The Golden Dog Press, 1995), p. 318.
16. Land Force Command, *Canada's Army* (Ottawa: DND, 1998), p. 52.
17. *Queen's Orders and Regulations*, Article 5.01.
18. Major-General Sir William Dillon Otter, *The Guide: A Manual for the Canadian Militia*, 9th ed. (Toronto: Copp, Clark Company, 1914), pp. 21-22. See also Ronald G. Haycock, "The Stuff of Armies: The NCO Throughout History," in *Backbone of the Army. Non-Commissioned Officers in the Future Army*, ed. Douglas L. Bland (Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001), pp. 9-23.
19. An interesting anecdote provides some clarity. During the Second World War, a promising young sergeant was asked to take his commission. He refused. "You see," he said, "what I am really interested in is the personal contacts with the men and I know that if I become an officer I should not have the same chance of helping them as I have now." Lieutenant R. Bernays, "Man-Officer Relationships," *The Army Quarterly*, Vol XLVI, No. 2, August 1943, p. 253.
20. Corporal Denis Flynn, interview with author 18 April 2001.
21. Colonel Otter, as quoted in Haycock, p. 18.
22. *Canada's Army*, pp. 52-53.
23. First Sergeant Jeffrey J. Mellinger, "Open Letter to Three NCOs," *Infantry*, May-June 1989, p. 20. This aspect of a senior NCO's responsibility is universal. The famous British Lieutenant-Colonel Colin Michel (of the Argylls) wrote, "My platoon sergeant, a tough little man called Dempsey was obviously just the professional I needed to nurse me into my new job." Colin Mitchell, *Having Been a Soldier* (London: Mayflower Books), p. 41.
24. James S. Corum, *The Roots of Blitzkrieg* (Kansas: University of Kansas, 1992), p. 11.
25. Tom Clancy with General Fred Franks, Jr. (ret.), *Into the Storm* (New York: Berkley Books, 1998), p. 85.
26. John C. McManus, *The deadly brotherhood. The American combat soldier in World War II* (Novato: Presidio, 1998), p. 219.
27. See Report of the Commission of Inquiry into the Deployment of Canadian Forces to Somalia, *Dishonoured Legacy. The Lessons of the Somalia Affair* (Ottawa: Canadian Government Publishing, 1997), Vol. 1, pp. 244-247 and 324; and Vol. 2, pp. 429-470. See also Bernd Horn, *Bastard Sons - A Critical Examination of the Canadian Airborne Experience, 1942-1995* (St. Catherines: Vanwell Publishing, 2001).
28. Stephen G. Fritz, *Frontsoldaten. The German Soldier in World War II* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press), pp. 18-19.
29. *Ibid*, p.19.
30. McManus, pp. 218-220.
31. Karl H. Theile, *Beyond Monsters and Clowns. The Combat SS* (New York: University Press of America, 1997), p. 99.
32. Sergeant R.F. Anderson, letter to author, 19 December 2000.
33. Corporal Dan Hartigan, interview with author, 30 October 2000.
34. McManus, p. 202.
35. John A. English, *On Infantry* (New York: Praeger, 1984), p. 191.
36. John Dollard, *Fear in Battle*, (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press 1944), p. 28. See also Elmar Dinter, *Hero or Coward* (London: Frank Cass, 1985), and S.J. Rachman, *Fear and Courage* (San Francisco: W.H. Freeman and Company, 1978).
37. Dollard, p. 44. It is generally accepted that "the presence of careful and thoughtful leadership builds up a force which helps resist fear."
38. Elmar Dinter, *Hero or Coward*, p. 53.
39. L.S.B. Shapiro, "I Dropped Alone," *MacLean's*, 1 August 1944, pp. 5-6.
40. Jean E. Portugal, *We Were There. The Army. A Record for Canada*, Vol. 2 of 7 (Toronto: The Royal Canadian Military Institute, 1998), p. 968.
41. *Ibid*, p. 706.
42. US Army generals who have served in both classic warfare and conflict resolution environments assert that the type of complexity found in conflict resolution, such as Bosnia, "does not exist on the modern battlefield." They add that "Bosnia holds a level of complexity and frustration that is new." Quoted in "The Civilian-Military Gap," Online NewsHour, www.pbs.org/plweb/cgi/fastweb/getd, accessed 10 November 1999.
43. Colonel J.P.M. Maillet, "Defence Ethics Program Ethics and Operations Project," memorandum dated 20 January 2000.
44. Dr. Ronald Haycock, former Dean of Arts, Royal Military College (RMC), "Clio and Mars in Canada: The Need for Military Education," presentation to the Canadian Club, Kingston, Ontario, 11 November 1999.
45. Speaking Notes for the Honourable Art Eggleton, Minister of National Defence, Canadian Forces College, 19 June 2000, p.10.
46. John A. Lynn, *Bayonets of the Republic* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1984), p. 89.
47. More and more one hears of the "corporal with a Masters Degree" as the way of the future. Although there are several cases such as this in the CF, largely in the Reserves, a few do not a trend make. The argument that soon there will be no marked difference between the NCO cadre and the officer corps may be considerably premature. These apocalyptic warnings are not new. "The results of popular education have borne fruit," wrote Major R.A.C. Radcliffe in 1943, "and there are to-day a considerable number of men in the ranks who have learnt to think and reason for themselves." He went on to state that the improved education of the men in the ranks made them "more critical of their officers in every way." Major R.A.C. Radcliffe, "Officer-Man Relationships," *The Army Quarterly*, Vol. XLVI, No. 1, May 1943, pp. 114-116. In a similar vein, another account from 1943 revealed, "In the old Army there was a blind obedience, the result of strict discipline, which was often confused with loyalty to one's officers and to the Army. Today there is a much more questioning quality...the N.C.O.s and men nowadays are not blindly loyal to their senior officers just because the latter happen to hold the King's commission. They first wish to satisfy themselves that their officers are thoroughly capable, and, as intelligent men, they take mental note of every action, look and word of their seniors...." C.W. Valentine, "Army Morale and its Relation to Discipline and Efficiency," *The Fighting Forces*, Vol. XX, No. 1, April 1943, p. 24. Although the need for education will become increasingly important at all levels in DND and the CF, it will remain as the predominant difference between non-commissioned members and the officer corps.
48. See Canada, *People in Defence Beyond 2000* (Ottawa: DND, 2001).



Dr. Michael Hennessy, founding Editor of *Canadian Military Journal*, has been awarded the Chief of the Defence Staff Commendation for his work in the set-up of several significant Defence projects. CDS Commendations are generally awarded only to military members, and awarding this honour to a civilian is quite remarkable. The citation reads as follows:

Dr. Hennessy exemplifies the finest standards of both his academic profession and the Canadian Public Service. His drive and determination have been decisive factors in the establishment of a number of high-priority and deeply significant Defence projects. His initiative and imagination are invariably well placed and right. Without his efforts, the *Canadian Military Journal*, the Advanced Military Studies and National Security Studies Courses and the Leadership Institute would not have reached their present state of maturity.