



AN EXPEDIENT REORGANIZATION: THE NDHQ J-STAFF SYSTEM IN THE GULF WAR¹

by Todd Fitzgerald and Dr. Michael A. Hennessy

In the opening weeks of August 1990, the Canadian Forces (CF) were committed to a large scale, high-intensity war for only the second time in the last half of the 20th century. Iraqi forces met little resistance when they launched a surprise attack against neighbouring Kuwait on the evening of 1 August 1990. By midday on the 2nd, Saddam Hussein had effectively quelled Kuwaiti resistance and gained control of almost one quarter of the world's oil supply.² World condemnation of the invasion came quickly in the form of UN Security Council Resolution 660, which called for the unconditional and immediate withdrawal of Iraqi forces. At the end of November 1990, the United Nations authorized the use of such force as necessary to enforce compliance with Security Council resolutions, and set a deadline of 15 January 1991 for an Iraqi withdrawal from Kuwait. When the deadline passed, Coalition forces launched an air campaign, critically damaging Iraq's radar and command, control and communications networks. After more than a month of aerial bombardment, a well-coordinated and equally effective ground campaign, generally referred to as Operation "Desert Storm", liberated Kuwait in an astounding 100 hours.³ Canada's contribution, eventually termed Operation "Friction", evolved through a series of distinct phases to involve over 2,700 CF personnel operating under the Canadian Joint Headquarters Middle East (JHQME), essentially a Canadian theatre command. But that was not the only command innovation. At NDHQ, commanders and senior officials made every attempt to manage their forces as effectively as possible, but these challenges were made even greater by a cumbersome bureaucratic structure

geared largely for managing the greater Defence Department, rather than overseas operations. The war tested that structure and witnessed its transformation, as NDHQ moved toward establishing the command and control and joint staff system that forms the basis of its current establishment.

Before the war, there had been, over the years, many criticisms of National Defence Headquarters. Indeed, it can be argued that NDHQ had not functioned effectively since it was created by amalgamating Canadian Forces Headquarters (CFHQ) and the civilian Departmental staff in 1972. Until Operation "Friction", NDHQ could properly have been considered the administrative centre of DND, but it was not an operational command centre. Indeed, the terminology then employed within NDHQ to describe itself was the "NDHQ Matrix." The Matrix was hierarchical, but also consisted of many separate horizontal and vertically arranged boxes of responsibility that created 'stove-pipes' and left a good deal of operational management to the environmental commanders and commands such as Canadian Forces Europe (CFE). These subordinate, semi-autonomous commands – CFE, Maritime Command (MARCOM), Air Command (AIRCOM) and Mobile Command (FMC) – owned

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most of the resources dedicated to the conflict in the Gulf. Moreover, prior to the war the elements they contributed had rarely, if ever, operated in a joint fashion. Indeed these commands reflected a prime legacy of the Cold War, where CFE and MARCOM, for instance, were fighting commands responsible for force generation and force employment. Moreover, in doctrine and practice the respective air, land and sea forces of the CF were better prepared to act in combination with their foreign military counterparts than in concert with other components of the CF. Chart 1 illustrates the diverse commands that had to have their supporting roles and functions clarified or controlled by NDHQ in its effort to exercise centralized command and control over the joint force operating in the Gulf.

EVOLUTION

Canadian participation in the war can be seen as three distinct phases – a series of separate operations that together came to be called Operation “Friction”. The CF role developed through Phase 1 – Naval Operations (August to September 1990), Phase 2 – Joint Operations (September to November 1990), and Phase 3 – Joint and Combined Operations (November 1990 to February 1991). During the first, primarily naval phase, the command role of NDHQ remained largely untested as the deployed force followed the Maritime Command chain of command and command philosophy. This changed, however, in the latter two phases, in part because the addition of air and land elements brought conflicting command philosophies and lines of communication that resulted in a need for better coordination of activities from the staff at NDHQ. As a result, NDHQ moved to clarify its role as the central coordinator of operational joint deployments.

Prior to the Gulf War, despite a number of studies and reports pointing to its deficiencies for managing the CF in war, NDHQ remained an institution laden with blurred responsibilities and

duplication of effort. Unfortunately, it took a sudden requirement for joint operational planning to uncover many of the problems within the headquarters. In the spring of 1988 the Chief of the Defence Staff, General Paul Manson, asked NDHQ for a “hostile evacuation” plan for Canadians in Haiti. The plan was formulated without much input from any of the commands and was, as a result, judged to be dangerously inept.⁴ On the advice of Lieutenant-General John de Chastelain, then Assistant Deputy Minister Personnel, General Manson ordered an investigation into NDHQ planning procedures for war. The resulting report, “The Report on the Functions and Organisation of NDHQ in Emergencies and War,”⁵ generally known by the names of its authors as the ‘Little-Hunter Study’, was the “first attempt to define an operational role for the central headquarters since 1968.”⁶ It was clear, NDHQ could not be considered a centre of operations that could “without change, operate as efficiently in the emergencies of war as in peacetime.”⁷ This was undoubtedly a difficult goal to strive for, especially considering the complexity of reconciling peacetime efficiency, the disparate tasks of the NDHQ staff – which range far beyond simply managing the CF side of the defence program – and the imperatives of wartime effectiveness. Nevertheless, the Little-Hunter Study outlined how the headquarters should be organized, and it identified peacetime structures that would allow for the easiest transition to a wartime footing.

As an author of the report has subsequently stated, some of the important problems that NDHQ faced included a structure that was inconsistent with the peace and wartime command responsibilities of the Chief of Defence Staff, and which blurred the responsibilities and functions of military and civilian personnel.⁸ However, before the investigation got underway, it was made clear that NDHQ was to remain a single CF/DND entity, and that the CDS/Deputy Minister ‘diarchy’ would continue to be a defining characteristic of the headquarters.⁹

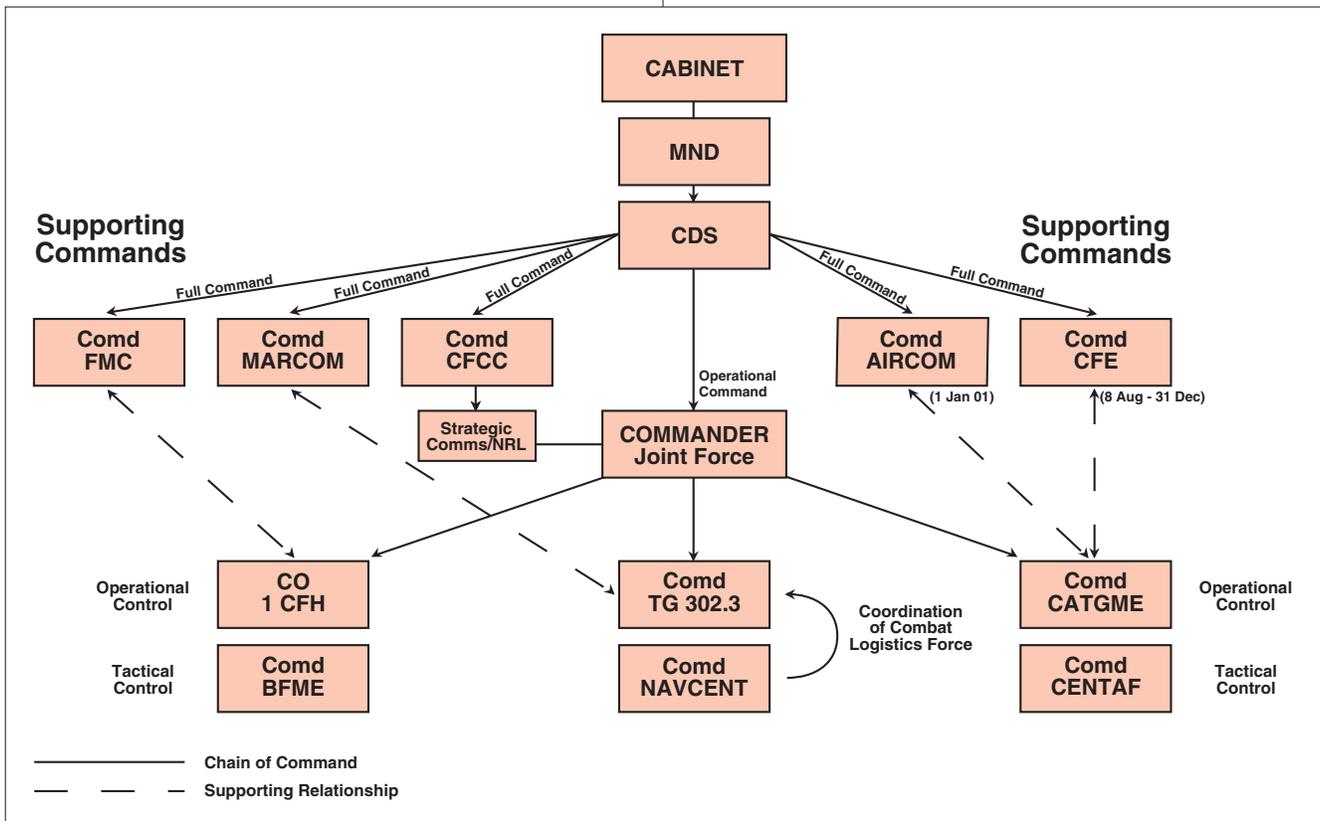


Chart 1 – Operation “Friction”: Command and Control.

These restrictions limited the study before it began, but the Little-Hunter Study did manage to conclude that the focus of NDHQ was unclear, and that the roles and responsibilities of various staffs were frequently duplicated. Debates within NDHQ ensured that the transformation recommended by the Little-Hunter Study could not be implemented, even after the driving force behind the investigation, General John de Chastelain, was appointed Chief of the Defence Staff. However, under General de Chastelain, an emergency plan was written, and it served as the blueprint for the rapid transformation to the staff organization at NDHQ that was implemented during the Gulf War. Why it was impossible to develop a more functional command organization before the war remains a matter for speculation, but it surely concerned the reluctance of either part of the CDS-DM diarchy to surrender their prerogatives.

CRISES AND CHANGE

Just prior to the Gulf War in the summer of 1990, the effectiveness of National Defence Headquarters was tested. An armed stand-off which began on 11 July between Mohawks and the developers of a golf course near Oka, Québec, brought a request for Aid to the Civil Power from the provincial government. An ad hoc crisis management committee, which included leading cabinet ministers, was established, and the creation of a Joint Staff philosophy was begun within National Defence Headquarters.¹⁰ The Oka crisis was controlled largely from NDHQ, with only occasional interference from “the deputy minister and other bureaucrats whose authority at NDHQ was unclear to many staff officers.”¹¹ These difficulties aside, the management of this domestic crisis provided the early framework for managing the CF contribution to the Gulf War. The experience of Oka, followed by the Gulf crisis, gave sufficient impetus to act on the emergency plan that had been framed earlier under de Chastelain.

Following the Iraqi invasion, steps were taken to implement that plan. In brief, the command relationships, reporting lines, and operational functions of a number of already existing staff positions was clarified by having them designated as parts of the Headquarters Joint (J) Staff. These steps in effect transformed NDHQ into an operational command organization. Initially, a ‘Battle Staff’ consisting of General and Flag officers holding senior positions in NDHQ was formed under the CDS to guide the higher direction of the Canadian military effort. In practice, however, the real work fell

to a Crisis Action Team (CAT) drawn from elements of the newly designated J-Staff operating under the Deputy Chief of the Defence Staff (DCDS), who had been designated the J-3 Chief of Operations. In theory, the Battle Staff relied on the Crisis Action Team for daily operational planning and monitoring. The J-Staff drew together elements of the NDHQ Matrix that had an operations function, and put them into a direct line to the National Defence Operations Centre (NDOC). In practice, the Battle Staff proved to be largely redundant – its members were too embroiled in their already busy routines. Instead, the CDS tended to work directly with the DCDS/J-3 and the rest of the CAT, i.e., the sub-heads of the various J-Staff sections. By the second week of August 1990 these organizations were functional and the DCDS assumed the job of coordinator and chief planner for the operation. Chart II shows the revised staff organization at NDHQ.

Instituting such changes while managing a war effort created many problems, but these were not immediately apparent because the initial stages of the Canadian military response was almost wholly a naval affair. When the crisis broke, the Vice Chief of Defence Staff was the Acting CDS, and both he and the Director-General Military Plans and Operations were products of Maritime Command. This well suited the initial naval deployment; happenstance clearly eased the naval preparation phase. As a result, naval officers became more prominent in the operational management process. This was an indication that despite the notional concept of NDHQ as a joint headquarters, the reality was somewhat different. Thus, during the initial phase, Operation “Friction” was almost entirely planned by MARCOM and subject to naval planning methods, means and resources.¹²

While this system proved functional, it raised an important issue. The existence of unclear areas of authority and accountability within NDHQ before the crisis meant that “command and administration” was often decided by the individuals and their personal networks within the organization, rather than resulting from plans and responsibilities inherent in centralized staff positions.¹³ The limits of the former approach became clear as Operation “Friction” moved into its second and third phases. Commanders during the Gulf War complained, especially loudly during the transition to the second and third phases, that planning and direction from NDHQ was inadequate, and that command and control arrangements were unclear.¹⁴ In a number of instances this led to commanders in Halifax, Winnipeg and Lahr, Germany arguing over

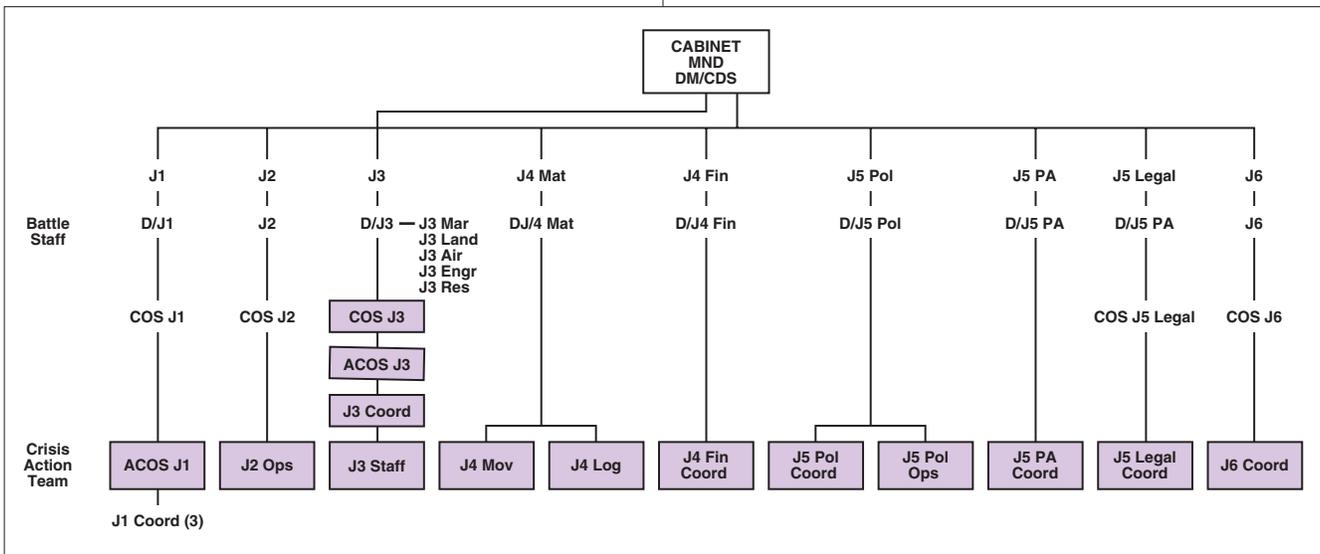


Chart II – The NDHQ Joint Staff System.

the control of their units deployed to the Gulf, with several subordinate commands attempting to influence the conduct of operations. To support their individual and conflicting cases, they “drew inferences from the missions and intelligence reports”, sometimes at the direct expense of other commands.¹⁵

COMMAND TENSIONS

Some of the responsibility for this situation must be attributed to the CDS’s decision to implement an untried plan for war management. Hasty changes to the roles and missions of staff elements in the throes of deploying forces to the Gulf and managing the Oka crisis resulted in confusion and debate. A hastily formed command organization – the new Battle Staff/CAT/J-staff system – could be expected to encounter some conflict with previous and unmodified pre-existing command organizations. In particular, a number of contentious issues arose as the J-Staff moved to usurp some prerogatives from other commands and organizations.

In the realm of J-Staff functions, NDHQ acted to wrest control of the operation from the respective commands that traditionally would have been left to run things. This was particularly true of movement and air control. Air Transport Group (ATG) in Trenton found itself largely superseded by the J-4 Movement staff, even though J-4 Movement did not have the manpower or other resources to fully duplicate the facilities available to the ATG. Further, as the J-Staff drew together pre-existing staff billets without increasing the size of the staff, there were often instances when the J-Staff was incapable of true 24-hour/7-day a week operations; some elements, for example, insisted on standard weekend leave routine. In several instances this resulted in urgent information not being acted upon until after a weekend had passed. Similarly, the busy J-Staff had to reconsider its original plan for deployment of the Field Hospital when the Judge Advocate General pointed out that co-locating the field security element with the hospital could forfeit the hospital’s protected status under the Geneva Conventions.

Strategic communications also proved a major point of contention. The CF possessed only limited mobile long-range, secure strategic communications means. Equipment essential for secure,

timely and dedicated Canadian communications was both rare and new. So new, in fact, that to establish the in-theatre rear-link secure communications system, the officer serving as J-6 Communications had to re-locate from NDHQ to the Middle East to establish the system on the ground.

At other times, NDHQ moved into a ‘micro-management’ mode. For instance, the CDS ordered Canadian combat aircraft not to release their empty fuel tanks in order to save costs. More important examples include NDHQ setting a higher priority for movement of the field hospital into the theatre than moving equipment essential for converting aircraft to the bomber role already assigned to them. Similarly, the CDS announced that naval vessels would remain on station while the crews would be rotated out of service. This decision was made with little or no advice from the naval staff, and indeed contravened plans made at MARCOM in Halifax. Eventually, the CDS had to issue a clarification which reversed his early decision – the ships would be rotated – but this only after repeated protests from MARCOM.

The Ottawa staff also realized that a more sophisticated and streamlined method of operational management was required as the forces deployed to the Gulf continued to grow in number. The decision was thus made to create a Joint Headquarters in the Middle East under a single Canadian commander, Commodore Ken Summers, which was, in turn, to be supported by the Joint Operational Staff in Ottawa. Commodore Summers was to enjoy operational command over all Canadian Forces in the Gulf, while heading the first headquarters to command Canadian joint and combined combat operations since the Second World War.¹⁶

Before this could be accomplished, however, a great deal of planning was required. Ironically, NDHQ had little joint operational command experience from which to draw guidance. Consequently, General de Chastelain had to turn to the Australian Defence Forces as a model. The Australians had recently adopted a joint task force concept that seemed appropriate for Canadian needs. After what must have been an awkward meeting with the military attaché in the Australian High Commission, NDHQ had the basis for what was to become the CF command and control structure in the Gulf.¹⁷

Beyond the issue of reconciling the control functions of the new J-Staff with pre-existing command relationships, a debate arose over the “Command Concept” formulated by the CDS. Initial directives from the CDS describing command and control relationships were considered by some who received them as unclear and not conforming to Canadian military norms. Perhaps the clearest example of this confusion came from the use of the term “full command”. For Operation “Friction”, the CDS’s command concept stated he had ‘full command’ of all Canadian Forces in the Gulf, but went on to say that supporting commands would also retain “full command” of their deployed forces.¹⁸ At the beginning of the crisis, there were a number of cases in which commanders fought to maintain control over different components of the forces in the Gulf. An example having to do with logistics and supply is appropriate here. With weak doctrine in the area of joint planning, and a central headquarters in which the ‘command’ role of civilians is sometimes unclear, one unsettling situation arose in which the Assistant Deputy Minister (ADM) Materiel argued that he should have “full command” of the logistics units deployed to the Gulf.¹⁹ Such an argument, made by



Operation “Salon”, Confrontation at Oka, Québec, July 1990.

DND Photo ISC 90-591 by J.P.M. Lamontagne

a civilian who had no command authority over military forces, is indicative of dangerously blurred lines of command within NDHQ. For many involved, this was a new concept that needed much greater clarity than provided by the CDS. This problem was addressed by a sharp message from Lieutenant-General Kent Foster, Commander of Mobile Command.

As a result of the ensuing confusion, General de Chastelain had to issue a clarifying order on 22 October, in which he summarized the role of NDHQ, JHQME, and supporting commands.²⁰ The clarification did not abandon the concept, but emphasized that all pre-existing command responsibilities for those providing forces that would go to the Gulf were not superseded. Rather, it stated that responsibility passed through to the local theatre commander, who would make *operational decisions* while relying on the force-generating commanders to maintain supply, personnel, etc. Despite such clarification, this remained a contentious concept and was revisited repeatedly throughout the war.

As a subsequent study has stated, “the majority of personnel involved in Operation FRICTION were the product of diverging environmental doctrines, and had little or no previous experience in joint operations.”²¹ As a result, formulating new operating procedures and doctrine was difficult as there were very few starting points that were common to all three environments. In fact, when senior officials met in October 1990 to address NDHQ’s shortcoming in joint doctrine and to design an appropriate headquarters for the Middle East, much of their time was wasted in an attempt to reconcile differences of opinion on the philosophy of joint operations.²²

Notwithstanding these and many similar teething problems, once the NDHQ J-Staff system and JHQME were in place, things began to operate much more smoothly. The Joint Headquarters Middle East was responsible for operational planning, communications, intelligence analysis and dissemination, along with supply and logistics for all Canadian Forces serving in the Gulf.²³ Originally envisioned as a very small command cell, this headquarters grew to over 300 personnel, and it would have been considerably larger if units had not been forced to pare out many support personnel (in part to avoid breaching an arbitrary strength limit set in Ottawa). Such tight resources resulted in a certain lack of depth, flexibility and responsiveness – weaknesses common to many *ad hoc* systems. Nevertheless, most importantly, JHQME provided Commodore Summers with a single line of communication to the J-Staff working in NDHQ.

The effectiveness of this system was demonstrated on 18 February 1991, when Captain (N) Duncan Miller, Commander of the Naval Task Force, requested permission to enter waters beyond the northern limit of Canada’s patrolling area to be able to go to the assistance of a US cruiser damaged by a mine. As Miller attests:

The answer to go ahead came back in 29 minutes! It was amazing, especially in contrast to what happened in December 1989 when a Canadian destroyer operating just off the east coast of Canada requested permission to forcibly board an illegal fishing vessel which refused to stop. It took several hours for the Canadian ship to get the required approval, and by that time the American ship was back in home waters.²⁴

The new command and control structure was clearly less cumbersome than navigating the traditional NDHQ Matrix, and it provided commanders in the Gulf with quick access to higher authorities in Ottawa.

Central organization and planning proved to be vital to the mission of sustaining the forces overseas. In keeping with this concept, Maritime Command created the Canadian Maritime Logistics Detachment as an organization within the Joint Headquarters Middle East (JHQME).²⁵ This logistics detachment served as an important support mechanism for the Canadian Task Force and provided central logistical support under the direction of Commodore Ken Summers, the Joint Force Commander in the Gulf. Expansion of the Canadian commitment placed even greater strain on NDHQ, however, where detailed planning and coordination was required. This task fell to the Logistics and Movements Coordination Centre at NDHQ. The Centre was responsible for the strategic allocation of all Canadian Forces resources, and it made its presence felt



HMCS *Terra Nova* en route to the Persian Gulf to participate in Operation “Friction”.

DND Photo HSC90-1069-582 by WO Loane

almost immediately.²⁶ The Centre was able to make some use of the US–Canada bilateral Integrated Lines of Communication Agreement (ILOC). The ILOC allowed either country to have their lift requirements programmed into the other’s lift fleets (land/air/sea) on a cost recovery schedule. These arrangements did not allow Canada to set priorities, and at times was more costly than commercial charter.

The system did not, however, function flawlessly. Still, commanders in the Middle East were generally pleased with the logistical support they received while deployed. Much of this can be attributed to the fact that the Canadian Forces devoted almost all of its strategic air transport and supply resources to support the forces in the Middle East.²⁷

Intelligence coordination also posed a challenge for NDHQ. The proximity of the Canadian task force to the major US intelligence fusion centre in Saudi Arabia meant that the local commander often possessed better intelligence than he was getting from the

central staff. Canada did not have a large, robust intelligence fusion centre, and this left Canadian Forces intelligence officers in the awkward position of having their information repeatedly challenged by the local commander.²⁸

CONCLUSION

Beyond all other factors, the strategic operational management of the Canadian Forces in the Persian Gulf War was characterized by innovative thinking and individual dedication. This is a particularly salient point in light of the limitations in both

materiel and doctrine which our decision-makers faced. At the beginning of the crisis, NDHQ was not formally or doctrinally structured for the functional demands of war;²⁹ however, it did have an emergency reorganization plan that it was, with some effort, able to implement. Like all untried plans, it had to be modified in its execution. Nevertheless, the war proved to be the impetus for changes that many had long advocated. The Gulf Crisis highlighted and served to address these neglected areas of Canadian defence management. The war accelerated the development of DND's crisis management system, and provided a catalyst for the adoption of a joint operations philosophy.³⁰ Moreover, it provided the first opportunity to conduct a major operation outside of the formal alliance relationships that had characterized Canadian Forces combined operations planning for the previous four decades. As a result, flexibility and innovation became the keys to success. Significant and serious changes had to be made within NDHQ in order to facilitate the deployment and management of the joint force. Without over-drawing the lessons, to everyone's credit much was done quickly, and quick action mitigated problems for the operational forces. And to the credit of all, getting the operational job done right remained the central focus. After a formal review of that wartime experience, many of the changes made during the war were codified to serve as the basis for the current J-Staff organization within NDHQ. That system continues to be reformed and refined to better manage the CF in crises and war.³¹



Canadian CF-18 pilots on the flight line in Qatar during Operation "Friction", January 1991.



NOTES

1. This essay is based on a more comprehensive study undertaken for the Canadian Forces College in 1998.
2. Major Jean Morin and Lieutenant-Commander Richard Gimblett, *Operation Friction* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1997), p. 13.
3. For a discussion of the ground campaign from an American perspective, see Richard M. Swain, 'Lucky War': *Third Army in Desert Storm* (Fort Leavenworth: US Army Command and Staff College Press, 1997). For a broader account, see John Pimlott and Stephen Badsey, *The Gulf War Assessed* (London: Arms and Armour Press, 1992).
4. Douglas Bland, *Chiefs of Defence*, (Toronto: Brown Books Co., 1995), p. 191. See also, Lieutenant-Colonel J.V. Arbuckle, "Command and Control of Canadian Forces in Combined Operations," *Canadian Defence Quarterly*, Vol.25, No.1 (September 1995).
5. NDHQ Study S1/88 "The Function and Organization of NDHQ in Emergencies and War," June 1989, also known as the 'Little-Hunter Study.'
6. Bland, *Chiefs of Defence*, p. 192.
7. The quote is from Canada, Royal Commission on Government Organisation, "Project No. 16 Presentation to the Commissioners" (April 1962), p. 5. It captures the logic behind moves later undertaken to streamline the upper management of the Defence Department.
8. Bland, *Chiefs of Defence*, p. 192.
9. *Ibid.*
10. Duncan (Dusty) Miller and Sharon Hobson, *The Persian Excursion*, (Toronto: Canadian Institute of Strategic Studies, 1995), p. 85.
11. Bland, *Chiefs of Defence*, p. 199.
12. See Morin and Gimblett, *Operation Friction*, passim.
13. Douglas L. Bland, *National Defence Headquarters: Centre for Decision* (Ottawa: Minister of Public Works and Government Services Canada, 1997), p. 41.
14. Bland, *National Defence Headquarters*, p. 55.
15. Bland, *Chiefs of Defence*, p. 202.
16. Miller and Hobson, *The Persian Excursion*, p. vii.
17. Bland, *Chiefs of Defence*, p. 203.
18. 3350-165/S40 (CDS), CDS COMMAND CONCEPT FOR CF OPERATIONS IN THE PERSIAN GULF, September 1990, p. 3. Access to Information (ATI) request A-95-0695.
19. Bland, *Chiefs of Defence*, p. 202.
20. See 1258-99 (DGPE), NDHQ Program Evaluation E3/92, Command and Control Vol.2, "A Case Study: *Operation Friction (The Gulf Crisis)*", 13 October 1993, p. 23. General de Chastelain's clarifying message is 3350-1 (CDS), 22 OCT 90, OP FRICTION – ROLE OF NDHQ AND SUPPORTING COMMANDS. ATI A-95-0695.
21. 1258-99 (DGPE), NDHQ Program Evaluation E3/92, Command and Control vol.2, p. 30. ATI A-95-0695.
22. 1258-99 (DGPE), NDHQ Program Evaluation E3/92, Command and Control vol.2, p. 42. ATI A-95-0695.
23. Miller and Hobson, *The Persian Excursion*, p. 86.
24. Miller and Hobson, p. 88.
25. Miller and Hobson, p. 123.
26. The Logistics Centre, for example, took over CC-130 and CC-137 taskings from Air Transport Group (ATG) very early in the crisis. See Morin and Gimblett, *Operation Friction*, p. 37.
27. Morin and Gimblett, *Operation Friction*, p. 37.
28. Miller called this "direct feedback on the information they were putting out." Still it could only be awkward. See Miller and Hobson, *The Persian Excursion*, p. 120.
29. Colonel K.T. Eddy, "The Canadian Forces and the Operational Level of War", *Canadian Defence Quarterly* Vol. 21, No. 5 (April 1992), p. 22.
30. 1258-99 (DGPE), NDHQ Program Evaluation E3/92, Command and Control vol.2, *A Case Study: Operation Friction (The Gulf Crisis)*, 13 October 1993, 1. ATI A-95-0695.
31. See, Vice Admiral (ret'd) G.L. Garnett, "The Evolution of the Canadian Approach to Joint and Combined Operations at the Strategic and Operational Level," *Canadian Military Journal*, Winter 2003, pp. 3-8.