

THESE EXCITING TIMES WE LIVE IN

by Colonel P.B. Stogran, MSC, CD

Throwing Down the Gauntlet

“These are exciting times.” Those words were spoken during one of my numerous presentations on my Afghanistan experiences. This time, however, I had no idea how exciting my life would get. I was making a pitch to a predominantly “blue-water navy” audience at Dalhousie University and was referring to the vision of the then-new Chief of the Defence Staff (CDS), General Rick Hillier. “Finally,” I said, “We have a central vision articulated by a leader that will synchronize the transformations of the individual services.” The excitement started during the Q&A, when one of the naval stalwarts challenged my assertion, arguing that the Canadian Forces (CF) could ill-afford to sacrifice the Navy’s interoperability with the United States by getting out of the ‘blue water’ business. “Whoa, whoa!” I thought. That was hugely speculative. Furthermore, I wasn’t prepared to comment on CF policy. What I was prepared to do, however, was to educate the maritime audience on the significant sacrifices that the Army had already made. Unfortunately, some of my Army colleagues felt my comments overstepped the bounds of professionalism and actually “endangered Army Transformation.” If Army Transformation is so fragile, then perhaps, given the new CDS’s vision, Army Transformation should be reconsidered in a “joint and integrated” fashion.

Army Transformation – A Perspective

The major victim of the Army’s inability to sustain itself has been the infantry. Ironically, the infantry has formed the backbone of the Army in the two Great Wars, Korea, and the myriad of operational deployments during and after the Cold War. It also plays a predominant role in the complex terrain battle, the main effort of Army training. Notwithstanding, the Army intended to eliminate one third of its infantry force, the light infantry battalions (LIBs) in the RCR, R22eR, and PPCLI. Moreover, a CF study into the asymmetric threat in the late 1990s identified that utility of LIBs against this threat, but conceded that the Land Force was getting out of the light force business. Clearly, in the ‘mech-centric’ paradigm of the Army, there wasn’t enough money to acquire sufficient light armoured vehicles, LAVIII, for these “equipment deficient battalions.” The person-years (PYs) contained therein would therefore relieve sustainability pressures elsewhere in the Army. That vision did not survive the next “Great War” – the “Global War on Terror.” Despite the subsequent re-alignment of the Army vision vis-à-vis the retention of light forces, the infantry still absorbed a huge PY hit with the disbandment of their pioneer and mortar platoons. It is noteworthy

that during the watershed peacekeeping mission in Bosnia at the turn of the last decade, artillery batteries were not manning guns overseas. They were employed as *infantry*. Therefore, using the infantry as the ‘ice cube to be shaved’ to enhance sustainability illustrates the financial desperation that the Army has long suffered.

Yet another deep cut that the Army was prepared to endure to make ends meet is represented by the uncertain future of the Leopard I tank in the CF inventory. To the uninitiated, the tank is “just another armoured vehicle,” a capability that can be satisfied by an eight-wheeled LAV with a 105 mm gun – the Mobile Gun System (MGS, aka Stryker). But even as the CF changes its focus from “The Bear” to the “Ball of Snakes,” even if we ignore the dash to Baghdad, and even to me and my ilk who claim to be avowed paratroopers and light warriors, the tank still fulfils a vital role in contemporary operations. Anyone who has been on the objective-end of an assault when tanks appear on the scene and has witnessed the “shock action” they instil, even though they may be Soviet-block technology from the 50s and 60s, can relate. Tanks continue to be relevant in the modern “Three Block War.” The images that stand out in my mind of the Three Block War in Falujah were Marines at the ready behind the cover of the M1 Abrams Main Battle Tank. In Bosnia, in the early 1990s, the Danish “Snow Leopards” were the centre of gravity for the United Nations Protection Force (UNPROFOR). The Bosnian Serbs made the mistake of messing with them, but only once. In Kosovo, our own Leopards proved their value. On the battlefield, even the “Three Block War” battlefield, the MGS does not replace the tank. Notwithstanding the psychological aspect the MGS clearly lacks, nowhere near the same amount of protection can be bolted onto the chassis of a wheeled vehicle as a tracked one. Finally, it was morbidly ironic that the announcement to replace the Leopard Main Battle Tank with the less protected MGS coincided with the call for additional armour in Kabul following the deaths of Sergeant Short and Corporal Beerenfenger in an unprotected Iltis. Unfortunately, the Army has a difficult time affording armoured vehicles, especially the Leopard.

The Army used to boast that “unlike the other services that man equipment, the Army equips the man.” One of the most important things that any service person must be equipped with is skill. It can be argued that the Army is unique in the wide array of individual skills and the complexity of the collective skill sets that are required to be effective in its environment. Unfortunately, financial constraints have had an insidious effect on the standard of training in the Army. The elimination of pioneers

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and mortars, the tip of the iceberg, will be depriving infantry soldiers of vital battle skills. Some have argued that engineer and artillery sub-units will provide these capabilities to infantry units going overseas. However, it is not an overstatement to say that, in combat, units can never have enough engineers or indirect fire. Furthermore, there is no guarantee that such assets will be deployed. Others will counter that these skills have been successfully preserved in units, but history has shown that the absence of a centre of excellence in a unit inevitably leads to the complete elimination or, at the very least, a significant deterioration of the respective skills.

The individual and collective skills of all Army units have suffered the wrath of limited funding. The Army has adopted a system of “managed readiness” in an attempt to make assets meet overseas commitments. What this means is that at any one time a third of the Army is in reconstitution, a third is intensely training for operations and the final third is either deployed overseas or waiting to go. Anyone with even a rudimentary knowledge of sports training knows that an athlete gets more benefit from the cumulative effect of training regularly and consistently than from a short burst of intense training. A hockey team that has played together for a long time has a better chance in a tournament than a composite team. Ground combat can be considered the “ultimate extreme sport,” and these lessons apply.

I would submit that the reason why the Canadian Army was so successful in adapting to the new era of “peacekeeping” in 1992 is because it was trained to a level that allowed it to improvise in the face of new and challenging situations. In those days, we had 4 CMBG in Germany, the Airborne Regiment, brigade-level and even the odd divisional-level exercises, and a bunch of gung-ho individual courses that enabled our soldiers to “be all they can be.” Today, brigade training is considered an “event,” 4 Brigade and the Airborne Regiment are gone, and the *prima* warfighter courses are in very short supply. So, although we continue to attract an amazing calibre of

young people to the Army, and even though contemporary operations increase in complexity each time we deploy, we cannot offer our soldiers anywhere near the level of training we used to enjoy. Unfortunately, the people who benefited from the training experiences of a bygone era are reaching the end of their shelf life. This does not bode well for the Army of tomorrow.

Integrated Transformation

As the Q&A came to an end, I was gratified to see that I had won my audience over. One retired commodore rose to my defence, telling the audience that if we don’t take a more pragmatic approach to the balance of forces, we would be killing people. I interrupted and said, “We are killing people. We have lost almost 130 soldiers on the supposedly bloodless offerings to so-called ‘peacekeeping’ operations.” It therefore behoves the Army to put manoeuvre before management. Our means are not limitless, so to ensure that we can untangle the “Ball of Snakes,” Army Transformation must be more “joint and integrated.” When the Army wants to provide greater mobility and firepower to the light forces, it should think aviation rather than trucks. When the Army wants to get the mobility, firepower, protection and *shock action* of tanks into the fight, it should think “big honkin’ ship” or Joint Support Ship, not MGS. In addition, the Army must not forget that the greatest contribution the Canadian Forces makes to any operation or coalition is the skill, knowledge and attitudes of our soldiers. The half-life of skills is very short and once they are gone, they take a very long time to regenerate. The focus of General Hillier’s visionary Team Canada approach, as a joint and integrated transformation of the Canadian Forces, may relieve some of the necessity the Army has faced in the dismantling of key capabilities. There should be no need for us to train to the lowest common denominator, nor to risk sending soldiers into a fair fight. These are indeed *exciting* times!

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