

THE 0.5 SOLUTION – A PRACTICAL APPROACH TO CHANGING THE FITNESS CULTURE IN THE CANADIAN FORCES

by Major Robert D. McIlroy

The prompt for me to write this commentary comes in response to the latest direction received from the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) on physical fitness within the Canadian Forces (CF),¹ and in response to a recent *Canadian Military Journal* opinion piece by Lieutenant-Colonel Goodspeed entitled *It's Time for a Fitness Transformation*.² The former instruction provides a clear indication that the issue of Canadian Forces fitness standards has gained elevated importance and must be tackled from a Joint perspective, as it is considered “an essential and critical component of our operational readiness...” for all three services. The latter article also addresses the requirement for change, and, specifically, a transformation in our approach to fitness within the Canadian Forces. Goodspeed’s article points accurately to some of the key societal and legal influences that impact upon our ability to achieve an appropriate fitness standard within the CF, and it discusses the importance of leadership in achieving this goal. It outlines three broad elements in achieving this fitness transformation, paraphrased as follows: all levels of the chain of command need to make fitness a measured priority; the program must be supported by a truly effective communications plan; and the program will require true institutional change in order to be effective. It was quite refreshing and heartening to review these documents, but it made me wonder – have I not heard this before?

In my years within the army, fitness standards and fitness assessment have continually been ‘hot button’ topics, whether they were discussed within the various messes, or more formally in conferences and orders groups. I have witnessed a plethora of ideas and concepts to address the issue of fitness standards, and I have read numerous published articles on the subject. I say *address* the issue, as invariably there has been a general recognition that the fitness standard within the Canadian Army, as well as the Canadian Forces overall, is not at an appropriate level and it has not been uniformly addressed. Fitness standards appear to be subjectively applied by commanders at all levels – more so than any other policy within the Canadian Forces. Yet, there have always been policies on fitness requirements for the army and for the CF as a whole. If we are going to make a true change, it must be more substantive than what has been done before.

I believe that many of the concepts espoused by Lieutenant-Colonel Goodspeed are valid, but that a mechanism must exist that provides personal recognition

and incentive for the individual time and effort invested to stay fit – one that also prevents a subjective application of policy. The policy must also be Canadian Forces wide, if a true joint, universal approach is to be achieved. To this end, and in response to the renewed emphasis on achieving a true fitness culture, and the concept of a required fitness transformation within the Canadian Forces, I offer The 0.5 Solution.

The 0.5 Solution

The general concept behind The 0.5 Solution is quite simple: The CF adopts a fitness assessment that can be scored, with the score then captured and used as one of the many assessment criteria for meriting and promotion processes. This would be different from the current policy of a simple pass/fail approach to fitness, which has only an indirect impact on a member’s career, and is often assessed subjectively by leadership, with variances based upon trade and environmental experiences.

I am proposing that a member’s fitness assessment be used in the meriting process and represent 5 percent of the overall score – or 0.5 of a full point at the merit boards – for both officers and non-commissioned members (NCMs). This would be similar to the score that is currently issued for second language proficiency at existing officer merit boards. Whether the score for fitness is considered separate from performance or potential scores, or as a sub-element to one of these broad categories is an academic point, so long as it is factored into the overall rating as a separate, measurable score. Clearly, the opportunity exists to have partial scores anywhere from 0.0 to 0.5, which would provide an incentive mechanism for soldiers. Where the minimum standard in Canadian Forces fitness falls out or is established on this scale can be debated. One possible solution may see the minimum CF fitness score achieving 0.2, with scores of 0.3 to 0.5 providing additional incentive levels.

The impact of this simple change would be profound, and it would elevate the importance of fitness within the Canadian Forces. It would also provide individual incentive and a tangible reward for personnel who make the extra effort to go beyond minimum fitness standards. Traceable or trackable fitness scores would also subject leadership to scrutiny with regard to enforcement and promotion of fitness policies. I imagine a PDR

interview of the future would include statements such as: “You need to get the gym on a daily basis.” And not that an individual will need much prodding, as the masses will start demanding the time and support for fitness.

The Simple Concepts in Life are Sometimes Hard to Achieve

As with many things in life, the simplest concepts are often the hardest to bring to fruition. Adopting this form of testing and associated scoring system would require a rigorous and fair testing mechanism that can stand up to the scrutiny of a grievance or inquiry. It must be logical in design and beyond local manipulation, as there would be potential for unfair career impacts. I am sure that there will be many concerns regarding this concept, and probably even more questions. “What test would we use?” “A predictor test or skill specific test?”³ “What would the standard be based upon – universality of service?”⁴ “How frequently would the test be conducted?” “Would it be conducted annually, semi-annually, prior to all leadership training, or a combination of the above?” “Who would administer the testing and what would be the required support mechanisms to administer the test?” “What is the leader’s role in the individual’s fitness training plan and how will leadership be assessed regarding subordinates’ success or failure in achieving Canadian Forces fitness objectives?” At this stage, I will provide some of my layman concepts in an attempt to answer to these basic questions.

The question of what type of testing is adopted is an important one, as it will impose an administrative burden to manage and meet a test that has career implications for 60,000+ service personnel. More importantly, the type of test must be fair in application, with limited subjectivity in order to avoid discrepancies. A predictor test (similar to the CF Express Test or the Coopers Test used for JTF-2 selection) would be the easiest to apply administratively as it relates general fitness capabilities to the more specific capabilities of the work place. However, this type of testing has come under fire, as some have been found to have a gender bias, similar to the Fire Fighter fitness test formerly utilized by the Government of British Columbia, and which the Supreme Court subsequently rejected as a valid screening test.⁵ Clearly, the current Express Test cannot be used since it discriminates by age and by sex. Nor are the applied standards of the test related to any operationally defined and researched requirement of which I am aware. A predictor test could be used if sufficient research could be completed to identify certain threshold fitness requirements necessary for employment in the Canadian Forces, and thus, it would be armed with a bona fide fitness requirement for the Armed Forces.

The other approach is to adopt a skill specific test requirement related to the precise operational tasks required by members of the Canadian Forces. The current CF Fire Fighting Fitness Test and the Army Fitness Test⁶ are legitimate, existing examples. Although considered very applicable tests, they tend to be ‘pass/fail’ tests that are also extremely burdensome administratively to complete for large groups. They have a slow throughput rate, and they also do not provide a good grading mechanism to measure levels of success. Thus, they would be harder to use to create an incentive scoring mechanism. The requirements of the Army Fitness Test (a trench-digging task), would make this test exceedingly difficult to impose on CF locations not co-located with the field force. My overall recommendation is a predictor-type test that has received the requisite level of testing and research as a requirement of the Canadian Forces.⁷ This may also necessitate ongoing research, analysis, and critical review of the adopted standard.

The next key question relates to the standard upon which the testing would be based. It is clear from the CDS comments that a CF standard needs to be developed and utilized if members want to say they are truly operating as a Joint entity. This standard will also offset the current differences that exist between the individual Services, and will impact those trades that do most of the inter-service employment – the service support trades. The term Universality of Service is often utilized as an explanation for the minimum standard tasks required by Canadian Forces personnel for employment in the service. Therefore, this seems like a logical place to start as a baseline to develop a minimum fitness standard. Of course, with the renewed emphasis upon a Joint capability, the minimum standard tasks of Universality of Service may need to be reviewed and updated.⁸ Perhaps a potential starting point for this would be a comparison between the Canadian Forces and other truly Joint-trained organizations – such as the United States Marine Corps.

Questions as to how often the testing should be conducted and who would administer the test are important, as they impact upon the administration of the test, its potential costs, and opportunities for re-testing if minimum standards are not achieved. As a minimum, testing should occur on an annual basis. Testing prior to leadership training, although useful to emphasize the importance of the Canadian Forces fitness program, is fraught with the potential for unintended consequences to a member’s career, as well as additional course administrative requirements. Conducting the testing more than once per year, although great for individual testing opportunities and test practice, may be administratively impracticable, depending on the type of test utilized. Who administers

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the test is also important. I believe that the task should fall to the current Personnel Support Program (PSP) in order to ensure a common baseline is established across the Canadian Forces. Clearly, this may necessitate some geographic specific staff increases to meet the potential testing demands.

Finally, with regard to the leader's role in an individual's fitness training plan, I do not believe that **individual** subordinate performance in this area can be or should be attributed to leadership, nor is the concept designed for that. It should be an individual incentive program. I do believe that a tracking mechanism would provide a valuable instrument to gauge the success of unit or sub-unit fitness programs, and would flag areas of concern – such as when a significant drop in fitness occurs across a group of individuals. Although there may be many factors that lead to a drop in performance across a population (such as an operational deployment), fitness tracking would be a useful tool to assess leadership performance when looked upon from the perspective of an entire group or population.

Conclusion

Although there are numerous questions to be addressed and research that would need to be completed prior to instituting this type of testing program, it is not beyond the realm of the achievable. I believe that a properly constructed predictor test would best meet Canadian Forces requirements, but that it must be different from the current CF Express Test that discriminates by sex and age. It should be completed annually and

administered by PSP personnel in order to achieve a common standard across the Canadian Forces. The standard would be based upon the tasks established through the Universality of Service principle, although these basic tasks may need to be revisited, as the Canadian Forces move ever closer towards becoming a truly Joint force.

In conclusion, I support wholeheartedly the concept of a heightened importance to fitness and fitness testing within the army, and more importantly, the Canadian Forces as a whole. I believe that a measurable fitness test linked directly to the military meriting system and merit board process would provide a direct and tangible indication of the importance of the fitness standards to each individual within the Canadian Forces. Just as importantly, this measure could provide an incentive program that would reward individuals for their efforts to go beyond minimum standards. It would also provide a tracking tool for fitness standards across the Canadian Forces and it could serve as a measurement tool for leadership ability. Overall, I am proposing that a member's fitness assessment be used in the meriting process, and it should represent 5 percent of the individual's overall score on merit boards. This measure alone would significantly transform our thinking towards fitness standards for years to come – and force a true fitness transformation.

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NOTES

1. Department of National Defence. CANFORGEN 198/05 CDS 104/05 211441Z DEC 05, CDS Direction for Physical Fitness. (Ottawa: DND Canada, 2005).
2. Lieutenant-Colonel Goodspeed, "It's Time for a Fitness Transformation," *Canadian Military Journal*, Vol. 6, No.1, (Spring 2005), pp. 67-68.
3. Department of National Defence Presentation, Major-General Doug Langton, *Physical Fitness Programs and Standards for Today's CF Members*, Ottawa, 16 January 2006. A predictor test equates to a test that measures general fitness capabilities (push-ups, sit-ups, etc.) while a skill specific test measures fitness capabilities against specific work place skills (digging a trench, casualty evacuation, and so on).
4. "Universality of Service is defined as the liability of every service member to perform any lawful duty and includes the liability to be operationally employable and deployable. This liability is limited only where a justifiable exemption has been promulgated by the CDS or an accommodation of individual employment limitations has been explicitly granted through an NDHQ administrative review." Department of National Defence, Director Military Human Resource Requirements website, <http://hr.dwan.dnd.ca/dmhrr/engraph/reports/pub_u_of_s_e.asp?mnu=rpt>.
5. Canadian Human Rights Commission, summary of *The Meiorin case: British Columbia (Public Service Employee Relations Commission) v. British Columbia Government and Service Employees' Union (B.C.G.S.E.U.)*, <<http://www.chrc-ccdp.ca/discrimination/occupational-en.asp#meiorin>>.
6. Department of National Defence. B-GL-382-001/PT-001, *Army Fitness Manual*, (Ottawa: DND Canada, 25 May 2005), <<http://fdts.army.mil.ca/AEL/PUBS/300-008/B-GL-382/003/PT-001/B-GL-382-003-PT-001.pdf>>.
7. "Bona Fide: genuine; sincere..." *The Concise Oxford Dictionary*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), p. 125. Also described in context in the Canadian Human Rights Commission, summary of, *The Meiorin case: British Columbia (Public Service Employee Relations Commission) v. British Columbia Government and Service Employees' Union (B.C.G.S.E.U.)*, <<http://www.chrc-ccdp.ca/discrimination/occupational-en.asp#meiorin>>.
8. The tasks associated with Universality of Service have been delineated as follows: fire personal weapon, maintain personal weapon, conduct individual NBC drills, perform simple NBC monitoring, provide initial fire fighting response to fire fighting emergencies, administer First Aid, perform Cardiopulmonary Resuscitation (CPR), perform drill, communicate using radios, prepare written military correspondence, secure/lockup work areas, and enforce hygiene and sanitation standards. The common fitness requirement is defined as: perform high-low crawl, perform Sea Board evacuation with Stoke's Litter, perform entrenchment dig, perform stretcher casualty evacuation and perform sandbag carry. DND, Director Military Human Resource Requirements website, <http://hr.dwan.dnd.ca/dmhrr/engraph/reports/pub_u_of_s_e.asp?mnu=rpt>. This writer believes that the tasks associated with Universality of Service should include the basic section attack. This task entrenches the concept of team, group, and section manoeuvre and imbues a sense of offensive spirit and purpose. It translates to all three services in tasks such as airfield security or ship boarding parties/ship security. In a fitness sense, it will probably elevate the minimum VO2 requirements for the fitness test (i.e. cardiovascular capability).