

NAVIGATING THE PERFECT WAVE: THE CANADIAN MILITARY FACING ITS MOST SIGNIFICANT CHANGE IN 50 YEARS¹

by Daniel Gosselin

Introduction

The conflict in Afghanistan is entering its seventh year, and the Canadian Forces is in the middle of it. Daily events on the ground, in and around Kandahar, are receiving constant coverage in our national newspapers, on television, and on the Internet, and the issues surrounding a future government's decision to extend, or not, Canada's military participation at the end of the current mandate in February 2009 are generating much discussion and debate.

While the conflict in Afghanistan is continuing, the CF is facing unprecedented change, on a scale unseen in nearly 50 years. Very little of this change makes headlines in the newspapers, and, except for a few military analysts, few people outside the military are taking notice. What is even more remarkable is that most people inside the Department of National Defence (DND) do not have the time to reflect upon the scope of the change, being too busy leading change initiatives and managing the consequences. I believe the change environment we are facing is without precedent for the Forces, and the key decisions we are now taking will shape the CF for years to come. This was the case with many of the fundamental reforms that took place in the 1960s.

There are three fundamental currents driving this change. Perhaps it is best to imagine three underwater earthquakes, each having generated its own series of tidal waves. The waves are adding to each other, creating a "perfect wave" through which the CF must navigate. I use the expression "perfect wave" to highlight the convergence of conditions created by three important change initiatives that are affecting the CF concurrently. These are: (1) the CF Transformation launched by General Hillier in early 2005; (2) the decision by both the Liberal and Conservative governments to increase the strength of the CF; and (3) the decision in 2005 to deploy Canadian troops into a combat role in the Kandahar region of Afghanistan.

The CF Transformation

In the post 9/11 era, military analysts and senior officers have identified the need for a new vision to guide the CF in meeting the defence and security challenges of the 21st Century, especially the asymmetric threats posed by terrorism and by failed or failing states. The

previous CDS, General Raymond Henault, had clearly recognized that fundamental changes to the CF were necessary to better position the institution for the coming decade. Transformation and change were the main themes of the last two *CDS Annual Reports to Parliament*.³

However, transforming the CF without the benefit of a new defence policy, without an overarching CF vision and with a frozen budget, proved to be a nearly impossible task. The election of a new prime minister in 2004, Paul Martin, the appointment of a senior Cabinet minister as MND, Bill Graham, and the arrival of General Hillier as CDS in February 2005 provided the long-awaited opportunity.

On 4 February 2005, General Hillier assumed command of the CF. Within days, he launched the CF Transformation, having convinced the government of the need for a new vision for the Canadian military. A decision by the government to increase the defence budget just three weeks after the appointment of the CDS gave the CF Transformation added impetus and much credibility.

I was fortunate to be part of the first CDS seminar, made up of all CF general and flag officers, soon after General Hillier's appointment, when he sketched for us a new vision for the CF. There was much enthusiasm with the boldness of the vision, and the air in the room was electrifying. I, for one, had not seen anything like this in my 33-year career. All of us had a definite sense that we were going to be part of a historical period in the evolution of the Forces. We were not wrong. Nearly three years later, I remain convinced that this change was needed, and that the CF is heading in the right direction.

Within months, the government released a new defence policy, advocating a prominent role for Canada's military within Canada's international policy, providing the foundation for change that the CF leadership was seeking. The CF vision is bold (I say is because it remains relevant): it aims at fundamentally reorienting and restructuring the functions of the CF and its command and control to better meet the emerging security demands at home and abroad.

General Hillier strongly believed that for the CF to achieve greater operational effects in Canada and



DND photo CK2007-0456-38

In the meantime, several major new crown projects were announced during the past 20 months, notably: the acquisition of four *CC-177 Globemaster III* long-range strategic aircraft, new *CC-130J Hercules* tactical transport aircraft, three joint support ships, modernization of the *Frigate*-class ships, eight new Arctic patrol ships, and new tanks. The government has also committed to acquire a squadron of medium-to-heavy-lift helicopters. We are witnessing a modernization of the CF unparalleled in decades, as well as

around the world, it would need to assume a more “integrated and unified” approach to operations, which could only be achieved through a major transformation of the existing command structure, the introduction of new operational capabilities, and the establishment of fully integrated units capable of a high-readiness response to foreign and domestic threats. These changes, once implemented, will allow the CF to achieve greater strategic effects for this country.

But there are two truly dominant ideas that underpin this Transformation. The first is to transform the Forces to better deal with “the snakes,” the term the CDS employed to refer to the potential non-state actors enemy we may face in the new security environment, instead of “the bear,” representing the more conventional armed forces of the Cold War. To be able to deal with “the snakes” means acquiring capabilities and changing the force structure of the military, from one capable of operating “full spectrum,” to one better adapted to the threats created by non-state actors.⁴

In January 2006, barely a year into the CF Transformation, the Conservatives were elected, and their defence platform, while largely coherent with the *Defence Policy Statement* of April 2005, contained important differences.⁵ The CF vision, especially the portion relating to the acquisition of new operational capabilities, needed harmonization with the agenda and priorities of the new government. This process is continuing, and, at some point in the near future, we will see this harmonized vision spelled out in a new defence policy statement.

important budget increases. These projects all support the new vision, and they provide the foundation for re-orienting the operational capabilities of the CF.⁶

The second dominant idea – seldom discussed – is the progressive removal of the bureaucratic shackles that constrained the CF from becoming more operational. Basically, this is moving away from a *management culture* inside the CF and DND to one that places *operations primacy* at the centre of all decisions. This management and bureaucratic way of thinking was inherited from the changes that took place in the 1960s and 1970s. The new operational vision for the CF does not work well with a bureaucratically unified CF. In 2005, the CDS established six key principles to guide decision-making within the CF Transformation, providing greater attention to operations primacy and progressively reorienting the CF toward a more command-centric organization. It is my belief that those principles are taking hold, and progressively changing the culture inside the CF.

In terms of reorganization of the CF, the last time we had change of this magnitude was in the 1960s, with integration and unification of the three services. In many ways, several recent decisions in the CF reverse decisions made by Defence Minister Paul Hellyer in the mid-1960s. Let me now address briefly the impact of Hellyer’s policies, as these influenced in important ways the Forces for over 40 years downstream.

Minister Hellyer strongly believed that the mechanisms of civil control of the Canadian military needed a major overhaul, and that this was best achieved through a

centralization of the control and administration of the CF into one Chief of the Defence Staff (CDS), instead of three service chiefs reporting independently to the minister. Hellyer wanted one integrated Canadian defence policy, one overall defence program, one CF Headquarters (CFHQ), and one Chief of the Defence Staff invested with the necessary authority. These were very commendable goals, and he achieved most of them.

But Minister Hellyer had more change in mind for Canada's military forces than just headquarters restructuring. On the heels of the Glassco Commission of the early 1960s, the Royal Commission that looked at the organization of the federal government, he viewed a major reorganization of the defence forces as the only means to make resources available for future capital equipment acquisitions. He was convinced that the establishment of a streamlined bureaucracy, coupled with the modernization of defence management methods, would help achieve the desired economies.⁷

One other way to save was to integrate completely the three services (the Canadian Army, the Royal Canadian Navy, and the Royal Canadian Air Force) into one service (the Canadian Armed Forces), and hence, Unification. Minister Hellyer also changed the command structure, creating six functional commands instead of the 11 headquarters of the three services. There is no indication that he was concerned about the potential adverse impact that the proposed administrative centralization would have upon the operational effectiveness of the various CF components. This is where the reorganization of the 1960s differs from the transformation launched by General Hillier, who is not focused upon efficiencies, but upon operational effectiveness.

Minister Hellyer's ideas, and his policy of unification, generated controversy from the outset; he was proceeding at a "breakneck" pace, and the three service chiefs were concerned with the scale and speed of change. Minister Hellyer has been blamed frequently for subsequent failings of defence policy and the armed forces. This is probably unfair, as there were several positive effects of unification. A plethora of tri-service committees was abolished, considerable reduction of facilities and services was achieved, a single CF policy and planning process for the entire department was established, decision-making was improved with the creation of the office of the CDS, and the scope of career opportunities for some support trades and classifications was expanded.

But, there were negative effects of unification, stemming largely from Minister Hellyer's single-minded focus on administrative efficiency. Not all of the negative elements were the direct result of his policies, but many dominant ideas that constituted

the pillars of unification set the pattern for further centralization at NDHQ, and significantly influenced the continued bureaucratization of defence in the 1970s and early 1980s.

Back to 2007 and the CF Transformation... The CDS created new operational commands to emphasize CF operations. Major command and control changes have been put in place, including the Strategic Joint Staff and the new operational commands created in February 2006 (Canada Command, CF Expeditionary Command, CF Special Operations Forces Command, and Support Command). In many ways, this transformation is strengthening the concept of "unified" commanders, that is, a commander with a joint staff with the authority to direct and coordinate operations with forces and capabilities generated from the three environments and other formations. The CF is being unified operationally, not bureaucratically, and not administratively. It is becoming more unified for the right reasons.

These days, the CDS is tackling the next spirals of the CF Transformation to pursue the core elements of the CF vision. These include reviewing areas such as training delivery, the professional development of officers and NCMs, and personnel support, to name a few.

"Jointness," which had become an organization concept for the CF because we were reluctant to use the terms "integrated" and "unified," is being relegated to its true meaning, that of "joint effects" in operations. Joint formations and units are not the solution any longer to justify the CF organizational construct – witness the disbandment in 2006 of the CF Joint Operations Group. Some people inside DND are now starting to use the term "unified" for its real meaning. Finally, slowly, the Hellyer shadow is fading.

The CF Transformation, an ambitious initiative in its own right, is not, however, taking place in a void. While Minister Hellyer's restructuring took place during a period of reduction of CF personnel, the present transformation is taking place in a period of growth of CF strength, on a scale not seen since the 1950s, thereby adding significantly to the transformation challenges, but providing unique opportunities as well.

The Force Expansion

The Transformation of the CF will not rely only upon a new command and control framework, new technologies and equipment, "...but more important on the human capability that is the basic component upon which all military capability depends."⁸

As of March 2007, Regular Force (RegF) members numbered 52,500 *trained effective strength*, within

a total RegF strength of 63,780 personnel. Toward the end of the 1990s, the strength of the CF hit a low of about 57,000 personnel. In 2005, the Liberal government announced increases of 5000 RegF members and 3000 reservists. At *Budget 2006*, the new Conservative government announced increases of 13,000 RegF and 10,000 reservists, for an end state of 75,000 RegF members. However, because of the need to sustain operational commitments, and to prepare for Olympics 2010, the expansion was re-profiled to 68,000 RegF members for the time being.⁹ Still, this represents a very important increase from the low of the late 1990s.

Growing to those levels is a significant challenge, considering the strength of our economy, and the current demographic features of this country. In a very competitive labour market, young Canadians want to keep their options open; while many do join the CF (over 6000 last year), it is not certain if they will opt for a long career. Many are looking at a unique and demanding experience for a few years, and then plan to move on to new challenges.

The projected growth of the CF is the most significant since the Korean War and the early 1950s. In 1950, before the war, the strength of the CF was at 47,000 personnel, but it increased to over 100,000 members in three years. At the time, it had been decided to recruit a Special Force for the Korean War. Barely six years after the end of the Second World War, it was easier to recruit, as there was significant residual capacity from the war. But after the 1950s, the CF strength declined steadily for 40 years.

This rapid force expansion, coupled with the CDS Transformation, is putting to test our recruiting and training systems, which had been operating in a low gear for nearly 20 years. For instance, the CF Leadership and Recruit School (CFLRS) in St-Jean has more than doubled its permanent establishment in three years, and the school had to change the way it conducts its courses because of the high throughput of students, and increased emphasis upon individual survivability and force protection. The decision to move the entry level fitness test to the first days of the recruit phase, instead of doing the test as part of the recruiting process, has allowed us to increase our pool of potential CF members, but it is creating other challenges that we have to manage, including instituting programs to bring the level of fitness of the recruits up to the CF standard. At the time of writing (December 2007), at CFLRS we will have 32 platoons of recruits and officer cadets with nearly 2000 students in residence. When you think that we use to recruit just over 1000 personnel a year during the 1990s, it provides some perspective of the scale of the Force Expansion.

The Afghanistan Campaign

These changes, CF Transformation and Force Expansion, certainly are important, but the most determinant element affecting the CF is, without a doubt, the Afghanistan Campaign, and, more particularly, our combat engagement in the Kandahar region. This represents our most intense army engagement since the Korean War, and, worth highlighting, our first counter-insurgency or guerrilla war since we participated in the Boer War in South Africa in 1900.

How will historians of tomorrow characterize this war? Typically, the level of participation, the intensity and length of the war, and the casualty count tend to be what we remember about a war. Except for the two World Wars, which were of a scale beyond imagination, let us look at the two other conflicts we participated in during the last century. The Boer War of 1899-1902 has an important place in our Canadian history, for reasons related to our early national development. In South Africa, 5330 Canadians participated, (2036 arrived too late to participate), and 270 died there, 89 due to combat.¹⁰ The others died of disease and other causes. In Korea, more than 22,000 members served with the Commonwealth Division (26,000 in total), and we suffered significant losses (516 deaths – 312 in combat-related activities and over 1500 casualties in all).¹¹

In Afghanistan, by the end of the current mandate in February 2009, over 22,000 CF volunteer members will have served in the campaign – about the same as Korea. To date we have lost over 80 soldiers and one diplomat, most of them killed in combat-related activities.¹² Even with the excellent personal protection our soldiers now possess, many more have been injured. No doubt that the high quality of medical care provided, and the speed at which this care is made available on the ground is saving many lives. It is a costly war for Canada in terms of human losses, and one that compares with those of both the Boer and Korean Wars.

Our participation in the war in Afghanistan is justifying the need to introduce many changes within the CF, and to accelerate several other important initiatives. A war such as this forces an organization like the CF to redefine its priorities, and to do so in many ways. We have witnessed various army equipment acquisitions during the recent past, probably some of the more visible aspects of changes to the public. In 2003, the MND had announced that Canada would acquire the Mobile Gun System (MGS). Just 16 months earlier, we were seriously thinking about eliminating tanks from our inventory. The



DND photo AR2008-Z103-16

lessons from *Operation Medusa*, a major offensive operation that Canada led in September last year to rout out Taliban fighters in southern Afghanistan, changed all that. And so, as a result, and Canada is now leasing 20 tanks and we will procure 100 more modern tanks. Better-armoured vehicles, such as the South African mine-protected vehicle *Nyala*, are being acquired as well.

The army has accelerated the development of the Canadian Manoeuvre Training Centre in Wainwright to provide highly realistic combined arms combat training up to the battle group level, and has changed the pre-deployment training to increase the survival and individual protection components. This greater operational focus has affected nearly all our training courses, including the basic military qualification and other officer and NCM training. In some cases, such as the basic officer training course, the changes we have instituted are the most significant since the 1960s.

Sustaining the deployment of nearly 2500 soldiers every six months is demanding, and all environments must contribute, especially in the logistics, communications, engineering, medical, and other support fields. Many of our personnel policies are being completely revamped, becoming more accurately modernized for a military at war. Just as the Boer War provided the impetus for the introduction of a separation allowance for families left behind

without an income at home, the war in Afghanistan has triggered a review of many financial benefits, from non-taxable income, to insurance, to risk pay, to funeral entitlements, to name a few. One will recall the debate last May in the House of Commons and in the national newspapers with respect to the military funeral benefits to which families of CF members who died on active duty should be entitled. The desire by Canadians to support our deployed troops – and their families – is a great stimulus for this change. The process for individual honours and awards has also been accelerated, with the assistance of Government House.

In short, the war in Afghanistan is doing what wars tend to do to military organizations: shake them to their core and help them re-focus the priorities of the organization toward operational primacy, while simultaneously removing old peacetime bureaucratic cobwebs.

The Perfect Wave

Three important waves of change are facing the Canadian Forces: Transformation, Force Expansion, and our engagement in Afghanistan. DND/CF is a very large organization, and it should not be surprising to discover that the management of the change we are facing is implemented compartmentally at times. Because of that, we fail to realise the magnitude of the changes taking place within the institution. I believe this is one of those occasions.

VIEWS AND OPINIONS

I also believe that the CF culture is slowly changing to one focused more upon operations. The creation of the new operational commands, a command-centric approach to decision-making, and the war in Afghanistan are providing the underlying conditions for this change of culture. We are also witnessing it with our civilian counterparts in the Department. It remains to be seen how fundamental and how deep this culture change will be. No doubt, the direct participation of over 20,000 CF members in a war, and indirect support of thousands more in Canada, will definitely change the identity of the CF of tomorrow. In addition, operational capability choices that are being made today will influence decisions for future CF participation abroad.

Finally, people ask me: "Will all this be reversed when General Hillier leaves the CF, in a year or two, or if we have a change of government?" My answer is: "I don't think so." Many of the changes being implemented are too fundamental to be reversed. We may see an adjustment to the organization when we finish expanding

the force or complete our mission in Afghanistan, but my belief is that many of those changes will become permanent. We need only look at the changes that Minister Hellyer instituted in the 1960s: only today, 40 years later, are some of them being dismantled.

We are facing a "perfect wave," perhaps navigating it is more appropriate, and the smart and dedicated people we have serving the CF and the department will ensure that this wave does not turn into a perfect storm. The current period certainly is presenting us with challenges, but there are opportunities as well, opportunities that my predecessors would have wished for in the mid-1990s. I am convinced that the magnitude of the change underway is something we may not see for another decade, perhaps for a generation. We can truly shape the CF for the next 10 to 20 years. These are exciting times, indeed.

Major-General Daniel Gosselin, OMM, CD, is currently Commander of the Canadian Defence Academy in Kingston.²

NOTES

1. **Editor's Note:** this text is an abridged and amended version of remarks given to the 2007 meeting of the *Institut d'histoire de l'Amérique française* on 18 October 2007 and the 10th graduate seminar of the Conference of Defence Association Institute on 26 October 2007, where the theme of the conference was "Canada's Security Interests: The Lessons of History." This article contains facts and opinions that the author alone considered appropriate and correct, and do not necessarily reflect policy or opinion of the Department of National Defence.
2. The author's previous assignments included: Director General International Security Policy at NDHQ, Chief of Staff for the CF Transformation Team, Commander of the Joint Operations Group, and Special Assistant to the Deputy Chief of Defence Staff. He was also the Chief of Staff of the National Command Element for Joint Task Force South West Asia at the peak of *Operation Apollo* in 2002. He is a PhD candidate in military history at Queen's University, studying civil-military relations and command at the strategic and operational levels of war.
3. The 2003 and 2004 *CDS Annual Reports to Parliament*, issued under the leadership of General Henault, spoke strongly of transformation. The titles of the reports were respectively, *A Time for Transformation*, and *Making Choices*.
4. Canada, *A Role of Pride and Influence in the World: Defence* (Ottawa: Government of Canada, 2005), p. 11.
5. Stand-Up for Canada, Conservative Party of Canada Federal Election Platform 2006, p. 45, available at <<http://www.conservative.ca/media/20060113-Platform.pdf>>.
6. There is one core project of the CF vision that was being developed that is now on hold: the expeditionary amphibious capability or the Joint Contingency Task Force (better known to some as the "Big Honking Ship" initiative), intended to give Canada a capability to deal with non-state actors in a hostile littoral environment, which could also act as an offshore command post. At the present time, there is simply not enough funding to sustain all the above projects and the Joint Contingency Task Force.
7. Douglas Bland, *The Administration of Defence Policy in Canada 1947 to 1985* (Kingston, ON: Ronald P. Frye, 1987), pp. 29-35.
8. National Defence, *Canadian Forces Recruiting: Strategic Level Guidance on Winning the War in Talent* (Ottawa: Government of Canada, 2007), p.1.
9. The Primary Reserve is established at 26,000 versus 35,000 members. Source: Canada, National Defence, *Performance Report for the Period ending March 31, 2007* (Ottawa: Public Works and Government Services Canada, 2007), pp. 13-14.
10. Department of Militia and Defence, *Further Supplementary Report: Organization, Equipment Despatch and Service of the Canadian Contingents during the War in South Africa* (Ottawa: Sessional Paper No. 35a, 1903), and Carman Miller, *Painting the Map Red: Canada and the South African War, 1899-1902* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993), p. 429.
11. Department of National Defence, Army Historical Section, *Canada's Army in Korea: A Short Official Account* (Ottawa: Queen's Printers, 1956), pp. 94-99.
12. As of 18 March 2008 (Ed.).