



US Special Forces using an ancient form of transportation in Afghanistan.

“LOVE ‘EM OR HATE ‘EM”: LEARNING TO LIVE WITH ELITES

by Bernd Horn

Introduction

Perhaps nothing can pique emotion more in western democratic societies than the concept of a privileged individual or group. Collectively, we *pride*, if not *delude*, ourselves with the idea of living in an egalitarian society that embraces the unassailable virtue that all humankind is created equal. Elitism automatically destroys that illusion. The term alone conjures up notions of favouritism, privilege, superiority, and standards that are unobtainable by the majority, and, consequently, it immediately creates angst.

The military is no different. Universally, military institutions parallel society's outward disdain for elites. Brigadier-General R.G. Thériault, a former regimental airborne commander, noted that in Canadian society it is not a good thing to produce a group that is favoured above others.¹ His observation was not exclusive to Canada. Thomas Adams, a former Director of Intelligence and Special Operations at the US Army Peacekeeping Institute wrote, "...[that] the US military, particularly the Army, has long distrusted the whole idea of elite units on the general principle that such organizations have no place in the armed forces of a democracy."² And as Martin Kitchen, a professor of history explained, "...the very mention of the idea of a military elite is enough to set the alarm bells ringing in sensitive democratic souls."³

In the military, elites are often seen as resource intensive and particularly divisive. Elites are frequently accused of shunning military protocol and decorum, and acting as a law unto themselves. Moreover, their privileged status, which normally includes higher pay, special badges and dress, special equipment and training, and 'streamlined access' to the chain of command, as well as special considerations and relatively lavish resources, runs counter to a very hierarchical, traditional organization that prides itself upon uniformity, standardization, and rigid adherence to military norms, values, and traditions.

Yet, despite this outward scorn, elites *do* exist in society and within the military. And, ironically, society and the military actively nurture and support elites. Some, such as the political, intellectual, and powerful business elites are largely ignored – based upon a degree of apathy, and, even more so, upon a realization that someone has to make the decisions and run the political and economic engines of a prosperous western capitalist democracy. Normally, only when a scandal or a massive failure surfaces does the public become

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incensed and rallies against the notion of excess privilege. Conversely, others, such as entertainment and sports elites, are actively nurtured and supported. In fact, large portions of the population hang on every word, action, and fashion trend that members of these elites espouse and represent. Society's fascination has bestowed almost iconic status on many entertainment and sport celebrities.

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Within the military, a similar phenomenon exists. Despite the historical disdain and resistance to the idea of elitism *within* the armed forces, military elites have always existed. And so, one must ask, how is this paradox possible? Clearly, 'love 'em or hate 'em,' there must be a reason. Collectively, we in the military have not only learned to live with elites but we have also actively promoted their existence.

What Constitutes Elitism?

Prior to examining the issue of why we have learned to live with elites, it is necessary to define what exactly constitutes an 'elite.' The word is often *used*, or, more accurately, *misused*, by the press, public, and the military itself. It is a term charged with emotion, and it often carries negative connotations. Thus, it is not difficult to comprehend why the concept of elitism often generates enmity. Military analyst and author Tom Clancy observed: "As always, those who dare rise above the crowd and distinguish themselves will spark envy and resentment."⁴ Similarly, elitism, acknowledged one former member of an elite unit, "...is counter-productive. It alienates you from other people."⁵

The term elite normally confers an element of exclusiveness, and it refers to "...a class or group possessing wealth, power, and prestige."⁶ This description suggests that elites comprise individuals and groups that are ranked in the upper levels of a stratified hierarchy, and that they possess greater power, influence, mobility, status, and prestige than other individuals or groups ranked beneath them.⁷ In its purest form, the term elite translates into "the choice or most carefully selected part of a group."⁸

Traditionally, there are four principal types of elites. The first is the aristocracy, or any other group enjoying particular hereditary privileges. In essence, this is an elite of *birthright*. The second form is an elite of *merit* that includes the intellectual elite (i.e., academic, medical, scientific), as well as a more contemporary rendition that includes sport and entertainment celebrities. In short, it is composed of people with outstanding merits and qualities *as judged by the rest of society*. The third type is the *functional* elite composed of individuals who hold particular positions in society essential for its efficient and effective operation. This bureaucratic elite is made up of key civil servants, and it can also include a military elite. Finally, there is a *power* elite. This category consists of individuals who hold and wield political and/or economic power. This group has now grown to include the contemporary cultural elite, those members (often also holding political and economic power) capable of influencing the terms of public debate on issues such as environmental and/or social concerns.



Members of the Long Range Desert Group, the famed Desert Rats, North Africa, 1942.

All elites share a set of common attributes. Sociologists and political scientists have long identified that elites are a cohesive minority that hold the power of decision-making in any given group or society. They further note that the chief strengths of a given elite are its autonomy and cohesion – attributes that are borne from an exclusiveness that is protected by rigorous entrance standards of one form or another. Furthermore, the elite are extremely homogeneous and self-perpetuating.⁹ In short, the term elite connotes a select minority within a group or society that holds special status and privilege. Traditionally, this has meant those who held political, administrative, and

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economic power within a society.¹⁰ Simply put, “...elites are viewed as the ‘decision-makers’ of a society whose power is not subject to control by any other body in society.”¹¹

In addition, elites (or ruling minorities) are usually constituted so that their members are distinguished from the masses by qualities that give them a certain material, intellectual, or even moral superiority – or else they are the heirs of individuals who possessed such qualities.¹² This includes, for some, the interpretation that elites can also be elite because they are “...[the] sole source of values in the society or constitute the integrating force in the community without which it may fall apart.”¹³

Sociologist John Porter’s 1965 study of Canadian elites, *The Vertical Mosaic*, opined that, in Canada, the *traditional* political and economic elite represented less than 10 per cent of the population, and that it was almost exclusively Caucasian, English, and Protestant. Furthermore, he revealed that they attended the same schools, belonged to the same country clubs, and sat on the same boards of executives for many corporations and committees. Moreover, they socialized, married, and did business largely within their own stratified grouping.¹⁴

Although the central tenets of elitism, namely autonomy and exclusivity, have not changed since Porter wrote the *Vertical Mosaic*, the make-up of elites within society has done so. The new elites are now defined as those who control the international flow of money and information, preside over philanthropic foundations and institutions of higher learning, and manage the instruments of cultural production. Within this new elite, the term is often meant to convey the simple concept of those who are “highly successful.”¹⁵ The new elites are “...far more cosmopolitan... restless and migratory, than their predecessors.”¹⁶

The Military Elite

This general overview of elites aside, *historically*, the concept of a military elite, for sociologists and political scientists in any case, has centred upon their impact on the *politics* of a society – for instance, the Prussian military had an instrumental role in the creation of the state and its caste-like structure.¹⁷ Obviously, however, from the 20th Century onwards, in the case of ‘military elites,’ the issue does not necessarily centre upon cultural, economic, or political power. Rather, most often, it relates to the relationship of a given group within its *own* institution.

Nonetheless, the whole question of what constitutes a military elite is not as clear as many people may believe. Due to a lack of understanding, the term is

often misused by the press and public, and also by military personnel. Many different groups, including submariners, search and rescue technicians, paratroopers, fighter pilots, specific combat arms units, and even military police have been labelled as elites, just to name a few.

But this is not surprising when one considers the myriad concepts that exist to define or explain the term ‘military elite.’ For example, the famous writer James Jones believed that “an elite unit is only elite when the majority of its members consider themselves already dead.”¹⁸ Clearly, he was referring to elitism as a military “forlorn hope” – the force of last or *only* resort. An Algerian veteran of the French Foreign Legion who captured the sentiment of his peers shared this view. “We were the elite,” he proclaimed, “because of our will to obey and fight and die.”¹⁹ This romantic image is often utilized by the media who feed the public a more stereotypical Hollywood image of military elites that centres upon the concept “...[that] elite units require troopers who can ignore pain and exhaustion, eat just about anything that grows or crawls, and fight on no matter what the danger.”²⁰

To others, military elitism is a question of *command*. The French Second World War General Ducournau insisted: “There are average soldiers commanded by elite leaders.”²¹ He defined elitism as a quality imposed from above, springing from a small highly trained group of skilled officers. Similarly Eva Etzioni-Halevy, in her study of Israeli forces, defined the military elite as “...the most senior officers, holding the rank of colonel and above.”²²



Air forces have also possessed their fair share of elite units, including these members of 617 Dambuster Squadron of wartime Bomber Command. RCAF members included (front left) Pilot Officer Donald Arthur MacLean, and (centre) Squadron leader “Big Joe” McCarthy.

DND photo 1-2007-019-002

Following an entirely different stream, Richard Szafranski, a military analyst with the Toffler Associates, asserted, "...elite means people and forces selected, organized, trained and equipped to rapidly adapt to, and even shape, changing or unforeseen circumstances."²³ His underlying belief centred upon individuals and/or organizations of greater intellect, ability, and power of decision-making who were capable of exercising control over their own destiny.



On a divergent plane, Roger Beaumont, an author and former military policeman, characterizes military elites as those organizations that are relatively free from ordinary administration and discipline, and whereby entry to these organizations is often through the survival of an ordeal or a 'rite of passage,' requiring tolerance of pain or danger and subsequent dedication to a hazardous role.²⁴ Somewhat similarly, the French author Gilles Perrault insisted that military elites are cults that possess special rites, a specialized language or vocabulary that includes passwords, their own apostles and martyrs, and their own distinct uniform. In addition, he stipulated that elites have a simple and very defined view of the world – there are those who belong to the group, and the rest who do not.²⁵

Renowned scholar Eliot Cohen developed specific criteria to define elite military units. "First," he stated, "a unit becomes elite when it is perpetually assigned special or unusual missions – in particular, missions that are, or seem to be, extremely hazardous." For this reason, he insisted, "...airborne units have long been considered elite since parachuting is a particularly dangerous way of going into battle." His second criterion is based upon the premise that elite units conduct missions that "...require only a few men who must meet high standards of training and physical toughness, particularly the latter." Finally, he argued, "...an elite unit becomes elite only when it achieves a reputation – justified or not – for bravura and success."²⁶

For the strategist Colin Gray, the designation 'elite' pertained directly to the *standard of selection*, and not to the *activity* that soldiers were selected to perform.²⁷ Conversely, military historian Douglas Porch utilized *conventional measures of performance* to determine elite status. As a result, he relied upon such benchmarks as "...battlefield achievement, military proficiency, or specialized military functions."²⁸ Similarly, Eric Morris, another military historian, defined units as elite by virtue of the fact "...[that] they were required to demonstrate a prowess and military skill of a higher standard than more conventional battalions."²⁹ This appears to be the commonest of themes. In the words of Tom Clancy:

It's not just the weapons you carry that matter, but also the skill, training and determination of the troopers... Elite is as elite does. Elite means

that you train harder and do somewhat more dangerous things – which earns you the right to blouse your jump boots and strut a little more...³⁰

In the same vein, military analyst and author Mark Lloyd was another who considered military units elite by reason of superior training and equipment, or from greater combat experience.³¹ Similarly, David Miller argued that military elites "...are selected and trained for a special role, for which conventional troops do not have either the special weapons or training needed [or] ...are given a special designation earned by a particularly meritorious performance in battle and are then expected to set an example which other elements should follow."³² Along this line, Clancy noted that military elites are "...fit volunteers, trained to a razor's edge and beyond..."³³ For this reason, Major-General Robert Scales stated: "Elite soldiers who are carefully selected, trained and well led always perform to a higher standard."³⁴ Not surprisingly, the US Ranger Creed contains the conceptual definition of a military elite, based upon the premise: "My country expects me to move farther, faster and fight harder than any other soldier."³⁵

These descriptions, however, do not exhaust the list of interpretations as to what constitutes an elite status. Professor of history Dennis Showalter has argued that military elites during the Second World War achieved their status not from personnel selection but rather upon functionalism "...based on learned skills, [units] whose professionalism facilitated employing ways of war inapplicable to homogenized mass armies."³⁶ For this reason, the noted German military historian James Lucas believed that military elites were thus designated because they were "...given the hardest military tasks to perform"³⁷

"If elites are so despised, then why cultivate them? Why allow them to exist?"

Conversely, Martin Kitchen, also a historian, believed that modern military elites were "...classless, highly trained killers who have a wide popular appeal."³⁸ Numerous other military analysts, researchers, and scholars have taken a comparable approach. Specifically, the designation of elite has been applied simply because individuals and units were not representative of their conventional brethren by virtue of the quality or type of personnel, training, or mission applied to them.³⁹ Stated simply: unique equalled *elite*.⁴⁰

Clearly, perceptions of what constitutes a military elite are wide ranging. Often, the criteria are somewhat contrived and misleading. But simply put, being different and/or performing a unique task is far from being a *de facto* elite.

Thus, there have often been misunderstandings as to what constitutes an elite. Nonetheless, *perception* often becomes *reality*, and those units so designated by others as elite, whether deservedly or not, become a *de facto* elite if they are provided with the resources and trappings that accompany the categorization. Conversely, *self-proclamation* seldom works because elite status entails rigorous selection processes, special training and equipment, as well as the bestowing of special privileges (i.e. higher pay, special dress, badges and insignia). And all of these criteria must be sanctioned and brought about by a larger, higher institution, and if that hierarchy refuses to acknowledge the status or provide the necessary framework, there is little chance that a unit or formation can evolve on its own into an elite force.

Problems Associated with Military Elites

If elites are so despised, then why cultivate them? Why allow them to exist? The resistance to their growth and presence is real enough. As noted earlier, they are *generally* opposed, and, worldwide, most military elites face bureaucratic hostility from the larger conventional institution to which they belong. The reasons are many. Most military commanders either *were* or *are* convinced that elite units have a negative impact upon the larger organization. Firstly, elite units are frequently seen as 'skimming the cream,' or taking the best individuals from conventional units, thus leaving the losing units with lesser leadership. "Almost invariably the men volunteering," explained historian Philip Warner, "are the most enterprising, energetic and least dispensable."⁴¹ It was for this reason that Field Marshal Sir Alan Brooke, Chief of the Imperial General Staff during the Second World War, never agreed with Churchill's sponsorship of special elite-type units. He felt "...[that it was] a dangerous drain on the quality of an infantry battalion."⁴² The legendary Field Marshal Viscount Slim was in strong agreement. He noted that special units "...were usually formed by attracting the best men from normal units by better conditions, promises of excitement and not a little propaganda... The result of these methods was undoubtedly to lower the quality of the rest of the Army, especially of the infantry, not only by skimming the cream off it, but by encouraging the idea that certain of the normal operations of war were so difficult that only specially equipped *corps d'élite* could be expected to undertake them."⁴³ This particular criticism remains extant to this day.

Elite units are also seen as bad for the morale of the larger institution. Historically, military leadership generally has perceived only negative consequences for those who failed to pass the high standards normally imposed for selection to elite units. Alan Brooke and Slim were two commanders who were convinced that those who were rejected had their confidence undermined by failure.⁴⁴ Moreover, the nature of highly selective units created an impression that everyone else was 'second best.'

But this is often more than just an *impression*. It is also a widespread *belief*. "I was glad they [those not selected] left camp immediately and didn't say any awkward farewells," confessed one successful candidate. "They were social lepers and I didn't want to risk catching the infection they carried."⁴⁵ This attitude is dangerous,



US Army photo

US Rangers during a waterborne exercise in Panama.

and, more importantly, it underlines the chasm that develops between those in the group and those to whom it is external.

Furthermore, many commanders perceive elite units as resource intensive, if not an actual waste of men and materiel, when one considers what is perceived as the return on investment. Detractors argue that elites are “...expensive, independent, arrogant, out of uniform, [operate] outside normal chains of command, and [are] too specialized for [their] own good.”⁴⁶ Again, Tom Clancy has observed, “[...][that elite] units and their men are frequently seen as ‘sponges,’ sucking up prized personnel and funds at the expense of ‘regular’ units.”⁴⁷ Detractors of special or elite units often liken their efforts to “breaking windows by throwing guineas (gold coins) at them.”⁴⁸

However, the most emotive criticism, the one that generates the greatest amount of resistance and animosity, is the issue of a ‘cult of the elite’ mentality, specifically, the presence of arrogance and a rejection of conventional military discipline, practices, and protocol. It is what some scholars, analysts, and military personnel have described as the phenomena of elites becoming a ‘law unto themselves.’ Many argue that the perceived rejection of the authority, or the validity of anyone outside the elite group, by members of that group, generates an environment whereby only internal values, norms, and rules are followed, and those external to the group are often ignored. ‘Adding fuel to the fire’ is what many outside the elite group perceive as arrogant behaviour and a flagrant flouting of military rules, regulations, and protocol. This phenomenon is exacerbated by the fact that the elite leadership may ignore non-adherence to regulations and may also condone some non-conformist behaviour. Military analyst and author Roger Beaumont went so far as to describe elites as “...virtually encapsulated delinquency.”⁴⁹

Indeed, this issue is probably the greatest seed of discontent with conventional military leaders with respect to elites, and it constitutes a major reason for that leadership’s resistance, animosity, and active hostility. To those on the outside, elite units that do not fit the conventional mould, specifically those described as elite, special, or unique, are more often than not viewed as rogue outfits and divisive elements in relation to the greater institution. Former Canadian lieutenant-colonel and current sociologist Charles Cotton, in his studies of military culture, noted “[...]their [elite] cohesive spirit is a threat to the chain of command and wider cohesion.”⁵⁰

This is often a result of the fact that leadership and discipline tend to be less formal within elites, and the normal protocol and emphasis placed upon ceremony and deportment is somewhat relaxed. Professor Eliot Cohen commented “[...]that] an almost universally observed characteristic of elite units is



A member of the British Special Air Service (SAS) Regiment.

their lack of formal discipline – and sometimes a lack of substantive discipline as well.” His research determined “[...]that] elite units often disregard spit and polish or orders about saluting.”⁵¹

Cohen is not mistaken, and this is borne out in the testimony of former members of a wide range of elite units. For instance, the highly distinguished and combat decorated British General Sir Peter de la Billière recalled that, as a junior officer in the British Special Air Service (SAS), “...the men, for their part, never called me ‘Sir’ unless they wanted to be rude.”⁵² Historian Eric Morris observed, “...the LRDG [Long Range Desert Group] and other like units did offer a means of escape from those petty tediums and irritants of everyday life in the British Army. Drills, guards, fatigues and inspections were almost totally absent.”⁵³ Another military historian observed that “[mad Mike] Calvert, [Commander 2 SAS Brigade] like many fighting soldiers was not particularly concerned by the trivia of, for example, military appearance [since] uniformity and smartness have little bearing on a unit’s ability to fight.”⁵⁴ However, there is no doubt that this relatively minor aspect of elitist behaviour has had (and continues to have) an enormous impact upon how a respective unit is perceived by others, namely, outsiders.

Nor have these anomalies been lost upon members of elite organizations. “We were

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already conspicuous by our lack of dress code,” confessed one SAS non-commissioned officer (NCO). “The green army always dresses the same.”⁵⁵ One neophyte American Special Forces soldier recalled his amazement on arriving at his new unit. “Sergeants-Major are the walking, breathing embodiment of everything that’s right in the US Army,” he explained. Yet, his first glimpse of his new sergeant-major caught him unprepared. “His shirt was wide open and he wore no T-shirt. His dog tags were gold plated. His hat was tipped up on the back of his head, and he wore a huge, elaborately curled and waxed handlebar moustache.”⁵⁶

The fact of the matter is that elite units have realized that their relatively lax discipline and dress codes have irritated the conventional military. This has been, and continues to be, in some cases, part of their appeal, as is their need to clearly differentiate themselves from the ‘regular’ armed forces. This is also why, when it occurs, it generates such enmity from the conventional hierarchy. Nonetheless, much of this dynamic is based upon the type of individuals that historically have joined these formations. David Stirling, the founder of the SAS, reflected that the “Originals” were not really “controllable,” but rather, “harnessable.”⁵⁷ The Rangers were acknowledged to consist largely of “...mavericks who couldn’t make it in conventional units.”⁵⁸ “Commanding the Rangers,” explained William Darby, their first commanding officer, “was like driving a team of very high spirited horses. No effort was needed to get them to go forward. The problem was to hold them in check.”⁵⁹

“Membership in the fraternity cannot be bestowed due to affluence, influence, or rank. It must be earned.”

Similarly, American Special Forces (Green Berets) were later described as those “...who wanted to try something new and challenging, and who chafed at rigid discipline.”⁶⁰ Furthermore, General de la Billière observed “...[that] most officers and men here do not really fit in normal units of the Army, and that’s why they’re here in the SAS, which is not like anything else in the Services.”⁶¹ He assumed that most of the volunteers, as he was, “...were individualists who wanted to break away from the formal drill-machine discipline” then existing in the army as a whole.⁶² This assumption fits a pattern. According to General Peter Schoomaker, who joined the American Delta Force under its founding commander, Colonel Charlie Beckwith, “...Beckwith was looking for a bunch of bad cats who wanted to do something different.”⁶³

This element of self-selection, combined with the feeling of accomplishment – as members of the few who had successfully passed selection – and the self-confidence born from challenging, difficult, and hazardous training, creates an aura of invincibility and an intense loyalty to what is perceived as a very exclusive group. An intimate bond is generated further through shared hardship and danger. Members of these ‘special’ groups frequently develop an outlook that treats those outside of their ‘club’ as inferior, and, thus, unworthy of respect. “The more the group is centred on itself, thus increasing its cohesion,” observed Professor Elmar Dinter, “the less it is interested in its environment.” He argued “...[that] an already existing behavioural pattern is thereby reinforced...What matters to the group is only what affects it directly.” Dinter added: “The desire to distinguish the group from other groups is not restricted to insignia and ritualism, but leads, in addition, to a spiteful attitude towards others.”⁶⁴ Often, this sense of independence from the conventional army, as well as the lack of respect for traditional forms of discipline, spawn what some analysts describe as the emergence of units that are more akin to militant clans than to military organizations.⁶⁵ Needless to say, this type of organization and institutional attitude is an anathema to a military that prides itself upon decorum, tradition, and uniformity.

Not surprisingly, the arrogance and deliberate insubordination of some individuals in elite units have often fuelled the fire. No image is more representative than the scene from *Black Hawk Down* when a captain gives direction to a group of senior NCOs. Upon completion, the group, less one, acknowledges the orders. The captain quickly confers with the recalcitrant NCO, asking him if he understood the direction. The Delta Force sergeant replies nonchalantly, almost contemptuously: “Yeah, I heard ya.” This is a classic case of art reflecting reality, and unfortunately, it echoes the behaviour of paratroopers in the Canadian Special Service Force during the 1980s, who consistently



Badge of Joint Task Force 2.

DND Image



Army Pathfinders tie up to HMCS Windsor during Exercise Joint Express.

refused to salute 'LEG' (conventional infantry) officers, and were not held accountable by their own chain of command.⁶⁶

Conventional commanders often cite the circumvention or outright ignorance of the chain of command as another long-standing bone of contention. Most see this behaviour as one of the commonest examples of disobedience by elite forces. It also tends to raise the accusation that elites are, in essence, "private armies," that often are apt to "...become an object of suspicion to the public army."⁶⁷ This is usually due to the fact that elite units are inclined to value concrete action, and have little patience for bureaucracy. Coupled with an 'ends justify the means' attitude, it is not surprising that some 'conventional feathers are likely to get ruffled.' "One danger of the private army," commented one senior officer, "is certainly that it gets into the habit of using wrong channels."⁶⁸ He is correct, and "Mad Mike" Calvert of SAS fame has conceded "...[that] a private army ... short-circuits command."⁶⁹

In the end, conventional commanders often believe that elites breed and nurture an 'in-group' mentality that is dangerously inwardly focused. Elites are perceived to trust only themselves – namely those who have passed the same rigorous selection standards and tests – and they may shun those on the outside. Anthropologist Donna Winslow has commented upon the negative aspects that often arise from an emphasis on the exclusivity of this 'warrior cult.' It nurtures an unassailable belief, she states, "...[that] only those who have done it know, or can be trusted, or more dangerously yet, can give direction."⁷⁰ Alan Bell, formerly of the SAS, confessed that we "...tended to have an arrogance that we knew it all, did it all, and had nothing to learn." Moreover, he acknowledged that they would work

only with Delta Force or (US Navy Special Forces) SEAL Team Six – no one else. "We figured," he confessed, "it wasn't worth our time."⁷¹

And so, the case against elites is deep-rooted and strongly held by many conventional commanders. And yet, military elites continue to exist. Why? First, the excessive arrogance and the downstream behavioral ramifications of that arrogance are largely a thing of the past. Elites are now drilled on the pitfalls of arrogant, disrespectful behavior, and this has, in turn, bred far greater tolerance and respect for others. In terms of 'value added,' the answer lies in what elites provide to the military institution and the government they serve.

The Case for Military Elites

Firstly, elite units are extremely cohesive, and they foster unquestioned solidarity among their membership. Normally within elites, officers and men undergo identical training, and they are faced with the same tests of courage, endurance, and strength. Generally, they have all passed the rigorous selection standards. In short, there are no shortcuts and no exceptions granted for anyone. For instance, with respect to paratroopers,



CMJ collection

Colonel Peter Kenward, the last commander of the Canadian Airborne Regiment, recognized "...[that] it is impossible to hide weakness in the Airborne."⁷² As a result of the exacting standards that all must meet, as well as the shared hardships, a bond is created, based upon group identity, mutual respect, and solidarity. Membership in the fraternity cannot be bestowed due to affluence, influence, or rank. It must be earned.

This unique, shared experience certainly builds group cohesion and solidarity. Sociologists have argued that high standards and requirements for admittance into a group result in a greater sense of commitment and value placed on membership to that group by successful candidates.⁷³ In simple terms, the greater the degree of challenge, hardship, and danger, the greater is the development of mutual respect and affiliation.⁷⁴

These bonds are significant. Samuel Stouffer's monumental study of battlefield behaviour, *The American Soldier*, indicated that 80 percent of respondents believed that strong group integration was the main reason for stamina in combat. This study also observed that motivation is primarily dependent upon group cohesion, and that group cohesion, in turn, is the decisive factor for determining combat efficiency. Steadfast self-confidence in oneself and in one's fellow soldiers engenders a belief and philosophy that there is no mission that cannot be accomplished.⁷⁵ As such, elite units provide a very reliable and effective combat force, regardless of the difficulty of a task assigned.

Moreover, elites can also be a source of inspiration and can set a standard for others. Importantly, they provide opportunities and goals for those who wish to challenge themselves and aspire to meet the rigorous selection standards for entry into an elite unit. This opportunity and challenge can act as a catalyst to retaining military members.

Furthermore, elite units can provide a 'leadership nursery.' Members have the opportunity to learn additional skills, particularly advanced leadership abilities, due to their exposure to different training and operational experiences, as well as exposure to different and often more experienced, mature, and highly skilled personnel. As these leaders return to their units or are deployed to other formations, schools, or various headquarters, they share their acquired attributes, insights, and skills. This 'cross-pollination' strengthens the military institution as a whole. By way of example, Special Operation Forces (SOF)

leaders have been responsible for enhancing such skills as marksmanship and close quarter battle drills (CQB) within other combat arms units.

In addition, elite units are often a preferred testing ground for new tactics and procedures, and this is easily explained. Normally, elite units represent smaller, more experienced, and talented organizations. They also tend to operate in very small teams. As such, it is easier to test new processes, tactics, equipment, and techniques, and then refine them prior to transferring skills to the broader military family. Within the Canadian experience alone, the impact has been dramatic. Canadian SOF personnel have been responsible for a number of important evolutions in Canadian Army equipment and tactics – specifically with respect to load-bearing vests, communications equipment, sniper equipment, CQB, and joint tactical air control, to name but a few initiatives.

But the greatest reason elites exist – and, within the contemporary environment, this refers mainly to special operations forces – is because the most senior military commanders and their political masters recognize their importance and the strategic capability that these forces can provide. A large part of this senior level support comes from the fact that they are privy to what elite units can actually accomplish, and senior leaders often get to work side by side with the members of the various elite units and their leadership. For these senior leaders, any misperception born of security constraints do not exist, as they are not only aware of the results that are achieved, they actually provide the necessary direction and approval. As such, any questionable 'return on investment' concerns are not an issue. They are fully aware that their elite units 'punch above their weight' and deliver results far in excess of the numbers of adversaries they engage. For instance, few realize Canadian SOF personnel have removed an entire generation of Taliban leadership in Kandahar, many of whom were responsible for the deaths of Canadian service personnel.

However, for those not privy to this level of information, the veil of secrecy still exists, which inevitably breeds misconception and misunderstanding. That said, with respect to security issues, elite units consciously err on the side of caution, rather than attempt to showcase their successes. This is due to two moral imperatives. The first is the requirement to protect their personnel, who operate against a ruthless enemy in an unforgiving, complex, operational environment. The second is to protect the security of operations in order to ensure mission success, which also includes the essential requirement to protect allies and their information, tactics, techniques, and procedures.

“Ultimate success depends upon staying ahead of the threat environment.”

Also, the intimate dealings of senior decision-makers with the members and leadership of elite units exposes those decision-makers to the overriding humility and professionalism that normally is present in elite forces. This is not to say that the occasional unsatisfactory exceptions do not exist – clearly they do, as they do in any organization. Overall, however, it is a quiet confidence and maturity that normally permeates elite organizations. As senior journalist and Harvard scholar Linda Robinson observed with regard to SOF forces with whom she has worked, “...they are largely self-policing because senior members usually detect and address breakdowns in a soldier’s performance.” She added: “There is a high level of intolerance among [the group] for performance that falls short of the standards and there are also the checks of peer competition with other teams and oversight by the hierarchy above.”⁷⁶ Their greatest fear and punishment is banishment, or, in the simplest of terms, to be ‘RTU’ – returned to the unit of origin.

However, the greatest reason for maintaining elite organizations is the capability they provide the government – a panoply of options (both kinetic and non-kinetic) that are not available elsewhere. Specifically, this includes agile, tailored, and rapid responses to high-risk situations. Often, these organizations are charged with tasks in which failure is not an option. Their training, expert skills, high readiness levels, and specialized equipment position them to deter, disrupt and/or defeat enemy threats in the manner least disruptive and damaging to the society they serve. Any lack of success on their part may leave the government with little space in which to manoeuvre. In some cases, the only possible alternative to the use of elite forces would be to send in a large kinetic force and to deal with its ensuing footprint – an option that is *sometimes* not possible and *often* not desirable.

The importance of their success is also why elites frequently are provided with generous budgets and cutting-edge technology. To counter a determined enemy that is networked and ever changing, as well as myriad threats in a complex environment, it is not enough to be simply *reactive*. Ultimate success depends upon *staying ahead* of the threat environment. For this reason, a heavy investment in a nation’s ‘no failure option’ force to ensure they maintain the necessary capabilities is critical.

Conclusion

‘Love ‘em or hate ‘em,’ elites, as disdainful as the concept may be to some, serve a necessary purpose to military institutions. It is normally misunderstanding and misperception that breeds resistance and enmity. Learning to live with elites requires an effort by all parties. Although operational security can never be compromised, better effort is required to educate others and to challenge dated misconceptions (i.e. poor return on investment, lack of discipline, rejection of institutional processes, rules and regulations). Similarly, the ‘conventional’ military must make a better effort to understand the role, capabilities, and importance of elite organizations. In the end, they provide an important capability in a nation’s arsenal – for this reason, they have always survived, despite institutional resistance and enmity.⁷⁷



DND photo DH1-2007-140-3

NOTES

1. Interview with author, 28 April 1998.
2. Thomas K. Adams, *US Special Operations Forces in Action. The Challenge of Unconventional Warfare* (London: Frank Cass, 1998), pp. 9-10.
3. Martin Kitchen, "Elites in Military History," in *Elite Military Formations in War and Peace*, A. Hamish Ion and Keith Neilson (eds.) (Westport: Praeger, 1996), p. 8. Brigadier-General (ret'd) R.G. Thériault astutely noted that in Canadian society it is not a good thing to produce a group that is favoured above others. Interview with author, 28 April 1998.
4. Tom Clancy, *Special Forces* (New York: A Berkley Book, 2001), p. 3.
5. Andy McNab, *Immediate Action* (London: Bantam Press, 1995), p. 381.
6. Katherine Barber (ed.), *The Canadian Oxford Dictionary* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).
7. <<http://www.webferg.org/sociology/e/elites.htm>>.
8. Kitchen, p. 7.
9. See John Porter, *The Vertical Mosaic – An Analysis of Social Class and Power in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965), pp. 27, 207; Robert Putnam, *The Comparative Study of Political Elites* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1976), p. 4; Geraint Parry, *Political Elites* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1969), pp. 30-32; Sylvie Guillaume (ed.), *Les Elites Fins de Siècles – XIX-XX Siècles* (Editions de la Maison des Sciences de L'Homme D'Aquitaine, 1992), p. 27; and M.S. Whittington and Glen Williams (eds.), *Canadian Politics in the 1990s* (Scarborough: Nelson Canada, 1990), p.182.
10. Hervé Bentégeant, *Les Nouveaux Rois de France ou La Trahison des Elites* (Paris: Éditions Ramsay, 1998), p. 19.
11. Parry, p. 3. This includes leadership positions of special interest groups. Those who lead such organizations are often designated as 'elites,' as differentiated by the 'non-decision-making' mass of their members. Leo V. Panitch, "Elites, Classes, and Power in Canada," in *Canadian Politics in the 1990s, 3rd edition*, Michael S. Whittington and Glen Williams (eds.) (Scarborough, ON: Nelson Canada, 1990), p.182.
12. Moshe M. Czumowski (ed.), *Political Elites and Social Change – Studies of Elite Roles and Attitudes*. (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 1983), p. 221.
13. Parry, p. 13.
14. See John Porter, *The Vertical Mosaic. An Analysis of Social Class and Power in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965), pp. 27, 207.
15. Reg Jennings, Charles Cox and C.L Cooper, *Business Elites. The Psychology of Entrepreneurs and Intrapreneurs* (New York: Routledge, 1994), p.10.
16. Christopher Lasch, *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1995), pp. 3, 5, 25-26. See also Guillaume, pp. 112-113. In accordance with this study, an elite must fulfil two conditions. First, it must be recognized by the respective 'local society' as an elite (By definition, the author states that the elite is of small composition). This aspect is symbolic in nature. The second requirement is that the elite have control and power over the cultural infrastructure of the society.
17. Parry, pp. 75-76.
18. Douglas Porch, "The French Foreign Legion: The Mystique of Elitism," A. Hamish Ion and Keith Neilson (eds.) (Westport: Praeger, 1996), p. 131.
19. *Ibid.*, p.126.
20. Steve Payne, "Hell is for Heroes," *The Ottawa Sunday Sun*, 19 March 1995, p. 6.
21. Porch, p. 118.
22. Eva Etzioni-Halevy, "Civil-Military Relations and Democracy: The Case of the Military-Political Elites' Connection in Israel," in *Armed Forces and Society*, Vol. 22, No. 3, Spring 1996, p. 401.
23. Richard Szafranski, "Neocortical Warfare? The Acme of Skill," in *In Athena's Camp* (New York: Rand, 1999), p. 408.
24. Roger A. Beaumont, *Military Elites* (London: Robert Hale and Company, 1974), pp. 2-3.
25. Gilles Perrault, *Les Parachutistes* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1961), p. 42.
26. Eliot A. Cohen, *Commandos and Politicians* (Cambridge: Center for International Affairs, Harvard University, 1978), p.17.
27. Colin S. Gray, *Explorations in Strategy* (London: Greenwood Press, 1996), p.158. The question of selection is important. Using Special Operations Forces, which are universally seen as elite, as an example, their selection/status is based upon a three-tier basis. For instance, 'Tier One' SOF consists of primarily 'Black Ops,' or counter-terrorism. Normally, only 10 to 15 percent of those attempting selection are successful. What makes this number so impressive is that a large percentage of those trying are already second or third tier SOF members. Organizations that fall into this category include the US 1st Special Forces Operational Detachment – Delta, the German *Grenzschutzgruppe-9* (GSG 9), and the Canadian Joint Task Force – 2 (JTF 2). 'Tier Two' SOF reflects those organizations that have a selection pass rate of between 20 and 30 percent. They are normally entrusted with high value tasks, such as Strategic Reconnaissance and Unconventional Warfare. Some examples include the American Special Forces (also referred to as Green Berets), the American SEALs, and the British, Australian, and New Zealand SAS. 'Tier Three' consists of those units, such as the American Rangers and the British Royal Marine Commandos, that have a selection success rate of 40 to 45 percent, and whose primary mission is Direct Action. See Colonel C.A. Beckwith, *Delta Force* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1985), pp.123, 137; Interview with Major Anthony Balasevicius; Leroy Thompson, *The Rescuers. The World's Top Anti-Terrorist Units* (London: A David & Charles Military Book, 1986), pp.127-128; General Ulrich Wegener, Presentation to the RMC Special Operations Symposium, 5 October 2000; Judith E. Brooks and Michelle M. Zazanis, "Enhancing U.S. Army Special Forces: Research and Applications," in ARI Special Report 33, October 1997, p. 8; General H.H. Shelton, "Quality People: Selecting and Developing Members of U.S. SOF," in *Special Warfare*, Vol. 11, No. 2, Spring 1998, p. 3; Commander Thomas Dietz, CO Seal Team 5, Presentation to the RMC Special Operations Symposium, 5 October 2000; Bernd Horn, *Casting Light on the Shadows* (Toronto: CDA Press / Dundurn, 2007), Chapter 1; and Colonel Bill Kidd, "Ranger Training Brigade," in *US Army Infantry Center Infantry Senior Leader Newsletter*, February 2003, pp. 8-9.
28. Porch, p. 117.
29. Eric Morris, *Churchill's Private Armies* (London: Hutchinson, 1986), p. xiii. See also David Chandler, "Indispensable Role of Elite Forces," in *Military History Quarterly*, Vol. 15, No. 3, Spring 2003, pp. 77-78.
30. Tom Clancy, *Airborne* (New York: Berkley Books, 1997), p. xviii.
31. Mark Lloyd, *Special Forces – The Changing Face of Warfare* (New York: Arms and Armour, 1995), p. 11.
32. David Miller, *Special Forces* (London: Salamander Books, 2001), p.15. Similarly, author Duncan Anderson defined military elites as "a relatively small highly trained force specializing in extremely hazardous operations, often of a militarily non-conventional nature." Duncan Anderson, *Military Elites* (London: Bison Books Ltd., 1994), p. 7.
33. Tom Clancy, with General Fred Franks, *Into the Storm. A Study in Command* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1997), p.119.
34. Major-General (ret'd) Robert H. Scales Jr., *Yellow Smoke. The Future of Land Warfare for America's Military* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc., 2003), p. 69.
35. Matt Labash, "The New Army," in *The Weekly Standard*, Vol. 6, No. 31, 30 April 2001.
36. Dennis Showalter, "German Army Elites in World Wars I and II," in *Elite Formations in War and Peace*, A. Hamish Ion and Keith Neilson (eds.) (Westport: Praeger, 1996), p. 152.

37. James Lucas, *Storming Eagles. German Airborne Forces in World War II* (London: Cassel & Co., 2001), p. 14.
38. Kitchen, p. 26.
39. See D.R. Segal, Jesse Harris, J.M. Rothberg, and D.H. Marlowe, "Paratroopers as Peacekeepers," in *Armed Forces and Society*, Vol. 10, No. 4, Summer 1984, p. 489; and Donna Winslow, *The Canadian Airborne Regiment in Somalia. A Socio-cultural Inquiry* (Ottawa: Commission of Inquiry into the Deployment of Canadian Forces to Somalia, 1997), pp.128-138. Gideon Aran stated, "Jumping can be viewed as a test which allows those who pass it to join an exclusive club, to be initiated into an elite group." Gideon Aran, "Parachuting," in *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 80, No. 1, p.150.
40. This emphasis on discernable differences between the 'special' units and their 'conventional' brethren became the core of the Canadian military's understanding of elite. Many senior commanders defined and treated the Canadian paratroopers as elite – at least, prior to the Somalia debacle – based upon the higher levels of fitness, distinctive uniform, and the parachuting requirement. Colonel Painchaud, a former Airborne Regimental Commander, was representative of many when he explained, "...the airborne soldier is the elite of the Canadian Army. He must be in top shape compared to any other soldier, in physical fitness and shooting and weapon handling." Dick Brown, "Hanging Tough," in *Quest*, May 1978, p.12. See also Commission of Inquiry into the Deployment of Canadian Forces to Somalia, *Information Legacy. A Compendium of Source Material from the Commission of Inquiry* (Hereafter Information Legacy). [CD-ROM], 1998, Hearing Transcripts, Vol. 36, 22 January 1996, testimony of Lieutenant-Colonel Morneau, p. 6898.
41. Philip Warner, *Phantom* (London: William Kimber, 1982), p.11.
42. Eric Morris, *Churchill's Private Armies* (London: Hutchinson, 1986), p. 90.
43. Field Marshal Sir William Slim, *Defeat Into Victory* (London: Cassell and Company Ltd., 1956), p. 547.
44. Slim, p. 546, and Morris, *Churchill's Private Army*, p. 243.
45. Command Sergeant Major Eric L. Haney, *Inside Delta Force. The Story of America's Elite Counterterrorist Unit* (New York: A Dell Book, 2002), p. 97.
46. Adams, p. 162.
47. Clancy, *Special Forces*, pp. 3-4.
48. Cohen, p. 61.
49. Beaumont, *Military Elites*, p. 192.
50. Charles A. Cotton, "Military Mystique," (Source Canadian Airborne Forces Museum files – no publication material available.)
51. Cohen, p. 74.
52. General Sir Peter de la Billière, *Looking For Trouble. SAS to Gulf Command* (London: Harper Collins Publishers, 1995), p. 117.
53. Eric Morris, *Guerrillas in Uniform* (London: Hutchinson, 1989), p. 15.
54. Weale, p.154.
55. Cameron Spence, *All Necessary Measures* (London: Penguin Books, 1997), p. 43.
56. Haney, p. 20.
57. Anthony Kemp, *The SAS at War* (London: John Murray, 1991), p. 11.
58. Charles M. Simpson III, *Inside the Green Berets. The First Thirty Years* (Novato, CA: Presidio, 1983), p.14; and Charles W. Sasser, *Raider* (New York: St. Martins, 2002), p.186.
59. William O. Darby and William H. Baumer, *Darby's Rangers. We Led the Way* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, reprint 1993), p. 184.
60. *Ibid.*, p. 21.
61. de la Billière, p. 236.
62. *Ibid.*, p. 98.
63. Greg Jaffe, "A Maverick's Plan to Revamp Army is Taking Shape," in *Wall Street Journal*, 12 December 2003.
64. Elmar Dinter, *Hero of Coward?*, (London: Frank Cass, 1985), p. 70.
65. John Talbot, "The Myth and Reality of the Paratrooper in the Algerian War," in *Armed Forces and Society*, November 1976, p. 75; Cohen, p. 69; and Winslow, pp. 135-141.
66. Interview with Lieutenant-Colonels Watkin and Peter Bradley, 4 June 1998 and 15 September 1997 respectively. The derogatory term 'LEG' originates from the Second World War. Regular infantry wore canvas 'leggings' as part of their uniform. The 'elite' paratroopers were spared this ordeal. They were issued with high-cut 'jump boots' into which the uniform trouser could be tucked. Needless to say, the paratroopers quickly christened their brethren with the contemptuous label of 'LEGS.' A more contemporary version translates the meaning to 'Lacking Enough Guts.' This was, not surprisingly, a peacetime mutation. Beyond the obvious that 'leggings' are no longer worn, the act of parachuting is seen as a test of individual courage. It had taken on an importance of far greater proportion than it did during the war. Since virtually all infanteers saw combat, and those in the regular line infantry for longer periods than the airborne units, the question of individual courage was rather moot.
67. Colonel J.W. Hackett, "The Employment of Special Forces," *RUSI Journal*, Vol. 97, No. 585, February 1952, p. 35.
68. *Ibid.*, p. 39.
69. *Ibid.*
70. Winslow, pp. 26-133.
71. Alan Bell, formerly of 22 SAS, Presentation to the RMC Special Operations Symposium, 5 October 2000 and WS 586 class, 19 March 2004.
72. Interview with author, 4 October 1996. One sergeant-major of the British 2nd Parachute Regiment stated that in airborne units, the officers and men rely upon one another. He explained: "A special bond was created because of the fact that the men knew that the officers, like them, endured the same difficult training prior to arriving at Regiment." Rory Bridson, *The Making of a Para* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson Ltd, 1989), p. 81. Major-General Newman declared: "There's a close bond between the airborne soldier and his officer, because each knows the other has passed the jump test. And they continue to do so together. Each believes the other will be a good man to have around when things get sweaty." Major-General A.S. Newman, *What Are Generals Made Of?* (Novato, CA: Presidio, 1987), p.193.
73. E. Aronson and J. Mills, "The Effect of Severity of Initiation on Liking for a Group," in *Journal of Abnormal & Social Psychology*, 1957, pp. 157-158. Elliot Aronson of Stanford University and Judson Mills of the U.S. Army Leadership and Human Research Unit established this in their 1959 laboratory experiments. They stated: "Subjects who underwent a severe initiation perceived the group as being significantly more attractive than those who underwent a mild or no initiation." See also R.B. Cialdini, R.B. *Influence. Science & Practise*, 3rd ed. (Arizona: Harper Collins, 1993), pp.70, 74; and Major James McCollum, "The Airborne Mystique," in *Military Review*, Vol. 56, No. 11, November 1976, p.16.
74. W.D. Henderson, *Cohesion: The Human Element in Combat* (Washington: National Defence University Press, 1985), p.14.
75. Dinter, p. 41; and Anthony Kellet, *Combat Motivation* (Boston: Nijhoff Publishing, 1982), pp. 45-46.
76. Linda Robinson, *Masters of Chaos. The Secret History of the Special Forces* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004), p. xx.
77. The support of the most senior decision-makers has always been critical. Their support is often a function of their belief in the capability provided. For instance, Prime Minister Winston Churchill took great interest in the development of the commandos, and he championed other similar aggressive, unorthodox type units. General George Marshall personally pushed his subordinates to promote the establishment of the American Rangers, and his political master, President Franklin D. Roosevelt, allowed the director of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) to maintain a direct pipeline to the White House. Later, President John F. Kennedy heaped lavish attention upon the American Special Forces, much to the chagrin of his conventional chiefs of staff, and, recently, it was former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld who personally ensured that American SOF received starring roles in US operations, as well as hefty increases in manpower and budgets. Within the Canadian context, key support by some of the most senior commanders was instrumental in ensuring the creation and survival of the Canadian Special Operations Forces Command.