

STATE OF THE FORCES

The Standing Senate Committee on National Security and Defence has made no secret of its exasperation with testimony from senior officers that paints “...a much rosier picture” of the state of the Canadian Forces “...than has been mooted by many Canadian defence analysts.” In its August 2008 report, *Four Generals and an Admiral: The View from the Top*, the Committee took particular note of the June 2008 testimony from Lieutenant-General Walt Natynczyk (then Vice Chief of the Defence Staff), Lieutenant-General A.B. Leslie (Chief of the Land Staff), Vice-Admiral Drew Robertson (Chief of the Maritime Staff), Lieutenant-General W. Angus Watt (Chief of the Air Staff), and Lieutenant-General J.C.M. Gauthier (Commander, Canadian Expeditionary Force Command). The Committee, posits its August 2008 report, “...heard nothing but positive testimony from all five senior officers about the state of the military, the high morale, the commitment from the Government to maintain reasonable funding levels, the impressive capital projects either in implementation or on the horizon, the challenging work that the Canadian Forces are doing, and the ability to conduct their government-assigned tasks. The gist of their message was that ‘...it is a great time to be in the Canadian Military.’”

Canadians, however, “...have been hearing a very different story. They have been hearing that there are substantial funding shortages within the Canadian Forces and that extreme measures have been contemplated to mitigate the lack of resources provided to the various commands. Leaked ‘needs reports’ from the Army, Navy and Air Force disseminated by the news media...have suggested that none of the three branches have adequate funding to perform the roles expected of them in the coming years. Many defence analysts have gone on record as stating that Afghanistan is bleeding the remainder of the military dry when it comes to ‘reasonable funding levels’ for the other missions and tasks.”

The Committee was somewhat mollified by Lieutenant-General Natynczyk’s June 2008 observation that it would be inappropriate to comment because the business planning process that the ‘needs reports’ were part of had not been concluded – in other words, as the Committee’s report noted, “...the Commanders had not been advised whether the gaps in funding identified in their reports would be filled.” The majority of Committee members nevertheless remained frustrated by a perceived lack of candour, some of it attributed to “the tight rein the Prime Minister’s Office keeps on politicians and civil servants generally,” from senior officers. Criticisms and concerns of this nature – to which one might add the current chorus of complaints from

Canadian journalists over the perceived dearth of timely and detailed information from the Canadian Forces and the Department of National Defence – raise a host of complex issues that are neither totally new or easily addressed. It is, clearly, an appropriate moment for a thoroughgoing review of these issues and the options for an improved balance between caution and transparency. In the absence of a better balance, a better approach, Canadians will continue to receive highly contradictory messages on the state of their armed forces. That is most assuredly not the way to improve Canadians’ understanding of national defence issues, or to generate informed and meaningful debate on Canadian defence policy. Nor, some would add, is it the way to re-invigorate the public constituency for defence in this country.

One example of the type of candour sought by the Committee – at least judging by the number of Senators who characterized the testimony as “sobering” or “riveting” – were the remarks by the Chief of the Land Staff, Lieutenant-General A.B. Leslie, on 9 March 2009. In a presentation keyed to personnel, education, equipment, and infrastructure issues, Lieutenant-General Leslie noted that “...despite the many successes we have achieved in recent years, the fact remains that there are so many demands on your army, that we are going to have to make difficult choices if we want to be able to maintain the present level of operational commitment in the short and medium terms.” He noted, for example, that although several thousand new positions had been created for the army since 2005, the number of trained soldiers had remained relatively unchanged, due to increased attrition. The Canadian Forces, in his view, “...have not been very proactive in introducing incentives to encourage their members to remain with the organization.” Moreover, “...the establishment of new headquarters and non-deployable units has forced the army to fill several hundred positions that required highly experienced soldiers with considerable military knowledge. This organizational change occurred at a time when our soldiers are particularly needed within field units, regiments, brigades, and training units. We absolutely cannot do without these people if we are to increase staffing levels within our operational units as quickly as possible.”

The army, he noted, is short approximately 700 officers and 700 senior non-commissioned officers. Under the circumstances, “...a number of strategic solutions have been suggested. In the short term, the Canadian Forces will have to either reduce their level of operational commitment or reduce the number of people working within static, non-deployable headquarters. One other option might be to reduce the number of headquarters within the Canadian Forces. In the medium term, by

mid-July 2011, we will have to explore the possibility of a well-organized and synchronized operational pause, in the space of less than one year.” He also enumerated a host of equipment issues, including distressingly high out-of-service rates for vehicles in Canada (i.e., 76 percent for the *Coyote* reconnaissance vehicle, 73 percent for the *Bison* light armoured vehicle, and 71 percent for the *Leopard 1* main battle tank). These numbers reflected aging fleets, the condition of vehicles returned from overseas, and a ‘crisis’-level shortage of mechanics and technicians. He was clearly exasperated that the *Leopard 2* main battle tank had not yet entered vital training service in Canada. The Chief of the Land Staff added that “...a tremendous amount of funding is required to maintain [army infrastructure], and it is clear that the required funds will probably not be available.” Moreover, “...the procedure that is in place to get some projects approved is too cumbersome and takes far too much time and effort. Approval of projects is delayed for months, and sometimes even for years, which leads [the Department of National Defence] to absorb exorbitant costs.”

Also testifying before the Standing Senate Committee on the same day were the Chief of the Air Staff, Lieutenant-General W. Angus Watt, and the Chief of the Maritime Staff, Vice-Admiral Drew Robertson. Both will be retiring later this year. Their remarks were not as blunt as those of the Chief of the Land Staff, but, then again, the army is carrying the overwhelming bulk of the operational load in Afghanistan and consequently faces a much broader array of very serious, and exceptionally time-sensitive, challenges and problems. Indeed, the army’s efforts to stitch together rotation-after-rotation have been nothing short of remarkable. To be sure, the other services have their own short-term challenges – such as distressing availability rates for the *Hercules*, *Sea King* and *Buffalo* aircraft, and the still-unresolved problems with the *Cormorant* search and rescue helicopter – but, as both the Chief of the Air Staff and the Chief of the Maritime Staff noted, the real challenges – fundamental challenges – will not visibly manifest themselves until the next decade.

Noting that the average age of the air force fleet was 16 years in the mid-1980s, and about 25 years in 2009, Lieutenant-General Watt stressed on-going recapitalization projects, such as the CC-177A *Globemaster* and the forthcoming CC-130J *Hercules* (a combination that looks better and better, given the very serious, but not altogether surprising, delays with the Airbus A400M), the modernization (and eventual replacement) of the CP-140 *Aurora* (although sadly no Senator queried the wisdom of modernizing a mere 10 aircraft), a new fixed-wing search and rescue aircraft to replace the *Buffalo* and SAR *Hercules*, and “...planning for a next generation fighter to replace the CF-18 *Hornet*.” He

also drew attention to the activation in Afghanistan of the much-needed Canadian air wing (replete with CH-146 *Griffons*, ex-U.S. Army CH-47D *Chinooks*, and other assets). He neatly side-stepped a question as to why the *Griffons* were not deployed earlier. On the personnel side, the Chief of the Air Staff noted that the air force has “...challenges in virtually all of our units, just like the army and navy. Some are manned at full strength, particularly those going on operational tours overseas. Our search and rescue squadrons are fully manned...” The “rest of the system, though, struggles.” Most prophetic, however, was his warning that “...if we do not take the right decisions now about key programs – not only equipment, but also infrastructure and people – there will be significant challenges.”

Vice-Admiral Robertson told the Committee that over the next two to three years, “...the critical challenges... relate to people. First, we will need to find ways to reduce the challenge of volatility that we impose on our sailors as a result of being under strength during a period of rising demand for people across the Canadian Forces.” Second, “...we have to organize ourselves to deliver the future fleet. This means we need to continue finding the people with the right skill sets to help our assistant deputy minister for materiel to administer the maritime program in a way that does not put success in operations at risk.” Looking beyond the short-term, “...our next order of business will be to figure out how we will meet our operational and institutional requirements with fewer ships at sea, starting when we begin cycling the *Halifax*-Class frigates through their modernization refits.” At times, “...four or five-plus frigates” would be “...out of operations simultaneously.” On the procurement front, the navy was considering “...how best to move forward” on the troubled Joint Support Ship and determining the “...appropriate level of ice capability and offshore capability” for the projected Arctic Offshore Patrol Ship. In a broader sense, he noted that “...for us, the issue is not so much about Nanisivik or waters south of Alert. The issue is how we will maintain surveillance, presence and control in the waters north of Alert. Perhaps not in the next five years or so, but certainly in the next five, ten, fifteen years, there will be open water north of Alert...” The CMS stressed that “...we must be successful at the procurement activities to replace the supply ships... and to move on the Canadian surface combatant. I am concerned that if we are not as effective as we can be on those acquisitions, we face the prospect for reduced output by about 2015.”

Perhaps candour, at least in some respects, is in the eye of the beholder. The testimony of the Chief of the Land Staff to the Standing Senate Committee on National Security and Defence was unquestionably



DND AR2008-2103-23 by Corporal Simon Duchesne

Members of A Squadron 12^e Régiment blindé du Canada catch a few minutes of rest beside their Coyote armoured vehicles.

“sobering” and “riveting” – and refreshingly candid. The testimony of his compatriots was less forceful and much more nuanced, but in its own way no less blunt. In the absence of timely political decisions, and appropriate funding for new equipment (i.e., replacements for the CF-18, the *Aurora* and the surviving *Iroquois-Class* destroyers), infrastructure, and personnel, the

Canadian Forces of 2015-2017 will look much different from, and possess significantly fewer capabilities than, the Canadian Forces of today.

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