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CARRYING THE TORCH FORWARD: THE REVITALIZATION OF THE PATROL PATHFINDER CAPABILITY

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*These comrades of ours are our lifeline.
Give them the best of your arrows and spears
and press good luck into their handshakes.*

~Odysseus, upon dispatching a reconnaissance party on
the Island of Scheria as recounted in Homer's *Odyssey*

Introduction

The Canadian Armed Forces' Patrol Pathfinder (PPF) capability has undergone much change throughout its storied history, owing to variance in the realms of force development, force generation, and force employment. More recently, PPF training was re-initiated at the Canadian Forces Land Advanced Warfare Centre (CFLAWC). After a training gap of five years and significant reconceptualization, a pilot serial took place at Canadian Forces Base Petawawa in 2011, and it graduated ten candidates. This marked the beginning of the military's efforts to revitalize the Patrol Pathfinders after a hiatus. The significance was patent: there is a strategic imperative for Pathfinders to remain within the commander's gamut.

While history is replete with examples of the reconnaissance function playing a pivotal role that determines the outcome of critical operations, there lacks a comprehensive account of the exploits of the Canadian Patrol Pathfinder.¹ This absence is

intricately linked to the lack of doctrinal development that would otherwise sustain the capability and allow for related planning for its future. Moreover, current and future intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) platforms will not replace Patrol Pathfinders as they execute a pivotal role on the ground as autonomous and animate human beings. It is from this perspective that we offer the following analysis and commentary.

The aim of this article is twofold: (1) to inform the Defence Team and other stakeholders about the development of the Canadian Armed Force's PPF capability, and; (2) to provide prescriptive recommendations about the capability's future. The desired outcome is the initiation of a more fulsome and broad-based discussion about PPFs and the supporting PPF program as a critical operational component, and force generation capability the across the future projected spectrum of warfare. Ultimately, a greater understanding of the function throughout the Canadian Armed Forces will enable more effective employment of Pathfinders within their capacity as a vanguard reconnaissance force.

This article will proceed as follows: it will first describe the patrol pathfinder capability with respect to structure and training. It will then explore the strategic context in which PPF development occurs, with a view to specifically highlight the effects associated with adaptive dispersed operations. Various mission profiles for which Pathfinders can expect to be employed are



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then described. Finally, the article turns to a prescriptive section is integrated into a look at the future of the PPF before some concluding remarks.

The Patrol Pathfinder

According to doctrine still in development, a Canadian Patrol Pathfinder is an expert at insertion and extraction techniques by air, land, or sea. He or she must be proficient in the establishment of drop zones, landing zones, beach sites, and tactical airstrips for follow-on forces and is prepared to advise commanders on the Pathfinder phase in joint operations. A PPF grouping, which can range in size from a detachment to a platoon, is inserted through various means, usually well forward of friendly lines. It is currently envisioned that PPF with supporting enablers will be grouped together as a platoon sized brigade-level asset. In garrison, Pathfinder-qualified personnel usually form a section of the reconnaissance platoon within each infantry battalion. Historically, Pathfinders have been a joint capability nested within the Army; such an arrangement needs to be codified within a force employment concept. While their doctrine, tactics, techniques and some equipment are similar, Canadian PPF are not considered special operations forces.

A commander is able to deploy a PPF group in isolation at distances that outreach the integral capabilities of typical conventional reconnaissance platoon assets. PPF are trained to operate as a self-sustained² organization until relieved by a follow-on force, or tasked with subsequent operations. Pathfinders' advanced skill sets are essential to penetrate areas of interest and provide the intimate knowledge and situational awareness required for the expeditious and effective insertion of fighting forces by land, sea, or air. Should it be ordered to do so, and in rare instances, PPF must be prepared to assume the follow-on force's mission if it is unable to insert or reach an objective. As such, personnel are required to be familiar with all phases of a given operation.

In addition to preparations tasks, Pathfinders provide a commander and his staff both a better appreciation of time and space, and the ability to mitigate or manage risk. They are human barometers that will more often than not represent the first human sensors on the ground. Their role is especially manifest in a new theatre of operation. That said, a PPF group can be expected to be employed across the spectrum of conflict, to include humanitarian assistance in an area beset by natural disaster or the evacuation of non-combatants. As such, Pathfinders must be familiar with the diverse mission types to which they can be expected to contribute. Likewise, planners must be familiar with the Pathfinder role, and how the capability can be appropriately leveraged to achieve mission success.

The training for such tasks is especially arduous. The PPF course is driven by a strategic imperative to build expertise within every infantry battalion. As per the 2010 Army Training Authority implementation directive, "...the target audience is army officers and non-commissioned members deemed physically fit, able to work under extreme stress, severe conditions and in a hostile environment with minimal support." Given the high threshold to entry, screening at the unit level is very important. The Patrol Pathfinder possesses a set of skills that are related, but distinct, from those of an advanced reconnaissance patrolman.

Pathfinders must be in top physical and mental condition to withstand the rigours of long range patrolling, long periods in uncomfortable circumstances, and to work long hours with minimal rest. These personnel must remain operationally effective during long periods under the stress and pressure associated with the conduct of PPF missions in isolated situations. As they can be expected to operate in enemy-held territory, members must be intimately familiar with survival, escape, resistance, and evasion (SERE) techniques. PPFs must be able to execute an evasion plan of action if inadvertent contact with the enemy takes place in the course of an operation. If captured, Pathfinders must be able to withstand interrogation. Hence, SERE practice is an important component of the PPF course, and it permits a commander to accept a level of risk commensurate with the deployment of isolated forces well forward of friendly lines. Moreover, the SERE training package makes the Pathfinder distinct from other conventional reconnaissance forces.

Recent training events have validated the format and content of the course as well as the role and employment of Canada's Patrol Pathfinders. During Exercise *Trillium Response* in Moosonee, Ontario, a PPF element conducted a suitability assessment of an airstrip prior to the arrival of a main body via a CC-130 *Hercules* aircraft. The group was able to relay vital information to both the pilots and the ground force commander, as well as to provide security during landing. Further, during Exercise *Trident Fury*, the Pathfinders conducted similar suitability assessment tasks in a maritime context. A joint team comprised of Royal Canadian Navy clearance divers and Pathfinders established a beach site

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for both insertion and extraction, established a drop zone for the insertion of a sniper team, reconnoitred link-up points, marked casualty evacuation sites, and acted as a continuous point of contact for the commander for joint planning and coordination, among other tasks. In conducting these tasks, PPF fulfilled a specialized mission for the commanders that other elements could not perform.

These training events were intended to reflect the environment in which PPF and military forces writ large can be expected to operate. Moreover, they served the equally vital role of putting the PPF capability on display for commanders and soldiers across all environments to better appreciate its design and value. Both of those notions are shaped by the strategic context in which the military exists and evolves.

Strategic Context

With a baseline understanding of the PPF capability, it is important to explore the context in which it is expected to be developed, generated, and employed. While there are many of relevance, we focus here upon adaptive dispersed operations (ADO). Given that PPF, like any other military organization, are only useful according to their direct relevance to the larger force employment structure, the ADO concept has an important bearing on the employment of Pathfinders and is worth discussing at some length.

An understanding of the PPF role likewise demands a generalized consideration of the nature of conflict that will shape the types of operations in which Canadian Armed Forces can reasonably expect to be engaged. Conflict has more recently and is likely to continue to feature highly adaptive, technologically-enabled actors that conduct irregular warfare in a hybridized fashion. That is to say, their actions across the tactical, operational, and strategic planes will blend conventional and unconventional approaches to best focus limited capabilities on our (i.e. a coalition's) perceived weaknesses. Adversaries will operate on both physical and non-physical planes, such as the cyber domain or within the minds of a civilian population.

The CAF has oriented its Force Development apparatus to become proficient in such a context. In general, strategic planners subscribe to the notion of warfare that will require a force that is adept at adaptive dispersed operations. ADO is characterized by "...coordinated, interdependent, full spectrum actions using widely dispersed teams across the moral, physical, and informational planes of the battlespace."³ Such a multi-dimensional appreciation of the operating environment demands a collection posture that is dynamic, is continuous, accounts for variance across an ethno-demographic spectrum, is relevant to both a rural and urban interface, and other considerations.

As such, PPF could be a vital component of efforts during ADO as they can facilitate the more rapid deployment of forces into areas that might otherwise be non-permissive to exploit an adversary's vulnerable nodes and disrupt his decision-action cycle. At the same time, PPF can enable a force's swift transition from one operation to another by shaping a new objective area. Ultimately, commanders can achieve tactical decisiveness by committing forces with a greater assurance of a successful and rapid insertion within the context of a preparatory PPF supporting operation.

Pathfinders must have an appreciation for the dynamics associated with diverse insertion methods, modern conflict and ADO as they can be expected to *contribute to* and *to lead* the planning in a joint context. Such planning is likely to include, not only full spectrum operations, but also humanitarian relief and non-combatant evacuation operations.

Mission Profiles

The PPF capability has been on display and has contributed to mission success in recent years. A common misconception concerns the lack of PPF operations during the Afghanistan campaign (Operations *Apollo*, *Archer*, and *Athena*), which has led to some to question the relevance of the course and capability as a whole. While not officially termed Pathfinder operations, PPF-qualified personnel executed vanguard reconnaissance tasks in support of company- and battle group-sized manoeuvres that were essentially in accordance with the PPF doctrinal function. It is important to recognize these critical contributions, which illustrate the requirement for a formed PPF element during Full Spectrum Operations to fulfill a specialized function.

Enabling the warfighting effort in a kinetic battlespace will remain central to the PPF role; however, the Canadian Pathfinder is trained to operate across the spectrum of warfare, as reconnaissance and the establishment of insertion/extraction sites are critical phases of nearly all operations. This can potentially include Pathfinder tasks in support of humanitarian assistance, or the



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evacuation of non-combatants. While historically they have not been employed in such a capacity, exercises have confirmed a PPF group's ability to do so.

Under Contingency Plan *Renaissance*, a Disaster Assistance Response Team is tasked to provide relief efforts following a major disaster anywhere in the world. Recent examples include Operation *Hestia* (Haiti) following an earthquake in 2010, Operation *Plateau* (Pakistan) following an earthquake in 2005, and Operation *Structure* (Sri Lanka) following an earthquake and tsunami in 2004. In each instance, task tailored forces launched quickly to provide relief to vulnerable persons in the form of fresh water, rescue operations, waste management, reconstruction, and basic health care. Such operations illustrate the unique challenges of inserting into a disaster zone, where infrastructure and lines of communication may have sustained considerable damage.

Contingency Plan *Angle* outlines the conduct of Non-Combatant Evacuation Operations (NEO), in which military forces facilitate the mass departure of willing Canadian Entitled Persons (CEP) and other nationals from a country that has likely experienced considerable deterioration, such that departure via conventional means (i.e. commercial aviation) is untenable. Operation *Lion* (Lebanon) in 2006, and Operation *Bandit* (Haiti) in 1988, are both examples of Canadian non-combatant evacuation operations. *Angle* is usually executed in a coalition

context and the type and size of a force package in contingent on the circumstances and the operating environment's permissibility.

The PPF role for both *Angle* and *Renaissance* is innate. As naval vessels or air assets can be employed in this effort, suitable landing zones, drop zones, beach zones, and austere airstrips must be identified and marked for either the arrival of aid or an extraction force. In the case of *Angle*, a PPF group can be tasked to establish and mark an extraction point for CEPs. Where shore access exists, Pathfinders will likely form a component of an Amphibious Scouting Group along with clearance divers to deploy from a Canadian naval vessel. The ASG can then reconnoitre, assess, mark, and secure beach sites, or move further inland as required. For both *Renaissance* and *Angle*, PPF can be tasked to conduct initial terminal guidance for Canadian or coalition assets.

There is a heavy emphasis upon coordination, since these mission profiles are executed in a joint, interagency, multinational, and public context. Of note, following the massive earthquake in Haiti in 2010, the Canadian task force had planned for the initial airborne deployment of Pathfinders and a Parachute Company Group. However, airspace coordination (among other factors) precluded the execution of this course of action.

The PPF skill set is organic to enable various types of operation, across all types of terrain for most types of threats (enemy) and risk (environment). Given members' intimate involvement in planning all aspects of the Pathfinder phase of a given operation, the job demands an understanding of the operational planning process, especially the intelligence preparation of the operating environment as contributors, advisors, and autonomous collectors. Future training events will need to incorporate the Pathfinders during the conduct of these types of operations to properly validate and showcase the capability's value and role rather than notionally play out critical phases of an operation (as tends to happen).

The Future of the Canadian Pathfinder

For the Pathfinder capability to evolve, remain relevant and be readily employable, defence planners may consider the following prescriptive points.

1. **Clearer strategic guidance.** While the PPF course and infantry battalions' reconnaissance platoons are sustaining the capability in a meaningful way, very little has actually been institutionalized, especially when it comes to employing Pathfinders as a joint capability. To ensure the Pathfinder capability remains extant and evolves, it is imperative that clear direction and guidance from the strategic level is issued. Such direction and guidance might confirm force structure, command relationships, force employment, force development (i.e. required skill sets), and doctrinal development.
2. **The establishment of a Pathfinder Group held at division level.** PPF should become a standing unit that exists at either the division or brigade level. This unit would act as both the centre of excellence and force generation node. Canadian Forces Land Advanced Warfare Centre would continue to force develop (i.e. train) the capability. Such a



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move would put Canada in line with allies such as the United Kingdom, Belgium, France, and Brazil, all of which have proven their PPF capability in contemporary and diverse operating environments.

3. **Publication of a Force Employment Concept.** A force employment concept (FEC) would address the first two points and provide the necessary blueprint to allow commanders to effectively field PPF groupings during exercises and operations. Too often, during the planning and conduct of exercises, the Pathfinder phase is omitted. This is a detriment to planners, training audiences, and Pathfinders alike, and it hinders the CAF's efforts to confirm readiness.

Conclusion

Canada's Patrol Pathfinders represent an important and unique capability available to a commander. They are primed to execute the initial phase of most operations involving the insertion of forces into a new or immature theatre. They also are trained to play a critical role in the evacuation of non-combatants, facilitate the delivery of humanitarian assistance, and other high value tasks that implicate conventional forces. This article has considered that role in some detail while providing an overview of the capability's employment. Further, despite its relative and necessary brevity, it has also

outlined some recommendations for consideration, with a desire to spark further discussion and debate. Future engagements (academic or otherwise) about the PPF capability might consider its history in more detail, the nature of PPF operations, and Allied Pathfinder capabilities.

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NOTES

1 The Pathfinder capability resided in the airborne reconnaissance force of the Canadian Airborne Regiment. With the Regiment's disbandment in 1995, there was no longer a valid and relevant force employment concept.

2 Typically up to 72 hours.

3 A.B. Godefroy, (Ed). *Land Operations 2021: Adaptive Dispersed Operations – the Force Employment Concept for Canada's Army of Tomorrow*. (Kingston, ON: Army Publishing Office, 2007), p. 18.