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Canada and its Armed Forces, 1932-2007

J.L. Granatstein

It is extraordinary to realize that the Conference of Defence Associations has existed for 75 years. Formed at the absolute nadir of the Canadian military—and the Canadian economy--during the Great Depression, CDA brought together military associations from across the country to call for Canada to have the armed forces that any nation worthy of the name required. This was a difficult argument to make in a Canada that was poor, large, had only 10.4 million people, and for the most part was resolutely uninterested in the military. The memory of the terrible casualties of the Great War were very fresh, just 15 yrs after Vimy Ridge.

Seventy five years later, more than sixty years after a Second World War, unfortunately, not much has changed. Canada is three times the size and vastly richer than in 1932, but opinion polls do not suggest that realism is a national trait. Not one Canadian in a hundred could identify the country's national interests and fewer

still would likely recognize that the Canadian Forces are important in achieving and protecting those interests. Defence remains a hard sell to Canadians, and the Canadian Forces remain grossly understrength and ill-equipped.

Still, matters are better than when CDA was formed. In 1932, the Canadian military scarcely existed. The regular force consisted of a few thousand ill-trained, ill-armed soldiers organized in three battalions of infantry, the rudiments of the other arms, and the barest minimum of support services. There were no tanks, no modern artillery, not even modern trucks. The Navy had two modern destroyers, acquired in 1931, but only a few more ratings than was required to man them. The Air Force's strength was under seven hundred officers and men and at least half its flying time was devoted to civil air operations. The reserves were no better off, not surprisingly. There was no modern equipment anywhere, training hours had been curtailed because of the Depression, and reserve units continued to exist only because officers and men contributed their pay. The defence budget in

1932-3 was $14 million—which in current dollars and tripled to equalize population might amount to perhaps $600 million. If a nation was ever disarmed, it was Canada. There are some in Parliament, the media, the universities, and the public who hope once more to bring the CF to this state.

What must be said, however, is that the leaders of the Canadian military during the Second World War were somehow encompassed within the pathetic remnants of the Great War Canadian forces that struggled to survive the long, dark night of the interwar years. Andrew McNaughton was Chief of the General Staff to 1935, Harry Crerar was a staff officer, as was E.L.M. Burns. Guy Simonds was a Permanent Force artillery captain, Bruce Matthews was a young officer in the Toronto garrison artillery and Bert Hoffmeister a lieutenant in the Seaforth Highlanders in Vancouver. The same story was true for the RCN. Officers like Percy Nelles, Harold Grant, and Harry de Wolf learned their trade on Canada's coasts or with the Royal Navy. In

the RCAF, leaders such as Roy Slemon and Black Mike McEwen somehow found reason to stay in uniform.

Indeed, as the 1930s turned from a postwar decade into a prewar one, the Canadian military even began a slow expansion beginning in 1936. The Mackenzie King government put in more money, mostly for the navy and air force. The budget doubled in 1937 and doubled again in the last peacetime budget of 1939. The RCN somehow persuaded Ottawa to purchase five destroyers and the Naval Volunteer Reserve and the RCNR began a slow growth towards 2000 officers and ratings by 1939. The RCAF established Auxiliary Squadrons and by 1939 had twelve in operation, along with eight regular squadrons. None of the RCAF's 53 aircraft, however, could be considered anything other than obsolescent.

Only the army was left behind in the slow process of renewal. To have an army was to presuppose an expeditionary force, the politicians worried, and overseas army commitments meant casualties, and casualties, given the 1917 experience, implied conscription and political strife that threatened the country's fragile

unity. This was unacceptable to the Mackenzie King government and to French Canada so, although planning did go ahead for an expeditionary force, it was conducted in quiet corners of Defence Headquarters almost surreptitiously. Nonetheless, the Militia had reached a paper strength of some 46,000 and the Permanent Force had 455 officers and 3714 other ranks in its ranks by the time of Canada's declaration of war on September 10, 1939. From those few regulars and reservists would come most of the leaders, junior and senior, who fought the Wehrmacht.

The war changed everything—but not immediately. The King government declared that Canada's war was to be one of "limited liability," not a total war. The RCAF's main task was to run the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan once it was negotiated in December 1939, the RCN to escort convoys, and the army? The army might stay home to defend Canada and might not even be permitted to send troops overseas, the Prime Minister hoped, a position that lasted only a week before public and governmental pressure compelled Mackenzie King to agree to despatch an

infantry division to Britain. The memory of the Canadian Corps' successes in France and Flanders all but forced the politicians to agree to a commitment of infantry.

The war effort was in second gear until Dunkirk and the fall of France, however, but then the motor of mobilization began to purr. Numbers eventually reached 1.1 million men and women in uniform, some ten percent of the population, with 100,000 sailors, 250,000 airmen and three-quarters of a million in khaki. Fifty thousand women put on uniform, doing every job except combat. There was conscription—first for 30 days service in 1940, then 90 days the next year, and then for the duration, first for North America service only and, from November 1944, and for 16,000 infantry only, for service overseas. The political troubles occurred as feared, but Mackenzie King proved better able to manage the anti-conscription opposition in Quebec and the pro-conscription supporters in English Canada than had his predecessor, Sir Robert Borden, during the Great War.

The operational record of the Canadian forces was very good indeed. The RCAF served in every theatre and operated all types of aircraft. Its major contribution was the BCATP, which produced vast numbers of aircrew, and the command and manning of No. 6 Bomber Group. The Navy, expanding fifty-fold in the course of the war, understandably had rough periods on operations, but learned on the job and ended the war escorting half the North Atlantic convoys, operating destroyers and cruisers and even aircraft carriers. After a rough start at Hong Kong and Dieppe, the First Canadian Army, with five divisions and two armoured brigades, had a corps in Italy and another in Northwest Europe. It fought and defeated the SS and Wehrmacht in a succession of fierce battles in Normandy, the Scheldt, the Rhineland, and the Netherlands. For a small nation, this war effort was simply extraordinary, not least because of the astonishing productivity of Canada's factories and fields and the financial and material assistance that was freely given to the nation's allies.

And then everything disappeared, almost as in 1919. The boys came home, the units disbanded, the equipment was tossed out, and the great events of the war became fleeting public memories. The regular forces shrank to 32,600 in July 1947, with 14,000 in the army. The reserves once again scarcely existed, certainly not in units with much military capacity.

Not until the Soviets began to make seriously threatening noises did the nations leaders remember that Canada had interests to protect. Not until then did Canada's military spirit begin to stir once more. Canada joined NATO in 1949 and raised a Special Force for Korean service the next year. In 1951 a brigade group and an air division went to Europe, and the RCN's role in the North Atlantic grew exponentially. In 1957-58, Canada struck an agreement with Washington to manage jointly the air defences of North America, a clear indication that the United States had replaced Britain as the nation's senior defence partner. The strength of the regular forces grew towards 120,000, and defence spending by the mid-1950s had reached 7 percent of Gross

Domestic Product. For the first and only time in peace (if the Cold War can be called peace), Canada had military power and a well-trained, well equipped professional military ready and able to protect the national interest.

But it would not last. By the end of the 1950s governments were looking for ways to scale down the military to save money; by then, after the Suez Crisis and Lester Pearson's Nobel Peace Prize, peacekeeping was beginning to become the Canadian public's preferred form of overseas military operation. The public loved the blue beret because it won kudos for the country and didn't involve killing (or at least not much); governments liked it because it won them some influence and, shrewd ministers could see, it cost little.

Then there was unification, the cause of organizational turmoil, and the imposition of long-overdue bilingualism. Both were crises of an organizational and moral sort, and they would be followed by efforts, after the coming into force of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, to make the Canadian Forces open to women. The

impact of all these measures on efficiency was palpable, and only sociologists expressed pleasure at the changes.

What truly hurt, however, was that by the end of the 1960s, the regular forces' strength, budgets, and NATO commitments began to be cut. The reserves had been turned into national survival units at the height of the Cold War—snakes and ladders, critics called it--and their condition was parlous everywhere. Certainly no one any longer thought of the militia as the basis of mobilization, except a few reserve stalwarts, most connected to the CDA. More to the point, no one in Ottawa then or later thought much of mobilization, a terrible mistake for which we may yet pay dearly.

For the next forty years, the struggle was for money. Every government, whatever its political complexion, cut back. Some promised more; none delivered. Numbers fell to 90,000, 70,000, finally bottoming out at the turn of the 21st Century at 62,000 with some ten thousand less as effectives. Equipment grew old, not gracefully. Budgets as a percentage of GDP dropped year after year, the Chrétien government finally applying the <u>coup de grace</u>

by allotting defence 1.1 percent of GDP or just above $300 per capita, the lowest figure in NATO. No one appeared to care, except the Conference of Defence Associations and its constituent members, along with a few other pro-defence groups. The astonishing thing is, that just as in the 1930s, good, capable men and women stayed in the Canadian Forces, their warrior ethos strong, despite the obsolete equipment, the indifferent pay, and an apparently uncaring nation that believed that all the military did was blue beret "traditional" peacekeeping. No one, except the soldiers, sailors, and airmen fighting in Somalia, Croatia, and Kosovo, regulars and reservists alike, appeared to notice the post-Cold War turn from peacekeeping to dangerous peace enforcement that frequently involved combat. Peacekeeping properly done, the able U.S. writer Robert D. Kaplan has written, is like war-fighting because it monopolizes the use of force in a given area. Some Canadian soldiers, I think, lost their edge from too much United Nations work and because they lacked the opportunity to practise their trade in combat, but the best Canadians did their jobs

properly. Again no one in Canada noticed, so happy were we to bask in our government-promoted reputation as the world's pre-eminent peacekeepers—whether it was true or not.

Did 9/11 finally change matters for the better for the CF? Yes and no. The government was forced to pay more attention to its national interests and Canada's security concerns and, by the turn of the century, at last had begun to realize that the CF was on the verge of collapse. As the Chief of the Defence Staff , General Rick Hillier, said as late as the autumn of 2006 (with extraordinary bluntness even for this outspoken senior officer), the Canadian Forces was "still very much on life support systems" after "a decade of darkness" where "all of our focus" was "designed to constrain, reduce, close, get rid of, stop doing, or minimize."

The condition of the Canadian Forces might have been a reasonable excuse for staying out of the Iraq War in 2003, though it offered no rationale for the decision to reject cost-free participation in Ballistic Missile Defence. The national interest in maintaining control of our sovereignty and good relations with the

United States was jettisoned for presumed political advantage. In this decade of darkness, the Navy, operating almost in obscurity, kept Canada's reputation up in London, Washington, and Canberra through its extraordinary service in the War on Terror.

Then, the Afghan commitments, three of them in succession, stirred controversy and, as casualties mounted, they fed anti-Americanism and public sentiment against combat roles for the Canadian Forces. The myth of benign peacekeeping remained hugely powerful, fostered by the NDP every day, but also by many Liberals and the self-proclaimed pacifists of the Bloc and Parti Québécois. Even ministers in Paul Martin's Liberal government who had accepted the Kandahar combat role in 2005 claimed publicly in 2006—and appeared to genuinely believe—that the mission there was peacekeeping and that Stephen Harper's Conservative government had changed it when the deployment was extended to 2009.

What is certain despite the carping in Parliament and the press is that there is one additional effect from the Afghan conflict. Our

soldiers have seen enough combat to become blooded, a terrible, old-fashioned, but not wholly inappropriate word. They have learned as their great-grandfathers and grandfathers did in the world wars and in Korea that well-trained soldiers—and ours have demonstrated that they are as well-trained as the best--can fight and survive and that a unit can sustain casualties and continue to function. That costly but priceless lesson has always been essential for every army to learn. For an army that had done only peacekeeping and peace-enforcement for the last two generations, not that this service was without killings, ethnic cleaning, post-traumatic stress, and other human costs, this shift in focus was important if the soldier's art was to be revivified in the army.

The idea that Canadians wore only blue berets and that administration mattered more than operations also had to be knocked out of the military mindset. To quote the Chief of the Land Staff, General Andrew Leslie, the military had become "completely and utterly risk averse. We have been consumed by bureaucratic efficiency, and become fixated on process and

planning." Combat and a concentration on effectiveness in operations has begun to kick some of those walls down.

The future of the CF is bright—if the government and people give it the resources it needs.

So, after 75 years, where are we? Despite the best efforts of the Conference of Defence Associations, the Canadian Forces, regulars and reserves, are only slightly better off than in 1932, still underfunded, still understrength, and still badly equipped. The Canadian public superficially supports the troops, but there is a vast storehouse of misinformation and woolly thinking in the media and among the politicians. Astonishingly, neither the defence of Canadian national interests nor the defence of North America are understood or agreed to by Canadians, in substantial part because no prime minister has consistently tried to explain their obvious importance for the security of Canadians. Values outweigh national interests in the eyes of many Canadians, not all of them in the Department of Foreign Affairs. Certainly none of our political leaders have tried to explain clearly, fully and

consistently why Canadians are fighting in Afghanistan or why we must—in our own interests--be involved in the War on Terror. None has tried to counter the wild anti-Americanism which flourishes despite Canada's economic and military dependence on the United States.

If the Canadian Forces are to be revived, if Canadians are ever again to take up a role of pride and influence in the world, our leaders must lead. And the CDA must continue to do what it has done—pressing its agenda forward, holding the politicians to account, calling for the best for the troops, and encouraging discussion and debate. The work, begun in 1932, is far from finished. Indeed, if there is anything that is clear in this befuddled nation, it is that the work of building a constituency for defence will never be finished.

(Historian J.L. Granatstein's most recent book is Whose War Is It? How Canada Can Survive in the Post-9/11 World (Harper Collins).