

“What does the public think of the military?”

CDA Conference: 22 Feb 2001

By David Hanley

Thank you, and good morning.

The question and focus of this conference brings to mind an old grammar class game of word emphasis: *What* does the public think of the military?; *What does ...?*; *What does the public think ...?* And so on.

The first answer — to “*What* does the public think of the military?” — is simple: “Not much,” based on the public’s usual indifference and limited knowledge of the military. But no one in uniform should be offended by that answer. The same response would be given about the Bank of Canada or the mayor’s office.

The second emphasis: “*What does ...*” is more interesting because we are expressing curiosity about what the public is *saying* about the military — at dinner, on long family walks, during symphony intermissions, or other thoughtful moments that the public is surely devoting to Canadian defence policy. Fortunately, polling firms net those uncaptured sentiments, and the answer is mostly, “We think a great deal about the CF.” In other words, it has a high regard for those who serve.

But the third emphasis, “*What does the public think ...*” is more important because it merges the first two questions. We wonder what the public *understands* of the military, as a profession and as an arm of public policy.

And from my perspective, the answer to that is: “It thinks what we, in the media, tell it to think.”

Scary, isn’t it? A community of gurglers communicating to the inattentive and indifferent.

But what other means, what other link, do you have to describe what you do to those by and for whom you are commissioned to do it?

By the broad-based circulation of the *Maple Leaf* flyer?

By the ceaseless freedom-of-the-city parades by countless regiments in communities large and small that clog traffic but at least bring out the masses, especially the young and impressionable, to see flags called “Colours,” knives called “bayonets” and hear orders to stop yelled as “Halt!”?

Or maybe it’s the growing number of military colleges, bases and PMQ areas that blanket the country, and with them the visible presence of actual public servants, in the truest sense, that don’t nest in Ottawa.

Then again, perhaps it's all the TransCanada highway billboards, like those dotting US interstate highways, that boast of a nearby base or unit while subtly offering a unique employment opportunity.

But maybe the answer is closer to home. In the home. Fathers, neighbours, uncles, great-aunts and cousins, all swapping stories while toddlers and teenagers pretend to ignore but are secretly fascinated by the tales of the profession of arms. The stories are then retold, and embellished, in school yards and composition classes. History told and retold.

The reality, of course, is that the maple leaf is just that; there are more decommissioning parades than celebratory ones; the dwindling number *seen* in uniform might just as soon apply for a "Status Military Person" card; so-called advertising is about the latest combat fashion accessories for the delicate few; and, well, storytelling is nearly buried, literally.

Which leaves us, "professional" storytellers, to tell the public what the military is doing. And that means, generally, November 11, the Snowbirds, peacekeeping, and, of course, problems.

But that is like giving a reader a table of contents and asking him to fill in the story. Most won't bother and will be content with the sketchy contents. Those that do turn a mental page can only fictionalize actual life in the Forces.

Consider, for example, these typical (and real) chapter headings:

"Overtasked ... Underfunded ... Overcommitted ... Undermanned ... Stretched to the limit ... Underequipped ... Operationally ineffective ... Loose Screws in the Airborne ... Loose Screws in the Sea King"

And then two from this year: "Fighting a losing battle: A senior officer uses blunt language to decry the Army's precarious finances." And in February, "Forces failing soldiers: report."

But when I look at "Forces failing soldiers" I also see in bold above it "Government failing Forces" and below it, "Soldiers, therefore, failing duty." But only one headline is allowed.

If I see that — as I'm sure many of you do, too — that's because I'd like to think I have a modest understanding of both public policy and the profession of arms, given my background and now observation of both.

What background does the public have, if not from personal interest then from what they see, hear or read in the media?

Again, about the same as their background knowledge of the Bank of Canada and City Hall.

So what? is what you might want to ask.

Does the general public need to know the math behind how bank rates work or the actual depth of the city's water table? Some, perhaps many, should and must know. But it really doesn't

matter what the “public” knows or understands about either. As in most professions, it suffices that the choir be in key, not that the public applaud or even hear.

Unfortunately, the Forces’ orchestra now risks losing its most important audience for all its screeching patchwork instruments and disharmony during the Liberals’ watch. That audience is not government, which comes and goes — hopefully, at some point before I retire. It’s not even the inattentive and indifferent public and their voting choices which, like the movie by the same name, is the cause of this never-ending Liberal “Groundhog Day.”

No, I believe the Forces is risking its young, future subscribers. Those who might only be glancing at TV news or reading as far as “Forces failing soldiers” and then hearing a casual throw-away line from a parent about the military. Suddenly, that sort of future doesn’t seem as neat or as cool as banking or being a mayor.

But *they* are your public, what they *think* matters.

In my opinion, however, the military now has so few stories to tell, in the Dr. Jack sense of History, that what the public knows and thinks is related only to budgets and equipment. And it will *never ever* get excited about those, least of all future officers, warrants and MCpls.

From what I’ve observed since I got out in 1989, there clearly has been more media attention on defence and DND for reasons that aren’t all scandal related, though most might say the reason is just as scandalous. The ranks of “active” storytellers has diminished due to overall attrition, while life’s attrition of our veterans, as the *youngest* reach 80, means the closing of a more important book. This stalls a “natural” recruitment process of those who might follow a relative’s calling, while at the same time creating a communication void that was once filled by the internal reward and discipline system, and “The Family.” The latter is what civilian zombies you see riding the bus might call a “secret” sect with undemocratic codes etc, etc.

Of course it was never about bribing or silencing or coverup if someone spoke out against his kind. Real and effective measures could be taken directly if a complaint was about missing boot laces, or, indirectly, if it was about bad leadership. Those who complained for its own sake usually found a more likeable professional habitat.

Moreover, active military members had a family of outsiders who “understood.” They were in higher levels of business and the government and bureaucracy where Defence still meant something. Even through the chaos and turmoil of unification, the one thing the Liberals couldn’t do was silence the storytellers, who mostly moved on but were still in positions of influence. Times were mostly good in the ’80s as pay and resources kept soldiers out of food banks and aircraft airborne.

But budget declines and equipment decay seemed to run parallel with the loss of active storytellers and, as we see each Remembrance Day, fewer veteran storytellers.

Guess who fills the void.

From a news business perspective, I'm sure you understand that we are *not* inclined towards "If you have nothing good to say about something or someone then keep your mouth shut." The public also understands that news isn't: "There was *no* earthquake in Central America today."

Extra media attention is certainly linked to the effects of budget cuts, equipment shortages and overcommitments by a clearly disinterested government. But now most military controversies, large and small, which were just as prevalent before as today, aren't being solved by simple chain of command and supply chain means. As former RCMP assistant commissioner Lowell Thomas confirmed in his environment report: "The confidence of CF personnel in their own system to protect and promote their welfare has been shaken, and several former members felt that the media was the only way to bring the matter to light."

But I have had that nagging sense, as I'm sure you have, that I can call my brother anything I want, but don't you outsiders even dare breathe a bad word about him. That I know him to be a bone-idle piece of human wreckage is precious mine to know and express, if and when I choose to do so.

So what do you do when outside storytellers expose the inner workings of a family that is no more dysfunctional than, say, an HRDC or PMO sibling? Do you attack the offending observer, or do you try to eliminate the cause of the catcalls by establishing or imposing internal reforms?

If the latter, isn't it the governing parent's responsibility, once a family member has expressed concern about another's raggy clothes, to do something about it?

I'm afraid your current guardians will never be motivated to act until something truly dramatic or embarrassing happens to them, personally. Military air crashes are tragic events that are a known risk for those who serve. A contingent of base-touring MPs killed on a Sea King familiarization flight would not be acceptable, however.

Unfortunately, I doubt that even an extreme, worst-case scenario would inspire this particular government to do anything other than close down rather than repair that element of the Forces.

So that leaves you, the offended, to assume the role your guardian will not, both as internal reformer and educator of external hecklers. In a sense, you always have done both, but not usually as an orphan.

Attacking the media is not a good idea. But challenging and correcting the media about what we got wrong is vital. You perform a valuable copy-editing role for journalists, columnists and editorial writers that may not have gotten it completely right the first time. And don't worry, we will have a second and third chance. Also remember that headline and story writers are not the same person. I've received many phone calls and seen many letters-to-the-editor complaining of a headline, which may or may not have been a legitimate complaint, but the story still held. Readers, when they do, get beyond the headline. Worry more about the content and facts of the story.

Ambushing us with spin doesn't work either. You may think that we're stupid, but we only look that way. There are now too many reporters that feed off military stories for the pack to be spun as a whole. Someone will find the answer you'd prefer left unbound.

Finding the weakest or friendliest link in the media is perhaps what the propaganda schools teach PR directors but other storytellers will eventually set the record straight if it needs setting or dig for the untold story. I may have been one of your most loyal supporters but I was hardly your biggest fan. That, to me, is a healthy relationship.

Again, recall who is *your* public and that, for now, we storytellers are telling them what to think.

With that, I'd like to conclude with one of my favourite stories.

I can't say I liked Wayne Gretzky. Great though he was, I thought he was a floater. A one-way player. But he was the greatest at that. Like all of you, I had seen him play many times, sometimes live. My opinion never changed. He was the greatest, with an asterix.

Then I saw him again here in Ottawa play against the Senators, his last game in Canada before retiring. The game ended 2-2. And I was converted.

Because I was to write an editorial about him and the game, I focussed on him only, like a TV isolation camera. He was, without question, the best player on the ice. What I also saw, differently, was that he was surrounded by mediocrity.

He was clearly overtasked, underequipped, overcommitted, and stretched to the limit. He had nothing to work with, no matter how much he wanted to succeed. Like all team activities, even the best are crippled if surrounded by a lacking organization.

But then, near the end of the game, he did something which converted me. There were 5 minutes left, the game was tied, the Sens were fighting for an important playoff spot, the Rangers would be golfing soon.

Then the ovations started and never seemed to stop as the crowd sensed the end of this incredible player's career. The ice was his alone as he gave his curtain calls. Then he skated over to the face-off circle and waved to both benches to get on the ice and play. At the press conference later, he explained that the game was too important for the Senators, his *opponent*, for them not to stay focussed. The Game, he implied, was bigger and more important than his farewell.

Then I remembered the primary source of this great sportsman's personal success and how it will be retold by storytellers for other Canadians to admire and follow, and thus keep the Game, the organization, strong.

Gretzky's father, Walter, had taught his son how to play the game, but more importantly Walter taught him one thing which would distinguish him from the rest: And that was not to go where the puck was, but to go where the puck was going to be.

I try to use that advice every day in my own profession — to go where the news is going to be.

To finish our word emphasis game, I would rearrange the question and ask: “What *public* is the military thinking about converting.” Then I believe the military must maneuver to be there when it happens.

Thank you.