

## **Combat Capability: Where Are We Now? - A Political Perspective**

### **An address to the Conference of Defence Associations Institute**

**By Hon. John A. Fraser**

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Now, anybody who is asked to speak to an audience such as this ought to be a little bit in awe and also ought perhaps to justifiably think that there is not really much that I can tell you about the Armed Forces that you don't all know. But sometimes over-assuming what your audience knows can get you into trouble and it reminds me of a story I was told when I was a young lawyer about the young barrister who got his first case and took it to the trial court. And he was much convinced that his cause was just and his client was right and after a spirited presentation, he waited for the judgment, which finally came down, and he had lost to his astonishment and dismay. He rushed off, found the rule book, found out how to file an appeal to the Court of Appeal and eventually there he was in the Court of Appeal and now there were three judges looking down on him: the Chief Justice and two puisne judges, but that is -- the legal spelling is puisne. It just means less, not ... not of less intelligence.

Anyway, so he said, My Lord Chief Justice and My Lords, I want to open this case by setting out the law. And the Chief Justice looked at him and said, Counsel, you can assume that we know the law. Ah, he said, My Lords, that is the mistake I made in the lower court.

So I don't want to assume anything. As many of you, I was taught as a young soldier, never assume, always anticipate. I have been trying to teach subordinates of mine for all my life that fundamental lesson and, while sometimes it leads to caution, it also can keep you out of trouble.

For the past few years, the combat capability of the Canadian Forces has been a topic of some interest in the media, Parliamentary Committees and academic papers. In 2001, a sometimes heated discussion ensued between senior defence officials and members of the defence community over whether the CF was more combat capable than it was in 1990. Several key reports from various organizations making recommendations on what to do about what seemed, to them, the unrelenting slide of the Canadian Forces into operational irrelevance figured in the debate. Let us remember, after all, that 1990 is in the past.

Having served modestly in the Canadian Forces, I can claim only some knowledge of strategy, doctrine, tactics and other concepts, which are second nature to the military professional. However, as Chairman of the National Defence Minister's Monitoring Committee, tasked with overseeing reforms in the military, I can tell you a little about what is *politically* required to ensure the Canadian Forces are supported by the Government and people of Canada. They require, and deserve, truth about our military based on facts. Truth about our capabilities, truth about our deficiencies, truth about our commitments: these are all essential to ensure our combat capability for, without a clear understanding of the state of the armed forces, the public support essential in a democracy just will not be there when it is needed.

Defence officials insist that the CF is now more combat capable than they were during the Gulf War because of increased firepower and new platforms that have come on-line since. The LAV 3, the Coyote, frigates, coastal patrol vessels, Griffon helicopters and smart bombs for CF-18's all represent capabilities that the CF can exploit.

But they go further than that, and it can be very misleading to the ordinary citizen or elected member. For example the VCDS (On Track, June 2001) said: "Military capability is no longer a simple function of the number of personnel in uniform."

Well, when was it that simple? And who today says it is that simple?

But when the CF are down to 60,000 regulars, (and in fact below that) with all the difficult consequences resulting, how can anyone suggest that technological improved kit justifies further reductions in personnel?

Yet some do. On March 10<sup>th</sup>, 1999, the Globe and Mail carried a two-page story headlined: " Forces Take Aim at Lowly Reputation: The Military Bristles at its Lack of Respect, Insisting that Critics Take a Closer Look. The High-Tech Solution." In the face of criticism that said otherwise, the article highlighted two senior defence officials, one civilian and one military, who insisted that leaner and meaner forces could hurl more firepower at an enemy than they could during the Persian Gulf War. The senior civilian official stated that: "I'm saying this because of all the chaff being put out there on a daily basis by people living in a different world".

As reported, the senior defence official argued that new technology allows fewer troops or aircraft to do more damage. And, no doubt, he was refuting critics of any further troop reductions, by stating: "Shrinkage is not necessarily loss."

Later that year, on December 2<sup>nd</sup> 1999, the Ottawa Citizen carried a front-page story entitled "Cut Troops by Half, Adviser Tells Army: Military Urged to Use Fewer People, More Technology." I have some sympathy for Col. Howie Marsh who, in fairness, was trying to find a solution to insufficient financial resources, but look at the headline: that's what the public, Members of Parliament, Cabinet Ministers and bureaucrats see (which is not necessarily Col. Marsh's fault), and the impression is left that if we only had more technology we could cut an already too small army even further.

Now, that's the Army. But what about Canada's national commitments? In January 2000, Minister Eggleton was honest and realistic when asked whether a reduction from 60,000 to 50,000 would affect White Paper requirements. He was asked directly, "Could the military meet those requirements if troop levels were cut as low as 50,000?" The Minister said, "Probably not. It would be very difficult to do that and still meet White Paper commitments."

So much for "Shrinkage is not necessarily loss." Loss of our commitments; loss of the respect of our friends and allies; loss of our capacity to do something which is essential to Canadian values and to the well being of other people; and loss of our own self-respect. "Shrinkage is not necessarily loss."

It is ironic that months after the 'senior official' complained about chaff, it was now the Minister who asserted exactly what the senior official was bent on denying. Shrinkage is, in fact, loss.

Now, let us leave headlines and refer to testimony before the Standing Senate Committee on Defence and Security: Consider the following exchange from last July concerning whether we can deploy a brigade:

**Senator Banks:** *Would we be able to deploy, in good time, either within Canada or elsewhere, a brigade now?*

**Mr. Bon:** *We must situate your question in a context. A brigade has not had to be deployed by Canada since the Korean War. The likelihood, given the current international situation, of Canada having to deploy a brigade is almost nil. Indeed, the white paper said either as a brigade or as three battalion groups. Over the past 15 years or so, we have noticed that deployments take place on the scale of a battalion, not a brigade. If we posit a situation that required Canada*

*to deploy a brigade, we would also posit a level of unpleasantness in the world that would create a crisis. As I said in my presentation, all the intelligence analyses - ours as well as those of our allies - indicate that if there were a crisis of those proportions there would be ample warning. I have no doubt whatsoever that in those circumstances Canada could deploy its brigade.*

To suggest that Canada has not deployed a brigade since Korea is simply not true. I was, in fact, in Germany as part of 27 Brigade in 1953 (later 4 Brigade), and that formation remained in Germany for about 40 years. Different 'context', I suppose.

So, we're left hanging. Maybe we could deploy a brigade if there was a crisis; if it was unpleasant enough; if we had ample warning, etc. But nothing in this official's response indicates any necessity to actually train and plan for such a deployment, or even to seriously contemplate having to do it.

But a brigade is a commitment. Let's now examine the testimony of the Chief of the Land Staff, who comes much closer to giving us an understandable answer to the brigade question:

**Senator Forestall:** *If you were called upon now to deploy a full brigade with its heavy equipment - one that has trained on a regular basis and in which each member knows the others, including men and women - outside of Canada, could you do it? How long would it take us, as a nation, to respond?*

**LGen. Jeffery:** *To answer that question, one has to bear in mind some givens: the first one is that we currently have a large mechanized battle group deployed in taskforce Bosnia-Herzegovina. That battle group is just shy of 2,000, and about 1,500 are from the army. I have an IRF(L) battalion on standby for another theatre. Currently, I am in the order of 1,400 trained soldiers short of my full establishment. Right now, we are in the middle of a modernization program that takes part of the army out of the order of battle - out of its operational readiness level - for a significant period. I have six mechanized infantry battalions, for example. Each one has to be re-equipped with a new LAV 3. One is re-equipped and the others are going through a 3- to 6-month process. Depending on circumstances, that unit is not prepared for operations during that time period, for understandable reasons. All of that has to be considered in the equation.*

*Can the army deploy a brigade? Yes, it can. However, it cannot be done without significant cost, because of other commitments and the overall sustainability of the army. It will take all of the army to do it, and there will not be much to spare to get that done.*

*Will they have been trained together? No, we have not done significant brigade training in a good number of years. Is that, all things considered, acceptable? It depends on the circumstances. Assessing risk has to be done in the context of the mission that they are being asked to perform. I cannot give you an assessment of that, and clearly it is a concern.*

*On the issue of "time is the lever," again, I cannot tell you, without knowing the specific mission, how long it would take. I am required to have a brigade on 90-days so that we meet the white paper commitment. As long as we are talking about a light brigade, similar to the IRF(L) capability, then it can be done. If we are talking about anything heavier than that, given the current state of modernization, it cannot be done.*

The Army Commander is not brushing off the brigade question. He's giving us facts, backed up by his professional judgement. The deployment of a brigade is possible, but only a light brigade, and Canadians have to understand the cost and the repercussions.

What is so dangerous, however, is that some of what officials say about technology is true. We cannot ignore technology. Some missions are technology intensive. Our Navy, Air Force and Army need state of the art kit, and no one is suggesting otherwise.

But we are dealing with today, and today we have commitments. Can we fulfil the objectives of the White Paper? Of course, this might not matter if some have already abandoned the White Paper and peacekeeping, peace making, occupying ground to stop massacres, restoring and maintaining order and meeting domestic emergencies. Their thesis won't work in Bosnia, East Timor, the Golan Heights, the next ice storm or the war against terrorism. But it plays right into the hands of those who, misguided or unrealistic, want to ensure that the shrinkage continues. These people can now argue, having listened to these senior officials that, you see, even the Armed Forces say we don't need all these troops. That is what is so very dangerous.

We should pay heed to the words of Retired General Charles Belzile, as he testified last October:

*Finally, contrary to popular belief, technology does not replace people beyond well-defined limits.*

I want to end today with a quote from a reasonably qualified military authority, about the importance of maintaining real 'military' thinking.

(a letter)

"Gentleman:

*While marching from Portugal to a position which commands the approach to Madrid and the French forces, my officers have been diligently complying with your requests, which have been sent by H.M. ship from London to Lisbon and thence by dispatch rider to our headquarters.*

*We have enumerated our saddles, bridles, tents and tent poles, and all manner of sundry items for which His Majesty's Government holds me accountable. I have dispatched reports on the character, wit, and spleen of every officer. Each item and every farthing had been accounted for, with two regrettable exceptions for which I beg your indulgence.*

*Unfortunately the sum of one shilling and nine pence remains unaccounted for in one infantry battalion's petty cash and there has been a hideous confusion as to the number of jars of raspberry jam issued to one cavalry regiment during a sandstorm in western Spain. This reprehensible carelessness may be related to the pressure of circumstances, since we are at war with France, a fact which may come as a bit of a surprise to you gentlemen in Whitehall.*

*This brings me to my present purpose, which is to request elucidation of my instructions from His Majesty's Government, so that I may better understand why I am dragging an army over these barren plains. I construe that perforce it must be one of two alternative duties, as given below. I shall pursue either one with my best ability, but I cannot do both.*

- 1. Train an army of uniformed British clerks in Spain for the benefit of the accountants and copy-boys in London, or perchance*
- 2. To see to it that the forces of Napoleon are driven out of Spain.*

*Your most obedient servant,*

*Wellington"*

As quoted by Senator Banks and Mr. Daniel Bon, "Proceedings of the Standing Senate Committee on Defence and Security", July 18, 2001 (morning).

As quoted by Senator Forrestall and LGen M. Jeffery, "Proceedings of the Standing Senate Committee on Defence and Security", December 3, 2001 (morning).

As quoted by LGen (Ret'd) Charles Belzile, "Proceedings of the Standing Senate Committee on Defence and Security", October 15, 2001.