

**REFLECTING ON THE RESERVES - TODAY'S
41 CANADIAN BRIGADE GROUP**

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26 October 2005

Much has been researched and written in regards to the future direction of Canada's Army Reserve. However, there is a dearth of study concerning the Militia in its present state as well as what it has evolved from in the past ten years. In order to understand where the Reserves of Canada are heading, it is imperative to know where it is situated at present. This paper will endeavor, through the study of 41 Canadian Brigade Group, to enhance understanding as to the current readiness of Canada's Reserves as a whole. Through a comprehensive research and interview process – consisting of a cross-section of Officers and Non-Commissioned Members from as many units as possible within the Brigade Group – the paper will determine whether the mandated role of 41 Brigade Group is being realized as well as illuminating the Group's strengths, weaknesses and limitations. By using 41 Brigade Group as a representative body within the Land Forces Reserves, it will then be possible to better understand where the Reserves are today versus ten years ago, how the relationship stands at the present between the Regular Forces and the Militia, as well as the state of affairs pertaining to recruitment, retention, pay.

41 Canadian Brigade Group is the Army formation in command of Alberta's 1500 part-time soldiers. Twelve units constitute the Group with locations in Edmonton, Red Deer, Lethbridge, Medicine Hat and Calgary. The stated role of Group is to enhance the combat readiness of the Canadian Forces and to augment the Regular Force in times of peace, emergency or war.¹

It is imperative to understand that the Reserves today are a function of its past and the outside factors that have influenced it. The two entities that have affected the Army Reserves (as a result of this essay focusing solely on the Army Reserves of Canada, for the remainder of the essay Reserves or Militia will be substituted throughout) are the Special Commission on the Restructuring of the Reserves (SCRR) 1995 and the Land Force Reserve Restructure (LFRR) project. Both have had wide-ranging and positive influences on the Militia.

In April of 1995, the Liberal Government of Canada struck the Special Commission on the Restructuring of the Reserves and gave it the mandate of studying and reforming the Reserves of Canada – most notably the Militia – to further its ability to respond to ever-changing domestic and international events. Following extensive briefings in Ottawa as well as numerous hearings while crisscrossing the nation, the Commission put forward 41 recommendations.² Most were accepted by the government of the day. As a result, many improvements in the capabilities of the Reserves have occurred.

Following the release of the recommendations of the Committee, the government decided to form the Land Force Reserve Restructure project as a means of ensuring that the recommendations it deemed important would be properly implemented. Its stated goal is as follows:

Land Force Reserve Restructure is about enhancing the Army Strategic ability. It is also about making sure that we optimize the Reserve structure to meet today's demands and can mobilize for future threats. Capabilities resident in the Regular and Reserve components will tend to become less distinct as

some specialized, largely Reserve capabilities in demand for current operations such as civil military co-operation, are actually at a higher state of readiness than some Regular units³

The work conducted by these two bodies has been to the benefit of the Militia. Many of the problems that have dogged the Army Reserves have been ironed out, while others have not. It is important, then, to understand where the Reserves are functioning smoothly and where they are not.

One special area of concern, and one which has dominated as long as Canada has fielded military units, is the relations between the Regular Force and the Militia. This apprehension was vividly evident to the SRCC, which took decisive action to counter the problem. By increasing the Regular Force awareness of what the Reserve capabilities were, tensions have subsequently decreased. Much of the friction between the Regular and Reserve Forces can be traced to the latter being upset during instances where the best reservists were taken away from the unit to serve as part of a rotation. Often this left the Reserve unit without its preeminent soldiers to conduct training at the Armouries or in the field. The Commission impressed upon the Reserve units that the benefits – increased hands-on experience to name one – of having their soldiers serve with the Regular Forces far outweighs the negatives.⁴

In the course of conducting interviews, it became clear that the relationship between the two forces is not without friction; in reality, complete harmony will never be achieved. However, valuable insight as to

the state of the relationship becomes readily apparent when careful scrutiny is given to the comments of Regular and Reserve soldiers. A Regular Force Warrant Officer replied to an interview question with the following astute remarks:

I have indeed served with Reservists on tour. I also spent three years as RSS for a Militia unit. At the lower levels the troops are fine. The training is very similar to what the Regular Army gets, and graduates from the lower level courses are similar in capability (Reg(ular) and Res(erve)).

The problems creep into the system as soldiers gain rank. After graduating basic training and low level trades courses the field is fairly level between the Regular Army guys and Reservists. They both have the same training and experience. By the time they start going on lower level leadership courses there is a discrepancy between them in experience. Through sheer repetition even a mediocre Regular Army soldier can be depended on to do his job. Not so with Militia soldiers, they don't normally get the day to day practice and don't tend to progress in ability. This "Experience gap" gets worse as the rank levels grow, to the point that even a good Militia soldier has to struggle to keep up with his average Reg(ular) Force counterpart by the time they reach S(er)g(an)t / Capt(ain).

I've met very few Militiamen in these ranks or above who could honestly compete with Reg(ular) Force soldiers of two ranks lower on day to day operations. Militia soldiers can't compete technically with the Reg(ular) Force any more either, they don't have Coyotes or tanks. Both these machines are very demanding in technical skill and you can't fudge your way through on them. A couple of factors that you can't count out are the natural born soldier and civy work experience.

1. "Naturals" occur in both the Militia and Reg(ular) Force. If you're dealing with a "natural" it doesn't matter what force the guy's in, he's just good. I know a few of these in both the Reg(ular) force and Reserve.

2. If a guy is a leader in his civ(ilian)y company, Captain of industry,

etc he can bring some really neat skills to the table and some of these guys can be quite effective. The only real advantage the Militia soldier has over the Reg(ular) is the fact that through lack of experience he's not tied down to dogma or bad habits. They think much more independently, this can hold them back and give them a bad rep(utation), but guys like Arthur Currie turned it into an advantage.

So like most things the answer is the median. Both Reg(ular) and Reserve, while different from each other, have advantages and disadvantages. If I had to choose between one force's

soldiers and another I'd have to choose Regular because at the very least you can always count on a given level of capability through experience. (With the militia it's like a lottery as to whether you get a good one or not and the odds are weighted towards not getting a good one).

A Reservist Officer had similar thoughts regarding the relationship:

I have found that the relationship between the Reserves and Regular force a very rough one. It is similar to siblings, constantly fighting, but at the same time they can work together and are bonded. I have found over the seven years that I have been in the army that the relationship has improved. I attribute this to the fact that R(e)g(ular) F(orce) and Res(erve) F(orce) have started working closer together (and) more and more Res(erve) F(orce) personel (sic) deploying with Reg(ular) F(orce) units on operations.

Conversely, a Corporal in the Regular Forces had a somewhat different perspective of Reservists, proving that further effort is necessary to improve the relationship between the two:

I never had much faith in the reserves or for that matter in the so-called soldiers that outfit many of the units. I have found that the majority of them are poorly trained and led by a bunch of wantabe (sic) Generals !

Another issue that has dogged the Militia in years past, and to this day as well, is the problem of retaining soldiers upon their enlistment. Many Reservists are university students who, upon graduation, assume full-time employment that requires a move or much of their time. When something has to give, most often it is the Reserves. Additionally there are various other circumstances that force a part-time soldier to quit his or her unit – marriage, children and health issues serve as examples. Looking aside of instances that cannot be helped, what issues occur that could be shaped to ensure as high of retention as possible? A Militia Officer stated the following regarding the retention of Reserve soldiers:

The struggle to maintain people is an on going battle. Unfortunately it is hard to pinpoint one problem, everything from the recruiting process (taking 6 months to a year to enroll) and C(anadian) F(orces) R(ecruiting) C(entre) not maintaining contact with new applicants) to equipment shortages have a factor in retention. I would say though one of the biggest problems (sic) is the lack of resources/ working equipment. For example the TCCCS system (the brand new radio system) is constantly not working, mostly because there are not enough parts or trained personel (sic) to fix the radios. The other is the lack of uniforms/boots for new soldiers.

One area whereby retention could be improved is in the field of job protection. Many reservists are reluctant to remain in the military secure in the knowledge that they are not able to be deployed over fears of losing their civilian employment. The SCRR made the following recommendation regarding job protection legislation:

The Commission recommends that job protection legislation be drafted and presented to Parliament as soon as possible. The bill should address, at a minimum, providing additional time (with or without pay) for reserve training, as well as obliging an employer to accommodate, if reasonably possible, a reservist's request for a longer-term leave (without pay) for the purpose of participating in Canadian Forces operations.⁵

It is imperative that this recommendation be implemented by the government as quickly as possible since so much is riding on the Reserves as a means of successfully carrying out the new Army managed readiness plan.

The military has taken matters into its own hands regarding job protection. Many 41 Brigade Reservists, who volunteer to serve with Task Force 1-06 (part of Operation Archer in Kandahar) will be assured 13 months of full-time employment. In the past, many Reservists have volunteered for deployment, left their jobs and security before being told

that they were not needed. In order to correct this wrong, the Canadian Forces will now guarantee any Reservist who volunteers for deployment, regardless of whether or not he\she is accepted, full-time employment. This is a major step forward for the Army Reserves of Canada.

Job protection is one of two major SCRR recommendations not fully adapted by the Canadian Government – the other being a solid mobilization plan for the Militia in a time of crisis. The fact that Canada has no firm Reserve Army mobilization plan, which in real terms is its *raison d'être*, is shocking. The committee members of the SCRR stress having a mobilization plan as being imperative to the future survivability and strengthening of Canada's Reserves.⁶

The issue of pay was prevalent in the years leading up to the striking of the SCRR, and in the years since. It must be reported, widely and with vigour, that many of the recommendations regarding payment of service to Army Reservists made by the SCRR have been implemented with great success. In the course of interviewing currently serving Militia personal, there were no complaints with the pay structure. In fact, it was quite the reverse; Reservists are pleased with the pay they receive and are especially receptive to deployment remuneration. Furthermore, a satisfactory resolution of pay issues is a definitive means of retaining soldiers upon entrance into the Militia.

One further dilemma plaguing the Militia is the Recruitment process. Often slow and ponderous, it is not inconceivable to suggest that a large

percentage of possible recruits are lost due to the incredible length of time necessary to complete the recruiting process. An interview with a potential officer candidate, who currently holds a Master's Degree, illustrated that it would take upwards of two years to be admitted due to the extensive security clearances that have to be done as a result of a prior journey to Japan!⁷ A Non-Commissioned Member reported that the process took upwards of six months to complete as a result of the recruitment steps each being carried out separately. He continued on to remark that a further visit was necessary, following a trip to the Doctor, as a result of his having migraine headaches ten years previous.⁸

These delays, coupled with the fact that recruits are unable to participate in field exercises until the completion of their BMQ course, could mean that new soldiers do not get into the field for more than a year from the date of the beginning of the initial recruiting process – depending on the time of year when the signup began. It is imperative that recruits get through the recruitment process as quickly as possible and be able to get to the field equally soon. For it is this activity, in the eyes of many recruits, that is the payoff for joining the Militia. These types of delays have a definitive effect on retention of recruits.

One unit interviewed, as part of this study, has taken the lengthy recruiting process into its own hands. Frustrated with the unwieldy, complicated process, the unit has taken to 'holding the recruit's hand throughout the process.' This, in turn, has increased the retention

percentage of those who volunteer to serve⁹, and is a procedure that should be considered by all Reserve units across Canada.

Consideration of the recruiting problem was not lost on the Special Commission on the Restructuring of the Reserves. One of their primary recommendations was that the, “Canadian Forces recruiting system is broken and urgently needs to be fixed.”¹⁰ In their subsequent report titled, *The Special Commission on the Restructuring of the Reserves, 1995: Ten Years Later*, the authors admit that, while recruitment is a difficult and serious issue, little has been done to correct the overly bureaucratic, risk adverse, abysmal situation.¹¹ In order to limit the disrespect shown to the potential recruit, the SCRR put forward the notion that the recruiting process should take no more than one month from start to completion.¹² The author of this report agrees emphatically.

No study could be conducted of the Canadian Reserves, 41 Brigade Group included, without mention of the lack of funding that has plagued the military for its entire existence. It is, however, a problem that will not go away soon. Therefore, units have to accept this dilemma and work around it. The interviewing process illustrated many frustrations. A Militia officer commented on the economic state of his unit and the Reserves as a whole:

Most reserve units, that I have seen, have the minimum amount of equipment. In most cases not enough to train properly. Any shortages in equipment affect training. For example most reserve units go on exercise without blank ammunition. This means that units 'go through the motions' and pretend; which in turn means that no body takes it

seriously. It is hard to take enemy forces seriously when you have to shout "bang".¹³

Another Non-Commissioned Member expressed regret over the fact that when his unit undertakes section attack and radio procedure training, fingers are substituted for C7's and radio microphones.¹⁴

Throughout the interview process, it became very clear to the author of this report that today's soldier's have very little knowledge regarding the Regiments and Squadrons that their unit perpetuates. Any spare time that can be afforded to this important subject must be utilized to enhance the Reserve soldier's awareness of those who served before him or her. This will, in turn, increase morale within the unit and perhaps create a link to Canada's veterans that would hopefully assist in retaining soldiers.

41 Brigade Group strongly illustrates the importance that the Reserves have in flushing out deployments that could not, and cannot, be filled by the Regular Force. This trend will continue in the foreseeable future. Brigadier General Grant, Commander of Land Forces Western Area, reaffirms this actuality when he stated that 20 percent of the soldiers constituting Task Force 1- 06 will be Reservist from 41 Brigade Group.¹⁵ These soldiers will be tasked with defence and security duties, psychological operations as well as civil-military roles while in the Kandahar region as part of Operation Archer.

Dr. David Bercuson, Professor of History at the University of Calgary, served as a member of the Minister of National Defence Committee to monitor change in the Armed Forces from 1997 to 2003. As part of the

mandate of the Committee, Dr. Bercuson worked extensively with the Special Commission on the Restructuring of the Reserves as well as with the follow-up report published by the two surviving original authors in 2005. Dr. Bercuson's comments and opinions mirror those of the author of this report; that the Army Reserves are fundamentally important to Canada from a military sense and that the Militia fills a large void in the security of Canada that would otherwise be vacuous.

However, while the military importance of the Reserves is self-evident, it has become increasingly apparent that the political and social importance of the Militia may have decreased over the past several decades. This trend must be changed for the future security of the Canadian Reserve structure as we know it today. In an interview with the author, Dr. Bercuson commented on the importance of the Reserves to Canadian society with special emphasis given to the Calgary units within 41 Brigade Group. When asked about the importance of the Reserves to the social fabric of communities across Canada, Dr Bercuson responded, "Well, I'm looking at a city like Calgary for example, where the Reg(ular) Forces left, and the Reserves have tried very hard to maintain a profile in the community here to remind people in Calgary that there still is a military in Calgary."¹⁶

A Reservist from Calgary had the following to say regarding the importance of the Militia to the social fabric of Canadian cities:

What the D(epartment of) N(ational) D(efence) does not realize is how much it needs the Militia and that it needs the Militia in as many communities as possible across the country.

The Militia is needed even more now that the Army Regulars have holed up in about four large bases and a couple of smaller ones across the country away from the centres of population. Most Canadians seldom see a soldier. The sad fact is that the Armed Forces has (sic) become disconnected from just about every level and segment of Canadian society. The only way the connection can be re-established is by having as many people as possible serve as part-time soldiers.¹⁷

Thus, it is readily apparent and also imperative that the Reserves increase its profile in Canadian cities as a means of self-sustenance.

The situation concerning the Army Reserves of Canada has changed considerably over the past ten years. Many positive changes have occurred. Reservists are, and will continue to be, a very important component of every overseas rotation. That is not to say that further improvements are not still possible. Increased vigilance must be undertaken to maintain the Reserve Army as a viable entity. The people that compose the militia are the strength of the organization. A Militia officer perhaps best summarizes the state of the Army Reserves today:

The reserves today are one of the biggest strengths that the military on a whole has. The reserves do their job with few people and resources, yet are able to do any task that has been assigned to them. The determination and creative thinking of a lot of the soldiers and officers in the reserves are what allow the reserves to do this. A little more trust and respect towards the reserves and its personnel would be an excellent first step in improving the reserves as a whole and would go a long way in continuing to build the trust and respect in the C(anadian) F(orces) from Canadians. The strength is without a doubt the people, specifically those who believe in what they are doing, and do not get frustrated with the system. The biggest weakness is the lack of resources allocated to reserve units.¹⁸

This paper, looking specifically at 41 Brigade Group, clearly illustrates the Canadian Army Reserves as it stands today. It also

illuminates the changes that have taken place over the past ten years. However, with changes come problems. While pay issues have been resolved for the most part, recruitment, retainment, mobilization planning, job protection and funding issues remain. While relations between the Regular Force and the Reserve Force have improved recently, there are still issues between the two that must be resolved. The Army Reserve Webpage states that the Regular and Reserve components of the Army share a mission, a vision, and a unique mandate.¹⁹ The past ten years have gone a long way towards realizing that mission statement. However, as shown in the course of this paper, there is still work to be done.

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