

# **The Canadian Way of War: The Legacy of Operation FRICTION and the Gulf War**

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When Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait on 2 August 1990, he quickly found himself squaring-off against a US-led Coalition of some 32 nations. One of the less likely Coalition members was Canada. The Persian Gulf was not a region critical to our national interests. For the past 40 years, our military forces had been structured for war in the northwest European theatre. The Iron Curtain might literally have been torn down, but with a major global recession looming, Western nations - Canada included - anxiously anticipated a "peace dividend" to permit large reductions in defence spending. Furthermore, the attention of National Defence Headquarters for the moment had turned to internal security as the troubles at Oka threatened an escalating military involvement. But Iraq's invasion of Kuwait came at a critical juncture in national and world affairs. The results of Canada's participation in the Coalition reveal a great deal of the "Canadian way of war."

The national path pursued in response to the crisis in the Persian Gulf in 1990-91 had everything to do with the continued projection of Canada's self-ascribed role of "middle power." While the United States unleashed Operation DESERT SHIELD, the Canadian ambassador at the UN, Yves Fortier perceived a unique opportunity for the world body to assume the role for which it had been created: to manage a global response to an international crisis. He was well placed to encourage this, as Canada was then occupying a temporary seat on the Security Council until the end of 1990. He and Secretary of State Joe Clark gained the commitment of Prime Minister Brian Mulroney to the philosophy that the assembling forces should be mandated by the United Nations, orchestrated in concert with, but as a counter to, unilateral US action.

For this stance to be credible on the international political scene, Canada had to accompany its recommendations with a supportive military response. NDHQ staffs were turned to explore the various options for an operation given the national codename FRICTION.

It quickly transpired that Canada's initial commitment would be a three-ship task group. After a hasty upgrade, the two destroyers and a supply ship sailed from Halifax in late-August and arrived in the Persian Gulf a month later. They were employed firstly with the Multinational Interception Force (MIF), enforcing the UN embargo against Iraq, but during hostilities the Canadian Task Group commander was charged with seeing to the protection of the Coalition Logistics Forces gathered in the Persian Gulf. He was the only non-United States Navy officer assigned a significant warfare command.

Meanwhile, the Canadian military response was increasing incrementally. By the time the ships began their first patrols in the Gulf, it had already been decided to complement them with a squadron of CF-18 Hornet fighters, which arrived in early October to fly protective Combat Air Patrols over water with a US Marine air wing. Working in a naval environment was very

different from the air superiority role for which they had been geared in NATO and NORAD. So too was the progression during hostilities through sweep and escort missions to high level bombing (the Hornets' secondary mission in NATO was low level interdiction). To administer both the naval and air groups, a Joint Forces Headquarters was hastily put together - there existed in the CF neither the establishment nor the doctrine for this type of coordinated warfare. It was set up in Bahrain in early November, primarily because that was the location of the commander of the UN-mandated Multinational Interception Force, and away from the byzantine workings of the other Coalition headquarters in Riyadh.

On 29 November, the Security Council passed a resolution authorizing "all necessary means" to evict Iraq from Kuwait by 15 January 1991. But a staff check, dubbed Operation BROADSWORD, had earlier determined that the despatch of an army brigade-group to the Gulf would take some six months to effect and would be too costly in terms of lives and matériel to warrant serious consideration. Instead, early in the new year, as the required Iraqi withdrawal did not transpire and the outbreak of hostilities appeared inevitable, the government decided to augment the contribution with an enlarged Field Hospital. The lead elements of that group - again hastily assembled - arrived in time to move to the front for the commencement of the ground campaign on 25 February. When hostilities ceased three days later, on 28 February 1991, there were about 2,700 Canadian sailors, soldiers and aircrew serving in the theatre of operations.

Within the month, they were virtually all back with their parent units in Canada. But Canadian operations in the region did not end there. Acting under various UN auspices, other Canadian forces soon were active with the United Nations Iraq-Kuwait Observer Mission (UNIKOM) overseeing the demilitarized buffer between the two states, with Operation PROVIDE COMFORT extending humanitarian aid to Kurdish refugees, and with the United Nations Special Commission (UNSCOM) investigating and dismantling Iraq's so-called weapons of mass destruction. Canadian warships have participated at intervals with the continuing embargo, and the Canadian Patrol Frigate, HMCS *Ottawa* is on-station there as this conference is in progress.

What, then, can we glean from this contribution?

For the fifth time in its military history, Canada dispatched an overseas expeditionary force. The contingents to the Boer War, the two World Wars, and Korea were undertaken during the half-century when the middle power role was emerging and reaching definition. Forty years later, with that status entrenched but untested in war, the force dispatched to the Persian Gulf was significant for its departures from the "model" experience.

Although naval forces were the first in action in both World Wars and Korea, and thousands of Canadians flew in each of the World Wars, overseas military contributions have tended to be defined in terms of the Army. The Gulf deployment was marked by the absence of a sizeable ground force. Instead, naval and air forces were more prominent. On each of the previous occasions, mobilization precipitated major adjustments to the existing establishments as the call went out for volunteer enlistment in large-scale contingents. In 1990-91, all Canadian forces despatched to the Persian Gulf were serving regular units - the *ad hoc* nature of the Joint Headquarters and of the Field Hospital notwithstanding. And in the past, the appointment of

national theatre commanders always devolved to single-service representatives with offices established close to the allied councils. This was not the case in the Gulf War. Commodore Summers' mission was constituted in a Joint Headquarters, and far from the centre of power in the Coalition capital of Riyadh.

And then, there was no traditional post-war "occupation" force. Instead, Canada participated in a peacekeeping contingent. At the start of the crisis, General de Chastelain had predicted that Canadian forces would most likely become involved only in an eventual peacekeeping capacity. The intervening military deployments notwithstanding, we did assume an important role in the UNIKOM mission. But even the peacekeeping involvement, familiar as it had become over the years, was also a departure from the past. The Gulf crisis encouraged the United Nations to shoulder a broader role in the management of world affairs. In a bold departure from previous missions, Canada also supported UN intervention in the internal affairs of Iraq, joining in supplying humanitarian aid for displaced Kurdish refugees, and in weapons inspection teams.

The initial intent that the forces deployed to the Persian Gulf region would act as a joint force was as ill-founded as it was ultimately unnecessary. The legacy of 45 years of armed peace - in Canada's case, the last 25 of them as an integrated force - was mixed. The "strength in numbers" philosophy of collective security arrangements such as NATO and NORAD kept Canada's defence budget expenditures relatively low compared to "going it alone." However, participation in these alliances maintained a degree of specialization within each of Canada's air, land and sea forces, and encouraged interdependency with sister services of other nations. For all the flexibility which each traditional service of the armed forces was able to display, their discrete commitments left them ill-prepared to cooperate with each other in national joint operations. For example, neither the equipment nor the procedures existed to allow the CF-18s to provide direct air support to the Canadian naval task group. Consequently, the Joint Headquarters in Manamah eventually was not used on the operational level - tactical control (TACON) of all elements was assigned to American and British commanders. Instead, the Canadian HQ was used as an in-theatre tool for national commanders in Ottawa to manage the level of participation.

Canadian forces were governed by a paradox. They were unable to operate jointly as a national force, but each service component was admirably prepared to combine with similar forces from allied nations. Hence the navy joined in the multinational embargo and later the logistics protection force; the air force flew defensive patrols over American carriers and escorted offensive missions into Iraq; the Field Hospital was part of a British medical facility; and dozens of Canadians served on exchange duties as integral members of deployed allied (that is, NATO, American, British and French) units. Despite the limitations of years of single service commitments and budgetary inattention, Canadian forces proved remarkably versatile. The air force operated effectively in a naval air defence environment and changed roles several times during the short span of the actual combat. And the command and control capabilities in the Canadian ships, developed to prosecute an anti-submarine war, allowed the task group commander to exercise an important coordination function over allied forces.

Coalition warfare allows member-nations a greater degree of independence than strictly defined alliance requirements, a fact not lost on Canadian commanders as they struggled to maintain a recognizable Canadian identity in the Coalition. And it was a mighty struggle. There were three

Canadian ships among the hundreds of coalition naval vessels; 24 fighter-bombers among the thousands of coalition aircraft; one field hospital; and a small headquarters not even in the Saudi capital. The 2,700 Canadians in-theatre should have been lost amid a half-million men under arms. But they were not because Canadian commanders insisted on national control over their troops' employment. Even when tactical control was extended to foreign commanders, it was done on the understanding of specific limitations, a sort of "TACON with a veto."

Certainly, Canadian units could have operated just as effectively, if not more so in some cases, under the direct command of American or British coalition commanders. They could easily have conducted operations quietly and anonymously, as just another flag on the board, but to what national advantage? At stake was Canada's acquired status as a middle power. Although there existed strong impulses to yield to American management, senior officials at External Affairs and National Defence exhibited a rare unanimity of purpose, determined to contribute in a fashion which would give meaningful substance both to the ultimate advantage of the Coalition and to supporting the middle-of-the-road Canadian policy on a resolution to the crisis. Canadian commanders in the theatre exploited every opportunity to assure a distinctly Canadian role in the conflict.

Canada's participation in the war against Iraq defies quantification in the traditional military sense of crossing swords with an enemy and the consequent price of casualties inflicted or suffered. Only once did a Canadian unit meet an opposing Iraqi force, when a two-man CF-18 team flying a CAP mission was called upon to strafe a fleeing Iraqi patrol boat. Beyond that, the only other offensive type of operation was the CF-18 bombing role - in itself a rather detached form of warfare - and given the post-war reassessment of Iraqi losses, it is unlikely that even those missions inflicted many casualties.

That is not to imply that Canadian forces did not expect to take on their adversary or were not prepared to do so. Before Saddam's invasion in August 1990 raised the question, it would have been impossible for any serving military officer, politician, or think-tank expert to predict the fashion in which Canadian forces - structured and trained for a North Atlantic or continental European threat - would have operated in a war in the Persian Gulf. It is all the more surprising, then, that each element of the deployed Canadian Forces, albeit for their own reasons, made its most noteworthy contribution in a non-traditional fashion. The navy task group commander organized the protection of a loosely bound multinational logistics force. The air force flew protective cover for allied naval forces. The army deployed not a brigade group, but a state-of-the-art field hospital.

Still, the problem of "quantifiable accountability" was sensed by Canadian military commanders as the conflict progressed. But attempts to re-define our participation in more militarily meaningful terms only served to detract from the value of the Canadian effort. Confusion attended the escalation of the CF-18 role from defensive combat air patrols to frontline sweep and escort and finally to bombing missions. The naval logistics protection force chased an enemy that failed to materialize. Canadian armed forces were unable to put together a mechanized brigade group.

In the end, though, the Canadian government got exactly what it wanted: an active, if limited, participation at arms-length from direct American control - and to a degree to which a middle power with a limited defence budget can realistically aspire in the expensive high-technology business of modern war. Within their assigned roles, the Canadian Forces dispatched to the Gulf performed admirably, providing their government with a credible military presence in support of the delicately balanced policies of the Cabinet at home and our Ambassador at the United Nations.

Truly, a Canadian way of war.