

## **The Canadian military then and, hopefully, in the not too distant future**

*by Ron Bezant*

To realize the sad state of the Canadian military, for which the Trudeau and Chrétien Liberals were largely to blame, one need only paraphrase the last half of the Most Holy Trinity's proclamation: ". . . as it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be shortages without end. Amen." When I alighted from a coach on the Digby and Atlantic Railway at HMCS Cornwallis on August 17, 1953, along with 64 other untrained ordinary seamen, the Royal Canadian Navy numbered 21,000 personnel, the Canadian Army 49,000, and the Royal Canadian Air Force 51,000. The Canadian military was close to its maximum Cold War complement. Today, with more than twice Canada's 1953 population, the military personnel complement is less than half its 1953 level.

Eighteen days before at HMCS Star in Hamilton, I had signed on the dotted line for a five year hitch. The proverbial chocolate bar was no more than figurative. Gross pay for a new entry was \$87 per month. The recruiter neglected to tell me that after deductions for pension and income tax, including tax on the value of my "free" room and board, my net pay would amount to a mere \$60 per month. Recompense in the other two services was identical. For comparison, my friends were working in factories for \$90 per week. But, despite the paltry pay, it was our sense of purpose and belief in the country's military history that kept many of us reenlisting, much the way I suppose that Royal Navy sailors are said to have walked with a cocky swagger throughout the 19th century when they were long removed from any major naval battles.

During the mid-fifties the navy had a fleet of 51 ships, including an aircraft carrier and two light cruisers, the army possessed more than 500 Centurion heavy tanks, most of them positioned in Europe, and 1 Air Division of the air force was operating 300 first line fighter aircraft constituting 12 squadrons in France and West Germany. The Canadian military triumvirate was a moderately powerful force for the time. Each of the three branches was firmly cemented together by adequate equipment, first class training, and a strong belief in military culture, history and tradition that had gone before. With unification on February 1, 1968, the whole defence organization became unglued and, with Pierre Trudeau's ascension to power, the fragments were scattered like so many dead leaves. This I consider the true "beginning of the shortages without end."

Yes, there were other times when the Canadian military would have found a wet paper bag impregnable. During the 1920's and well into the Depression years, the greatest military threat to Canada was perceived to be the United States and, accordingly, Canadian Army doctrine revolved around a grandiose plan for the invasion of the northern States and the occupation of several vital points, such as Seattle and the Chicago rail yards. The plan had been drawn up by one Colonel J. Sutherland Brown, the Canadian Army's director of intelligence. When my father served in the equine equipped Royal Canadian Horse Artillery between 1928 and 1932, the total strength of the regular Canadian Army was 3,000 men. The US Army numbered 175,000. But Canada was as yet a largely agricultural society; and the "war to end all wars" was not expected to see an encore.

One of Trudeau's early acts affecting the military was to withdraw half of the 10,000 personnel from Canada's NATO contingent in Europe. It was only international pressures that kept him from following through with an original proposal to withdraw them entirely. The first shock to the military's senses, and budget, was the requirement to finance the transformation from its historic language of operations to accommodate the imposition of bilingualism. Everything from aircraft markings to operating and maintenance manuals to signs on military bases had to be translated, produced and posted in two languages. After the Canadian Forces had spent hundreds of thousands of dollars undertaking studies on how best to bilingualize itself and on the costs of paint and labour and printing contracts and god knows what else, on one notable occasion Trudeau was boarding a military Boeing 707 when he made the offhand remark, "I can't see the French from here." Back to square one went the military, with the end result that every aircraft in the CF transport and fighter fleet once again underwent repainting so that the French and English were visible from either side.

The CF-104 fighter aircraft, designed as a high altitude interceptor, was modified for low level operations, sometimes with tragic results, and flown by our pilots in Europe long after other NATO countries had converted to more modern aircraft like the F-4 Phantom and the Tornado multi-role combat aircraft. Our 4th Canadian Mechanized Brigade Group in West Germany made do with Centurion tanks for years after their operational "best before date" had expired. It was only when Trudeau's overtures seeking special trade considerations with western European countries were met with a demand from NATO that Canada first replace its fighter aircraft and tanks that he reluctantly relented. The air element was able to procure a mere 138 CF-18 Hornet aircraft while the land element retired over 500 Centurion tanks in favour of 114 German Mark I Leopard's when the more advanced Mark II was already in production. The navy has given up its only aircraft carrier and completely lost its minesweeping capability, while its fleet has shrunk in total numbers. The popular traditional slogan "Join the navy and see the world" no longer applies to Canada's naval element as long

overdue capital expenditures on other equipment have meant a shortage of money for operating costs and prevented ships from sailing.

This is not a call to arms. It is a call for the country to place itself in a position to be able to defend itself. And if defending itself means to be able to pick the time and place to participate in pre-emptive action in distant corners of this earth, so be it. It is heartening to see the present government beginning to undo the years of neglect and damage.

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