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## **SOLDIER RETENTION: STRATEGIES FOR COMMANDERS**

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SERVICE PAPER - ÉTUDE MILITAIRE

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## **SOLDIER RETENTION: STRATEGIES FOR COMMANDERS**

### **AIM**

1. The aim of this service paper is to address retention of soldiers in the Canadian Army (CA) and is being prepared for deputy Commander Canadian Army. In accordance with the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) Defence policy: Strong, Secure and Engaged (SSE) retention has been identified as a major issue that needs to be addressed. SSE initiative 5 states “Develop and implement a comprehensive CAF Retention Strategy to keep our talented people in uniform with a welcoming and healthy work environment.”<sup>1</sup> The purpose of this service paper is to identify strategies to improve soldier retention and illustrate the effects of these strategies. I intend to provide formation commanders and unit commanding officers with four strategies to make adjustments or changes within their units in order to improve the soldier retention issue.

### **INTRODUCTION**

2. This service paper will address retention strategies for new soldiers during the timeframe a Canadian decides to join the CA, arrives at a training institution for their occupation training and the end of their initial engagement three year contract. It is crucial that during this timeframe the CA makes every effort possible to conduct socialization, indoctrinate new soldiers into the CA and conduct effective training in a positive, professional and accepting way. Since the CA is a volunteer professional force, the CA as an institution needs to utilize a number of different strategies in order to keep new soldiers interested and motivated to remain in the CA. These strategies need to be developed and implemented in order to improve soldier’s experience while they are going

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<sup>1</sup> Canada, DND, *Strong Secure Engaged: Canada's Defence Policy*. Cdn Electronic Library, 2017, 22.

through the training system and during their first few years at their units. The voluntary release (VR) attrition rate against years of service statistics from Director General Military Personnel Research and Analysis (DGMPRA) have shown that the first few years in the CA have been known to leave bad impressions on some excellent soldiers and this has resulted in premature VR after their initial three-year engagement contract.<sup>2</sup> According to the most recent CAF Regular Force Exit Survey conducted in 2016, job satisfaction was the number one reason why soldiers were voluntarily releasing.<sup>3</sup> Job satisfaction is the crux of the retention issue and in order to improve soldier's motivation to stay in the CAF this issue needs to be addressed, while at the same time balancing the needs of the individuals and those of the CA as an institution. Addressing this issue will result in a more fulfilled soldier, which is a soldier that will want to continue to serve past their initial engagement.

3. My critical thinking is all based on my experience from employment in 2 Canadian Mechanized Brigade Group (2 CMBG) and the Armour School, however the discussion in this paper is relevant and applicable across all Regular Force Brigade's, units and CA training institutions. I will not be able to address the Army Reserve retention issues as it is beyond the scope of this paper. Using the Armour Corps as an example, according to the Crewman Career Manager the current 2019 Preferred Manning Level (PML) for Tpr/Cpl is 1076 and our current Trained Effective Strength (TEF) is 951. The PML was the same in 2018 while the TEF 1006, at the same time the MCpl

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<sup>2</sup> Canada. DGMPRA. *CAF Retention Strategy Development Design Update*. COS Strat/DSFD Brief to CAF Retention WG, 2019, Slide 8.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. Slide 10.

PML and TEF were consistently even across both years which accounts for promotions.<sup>4</sup> What these numbers are showing is a five percent drop within the past year, which is the specific timeframe and rank level that is being addressed in this paper. If this topic is not addressed and these trends are allowed to continue, then this could compound into a larger issue than just retention at Tpr/Cpl level.

## **DISCUSSION**

4. The National Defence Research Group (NDRG) has been conducting CAF retention surveys every 2 years over the past 20 years, which have identified larger issues in the results, but those are not able to be addressed or influenced at this level.<sup>5</sup> The larger retention issue is being dealt with by the CMP led CAF Retention working group in order to develop retention strategies to deal with these issues such as: pay and benefits, geographical stability, impacts on spouses and children, career progression and postings.<sup>6</sup> However, the number one reason why so many soldiers are putting in their VR remains job dissatisfaction, and this should be addressed within the CA while the CAF Retention working group is working on the overall CAF retention strategies.

5. As a part of the SSE new initiative to improve retention, this initiative must begin as soon as the CA receives its new soldiers and becomes responsible for them from Canadian Forces Leadership Recruit School (CFLRS). The timeframe between when a soldier arrives at their training institution and they start their occupational training course

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<sup>4</sup> MWO Robert Englehart. Crewman Career Manager D MIL C 3-3-2. Email to author, 17 Oct 2019.

<sup>5</sup> Canada, Auditor General, *2016 Fall Reports of the Auditor General of Canada Report 5—Canadian Armed Forces Recruitment and Retention—National Defence*. 2016, 5.112.

<sup>6</sup> Canada. DGMPRA. *CAF Retention Strategy Development Design Update*. COS Strat/DSFD Brief to CAF Retention WG, 2019, Slide 17-18.

often has a significant period where they are placed into holding platoons awaiting training. This is a crucial period that causes a lot of frustrations for new soldiers because they are lacking a sense of purpose in their new profession. Not only does this period cause frustrations, but this excess of free time often results in soldiers getting into trouble due to excessive alcohol consumption, drug use and playing of video games. This is not why soldiers joined the CAF, they want to be a soldier and be apart of the institution, not sit in holding platoons. For example, according to the holding troop leader at the Armour School they currently have 136 soldiers awaiting either their BMQ-L or DP1 course.<sup>7</sup> These numbers will fluctuate throughout the year, but often these soldiers will be waiting in the holding troop for anywhere from two weeks and up to six months until the course serial begins. Therefore, the first recommendation is applicable at the CA HQ level to send new soldiers who are waiting in holding platoons to conduct professional development (PD) and on job training (OJT) with their prospective Reg Force units. If soldiers were provided with the opportunity to experience life at the Battalions or Regiments, this could greatly enhance their perspectives about the other side of the training system. Having the chance to conduct training alongside the soldiers that they will serve with would greatly enhance their motivation and augment their job satisfaction. This may also provide junior leadership with more opportunities to organize, plan and execute training which will improve unit effectiveness. Granted, there are a number of factors that will influence this strategy: how long a soldier will be in the holding troop, what time of year is it in order to synch with training, availability of resources to provide meaningful training and financial considerations. Acknowledging that these factors will

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<sup>7</sup> Major Steven Pineau. OC HQ Sqn Armour School. Telephone conversation with author, 23 Oct 2019.

certainly influence the execution of this strategy, but the value, experience and motivation that would result from this PD or OJT could greatly improve the esprit-de-corps, soldier fulfillment and job satisfaction for the CA newest members.

6. The select few members who are given the opportunity to command must be self aware individuals who understand the sentiment of the command culture within their units. The soldiers must also have confidence and trust in those leaders. At the beginning, middle and end of command time, command culture anonymous surveys should be administered to all units. The anonymous aspect of this process is the key enabler in order to tease out honest opinions and ideas from all ranks within the units. The NDRG have been using surveys in order to inform higher levels of the CAF about retention issues, member perceptions and conducted studies to better understand the attrition factors across the CAF.<sup>8</sup> This same practice can be utilized at the formation and unit level. Commanders should administer anonymous surveys in order to gain an understanding of the current temperament about the chain of command with the primary objective of asking what should stop, continue or change within their units. The difference at the unit and formation level from the CAF level surveys, is that soldiers will want to be given access to the results of the surveys and physically see results from their feedback. After reviewing a number of online forums about the CAF, it is easy to understand that to some soldiers, the process of filling out numerous surveys can cause significant frustrations, especially if they are not receiving any feedback.<sup>9</sup> Anonymous surveys should be

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<sup>8</sup> Canada, Auditor General, *2016 Fall Reports of the Auditor General of Canada Report 5—Canadian Armed Forces Recruitment and Retention—National Defence*. 2016, 5.112.

<sup>9</sup> Reddit. Canadian Forces. *CAF retention survey*. Last accessed 25 Oct 2019. [https://www.reddit.com/r/CanadianForces/comments/b31os3/caf\\_retention\\_survey/](https://www.reddit.com/r/CanadianForces/comments/b31os3/caf_retention_survey/)



administered, which will help inform the chain of command about current issues within their organizations. This feedback should then be provided to the soldiers which in time will help mitigate job dissatisfaction as your organizations will see the information from the surveys being used. The additional benefit is seeing unit effectiveness and overall cohesion improve.

7. As a Squadron Commander in an armour unit for the past two years, one of the biggest challenges within the brigade was protecting white space in the training calendar. The lack of white space in a sub-unit training calendar proved to be a significant dissatisfier for many soldiers within the squadron, knowing full well that the unit and 2 CMBG calendars were just as full or worse. The soldiers and junior leadership within 2 CMBG crave more opportunities to plan and execute level 1-3 training. The white space in the calendar can be used by sub-units to either complete Battle Task Standards (BTS) training and conduct make up training in order to set the conditions for continuation training. Soldiers always desire to have more time to conduct continuation training in order to build onto the regular BTS. This could include, but of course is not limited to, more unconventional ranges, complex urban operations training, escape and evade training, and individual survival training. Given that the CA tempo and priority taskings are not likely going to change, there are normally timeframes in which white space could be identified and protected in between training events. The white space in the calendar always tends to get filled with higher priority taskings, however anytime it is possible, identify these periods and make it a priority to protect this white space. Enabling continuation training by protecting white space provides more opportunities for soldiers to be exposed to more challenging and realistic experiences. It is this type of training and

experience that can improve soldiers job satisfaction and gets them away from their monotonous duties on the hangar floors or from doing the same training over and over again. This can then lead to a more fulfilled soldier that is more likely to stay in the CA past their initial engagement contract.

8. The CAF provides soldiers with a lot of opportunities to play sports including the CISM program, national and base level sports tournaments, the base inter-unit program, Bde competitions and unit level events. In accordance with Balance: Canadian Armed Forces Physical Performance Strategy the national lines of effort include expanding health efforts through PSP fitness and sports programs for commanders. Line of effort 3 strategic objective 3c states “Leverage PSP and Health Services advisors to commanders at all levels to further expand healthy programming efforts (fitness, sports, recreation, health promotion, etc).”<sup>10</sup> There are also a lot of advantages to incorporating sports into unit calendars. Giving soldiers the opportunity to play sports increases comradery, provides leadership opportunities, emphasizes the importance of team work and most importantly provides officers with the opportunity to get to know their soldiers better. Playing sports within the CA at all levels is most effective when it is fully supported and resourced by the chain of command. When soldiers are not supported to attend and represent their bases at national and regional level sports competitions, or when sports competitions get cancelled it creates an enormous amount of animosity and disappointment towards the chain of command. Soldiers often look forward to the competition and fulfillment that they get out of playing sports. It is acknowledged that playing sports does not replace physical training and that these two items need to be

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<sup>10</sup> Canada, DND, *Balance: Canadian Armed Forces Physical Performance Strategy*. 2018, 48.

viewed separately. The emphasis on playing sports needs to be given more importance by the chain of command so that it is viewed to be supported and important to the soldiers and then the full benefits of playing sports will be achieved. This is an important strategy at both the formation and unit level in order to improve soldiers job satisfaction.

## **CONCLUSION**

9. The retention issue within the CA is not a new problem. There will always be soldiers who will voluntarily release after their first contract because army life is not for them. However, the discussion in this paper has provided a number of mitigating strategies that can assist in improving the job satisfaction of our soldiers and help to reduce the regular attrition that the CA suffers from. With job dissatisfaction being the number one reason that soldiers voluntary release, leadership engagement at the formation and unit level is where a difference can be made. There are four mitigating strategies that have been identified for possible use by Army HQ, formation and unit commanders: sending soldiers who are sitting in holding platoons to units to get some PD and actual training with their future units, administer anonymous command culture surveys to your units to get a better understanding of your unit and provide your soldiers with feedback, attempt where possible to free up and protect white space for your sub units so they can conduct more continuation training and lastly provide more support and emphasis towards sports programs. These mitigating strategies will be useful tools for commanders to enable more fulfilled soldiers, increase unit retention and improve unit effectiveness and cohesion.

## **RECOMMENDATION**

10. It is recommended that these retention strategies be implemented where possible in order to improve CA soldiers job satisfaction and increase retention. These recommendations will assist with minimizing early career attrition and as an additional benefit help improve the overall operational effectiveness of your units. Had I either been given the opportunity and taken advantage of the possibility to employ these strategies as a squadron commander I truly believe that my squadron retention would have been better and soldier job satisfaction would have been improved.

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