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BACK TO THE FUTURE: ENABLING THE INFANTRY BATTALION

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AIM

1. The aim of this service paper is to recommend returning the 81mm Mortar and Assault Pioneer Platoons to the Infantry Battalions. Since these capabilities were divested, to the Artillery and Engineer Corps respectively, a great deal has changed in the Canadian Armed Forces. High attrition in the post-Afghanistan period, coupled with modest recruiting means that the requirement for the maintenance of these relatively new capabilities, within their new corps, has drawn attention and effort away from their core capabilities. The Infantry Battalion in Battle still lists Mortar Platoon and Assault Pioneer Platoon as part of the Battalion order of battle as these key enablers are required for the infantry to be able to achieve its tasks.¹ These capabilities should be returned to the Infantry Corps to ensure that they are manned in accordance with their importance, and to allow the other corps to focus their own efforts on their essential capabilities.

INTRODUCTION

2. At one time the Infantry Battalion was nearly 1,000 personnel strong. The Infantry Battalion Commanding Officer (CO) had four Rifle Companies, a Combat Service Support (Administration) Company and a Combat Support Company that contained Reconnaissance, Direct Fire (Anti-Armour), Assault Pioneer, and Indirect Fire (81 mm Mortars) Platoons. This gave COs all of the resources required to carry out their tasks within a brigade context, without the need for augmentation from other corps. Since the end of the Cold War the infantry battalion has been significantly degraded in both capabilities and personnel. The Infantry Battalion CO now has three understrength Rifle Companies, a reduced Combat Service Support Company,

¹ Canada. Department of National Defence. B-GL-309-001/FT001, The Infantry Battalion in Battle. Ottawa: DND Canada, 2013.

with only Reconnaissance (including Snipers) to employ. The thinking in the late 1990s was that it didn't make sense, given fiscal and manning constraints, to duplicate capabilities amongst corps. In the 2002 SORD the Armoured Corps was given Direct Fire, The Artillery Corps was given Indirect Fire, and the Combat Engineers were given all Engineering Tasks. For Mortars and Assault Pioneers, this paper will look at their traditional role within the infantry battalion, what the current employment model is, the training cost to bring them back and the potential manning challenges.

DISCUSSION

Direct Fire

3. The impact of losing the Direct Fire capability is significant, but not the subject of this service paper. There are enough simple, portable anti-armour weapons systems in existence today that require little training to use and that can be distributed throughout the various combat and combat support arms. Some of these systems such as Javelin² and Spike³ are already used by our closest Allies and can also be used in the Air Defence role. They have the added advantage of being fire and forget, generally top attack for added lethality, and, with extended ranges, can reach out to almost 8 kms, without the liability of a wire guided sight.

4. In the short term there are currently 33,000 Tube-launched, Optically tracked, Wire-guided (TOW) missiles in war stocks which are predicted to last out until 2025.⁴ The Infantry School, co-located with the Armoured School (the Armoured Corps currently owns direct fire capabilities within the CAF), is currently seeking to rebuild this capability, and will look at

² Wikipedia. "FGM-148 Javelin", accessed 2 February 2016.

³ Wikipedia. "Spike (Missile)", accessed 2 February 2016.

⁴ Record of Discussion, Canadian Infantry Advisory Board, held at Canadian Forces College, 28 January 2016.

employment of Anti-Armour from a corps perspective.⁵ The lack of expertise, in Infantry Battalions to employ Direct Fires was highlighted during the 1st Battalion, The Royal Canadian Regiment's recent deployment on Op UNIFIER to the Ukraine. As part of their mentoring role they were expected to be able to train the Ukrainian forces on the proper employment of anti-armour weapons against modern tanks. While successful, they were only able to do this because of residual capability from soldiers who served in Anti-Armour Platoon.

Indirect Fire

5. “The role of Mortar Platoon within the Infantry Battalion is to provide indirect fire support to the battalion. The Mortar Platoon CP (command post) is the Fire Support Coordination Centre within the battalion CP.”⁶ When the 81mm mortars were given to the Artillery Corps they came with a task to force generate a single Mortar Troop for employment within a Battle Group on thirty days' notice.⁷ There is no obligation to have a standing Mortar Platoon within the Artillery Corps. Essentially, the Infantry Corps gave up nine mortar platoons in order for the Artillery Corps (based on three Regiments) to be able to force generate three Mortar Troops in total, with sufficient notice. All of the combat arms and combat support arms have suffered with both recruiting and retention in recent years meaning the “niche” capabilities are not manned, or at least undermanned, in favour of core capabilities. In the Artillery Regiments the core capability is the M777 Howitzer.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Canada. Department of National Defence. B-GL-309-001/FT001, The Infantry Battalion in Battle. Ottawa: DND Canada, 2013, pg 4-3-1.

⁷ Alex Haynes. The Slow Demise of the Canadian Infantry Corps. Ducimus: Canadian Infantry Association, n.d., pg 5.

6. The range of the 81mm Mortar is 5,675 metres. This means that in order to fire in support of the Infantry Battalion or Armoured Regiment, the mortars would have to be placed within the Infantry Battalion Area of Operations (AO) in order to make maximum effect of their range. The Artillery Corps, when they employ the mortars, uses them in local defence of the M777 Howitzer. This is an effect that can be achieved through other means and is not sufficient reason to deny the Infantry Battalion Commander guaranteed fires in support of operations.

7. Artillery is massed for best effect. The greater the concentration of fire, the greater the effect that can be achieved. The requirement to support numerous maneuver units in various missions, potentially widely geographically dispersed, throughout an AO means that the Artillery Regiment often has to be extremely flexible to support competing priorities. The alternative, as seen in Afghanistan, was to have a troop of guns (two M777s) support a given mission. This goes against every principle of the employment of Artillery. This friction could be greatly reduced by providing the infantry battalions with guaranteed, integral fire support in the form of 81mm mortars. These weapons systems already exist within the inventory and there is still a latent corps-wide understanding of mortars from the employment of the 60mm Mortar, only recently divested. The sight for the 81mm Mortar is the Optical (C2) with Trilux Illumination, which most infantry soldiers still train on as it is the sight for the C6 General Purpose Machine Gun in the Sustained Fire Role.

8. The training bill will be significant initially and there will have to be buy-in at the corps level. A cell will need to be established at the Infantry School as the Centre of Excellence, which is conveniently located adjacent to the Artillery School. This transition phase will require a transfer of assets between corps as well as expertise. In the past, Canadian mortarmen have

travelled to the United Kingdom to receive advanced qualification courses. The British Army (as well as the Royal Marines and the RAF Regiment) still use this weapons system and would likely be amenable to combined training opportunities with a NATO ally, at fair market value.

9. The Artillery Corps did not receive additional Position Years (PY) to promulgate this capability when it inherited it from the Infantry (those divested PYs went to establish the Canadian Maneuver Training Centre) so there would be no PY gain to the Infantry Corps. This would mean that the Infantry Corps would have to resource these platoons from within. While it is not useful to discuss the merits of procurement of systems that have already been purchased and/ or divested, there is a role for the 81mm mortar within all battalions, be they light or mechanized. The 81mm mortar gives the battalion CO the ability to reach out farther than any other system in the inventory, including the C16 Close Area Suppression Weapon (2200 metres). This means that maneuver would not be dictated by fire support ranges, as long as the mortars are employed effectively. Neither the light nor mechanized battalions would be in competition for resources from the Artillery Regiment which could concentrate solely on joint fires at the formation level and higher. It would also give the CO the ability to employ non-lethal effects in their own AO, like Illumination and Smoke Rounds, without having to re-task guns firing in support of other priorities.

Assault Pioneers

10. Assault Pioneer Platoon:

undertakes a variety of minor engineering tasks connected with infantry fighting primarily to do with the maintenance of unit mobility and the denial of mobility to

the enemy in the battalion area. The platoon conducts limited radiation and chemical decontamination within the battalion.⁸

When Assault Pioneers were divested from the infantry battalions, the concept was that that the Combat Engineer Regiments would be able to conduct the tasks, within formed Battle Groups, that Pioneers had performed previously. This did work to good effect in Afghanistan, but there was a cost. Having Engineer Squadrons employed within Infantry Battle Groups, focussed on the Infantry fight, meant a skill fade (or loss) to their other core capabilities. The need to constantly force generate close support squadrons within the construct of the Managed Readiness Plan meant that this became the primary focus of the Combat Engineer Regiments at that time. Core Engineer capabilities include, but are not limited to, heavy equipment, combat diving, explosive ordinance demolition (EOD) and emergent capabilities such as counter-improvised explosive devices (C-IED). The requirement to fulfill the mandate left in the wake of the divestment of Assault Pioneers means that the Combat Engineers, also affected by poor recruiting and lowered retention rates, are trying to do a lot more with a lot less.

11. The support that the Assault Pioneers provided to the Infantry Battalion is not the same as the support that a Combat Engineer Regiment provides to a formation. Assault Pioneers were primarily employed to breach enemy obstacles and employ defensive obstacles in accordance with the CO's plan. Their obstacles were integrated into the battalion and formation defensive plan, but were not on the same scale as those that an Combat Engineer Regiment would emplace, such as Anti-Tank Ditches or Defensive Minefields. Their key skillsets mostly involved use of explosives and chainsaws to enable maneuver and deny the same to the enemy. They could also

⁸ Canada. Department of National Defence. B-GL-309-001/FT001, The Infantry Battalion in Battle. Ottawa: DND Canada, 2013, pg 4-6-1.

be employed as a rifle platoon when the need arose. They were often tasked with securing the battalion's Command Post (CP), a crucial duty which now falls to non-infantry soldiers in Signals Platoon.

12. There are still Senior Non-Commissioned Officers that served within Pioneer Platoon, but many of them are now employed outside of battalions and are too senior to be brought back to rebuild the capability. There was previously talk of pooling Urban Operations Instructors together within the battalions to form a pseudo-Pioneer platoon. By virtue of their being qualified in Basic Demolitions, there is currently some limited breaching capability in the infantry battalion.

13. The other key enabling task that Pioneers fulfilled was Chemical, Biological Radiological, and Nuclear (CBRN) Decontamination. With a renewed focus on this serious operational threat in a fluid international security environment, this is a natural fit. Each battalion has been mandated to provide a CBRN Control Centre. This would be a perfect secondary role for Pioneer Platoon Commander. As shown in numerous iterations of Exercise MAPLE GUARDIAN at CMTC, the Canadian Army has a long way to go to rebuild this capability. The decontamination task currently resides within the Service Battalions, but they are struggling as much as the rest of the Forces to meet this requirement, in balance with their other real life support requirements. Re-establishing Pioneer Platoon (and Assault Troop in the Armoured Corps) would go a long way towards re-establishing CBRN as a core competency Army-wide.

14. The core skillsets of Assault Pioneers are infantry focussed, demolition, CBRN decontamination and emplacement and breaching of obstacles. All of these skillsets currently exist as separate courses within various Centres of Excellence and corps. Establishing a cell at the Infantry School, adjacent to the Engineer School, to combine all of these qualifications back into both a Basic and Advanced Pioneer Course should be achievable if the Infantry Corps agrees and resources the School accordingly. Like Mortar Platoon, Assault Pioneer Platoon would have to be built from existing PYs from within the Corps.

15. While the argument could be made that the reintroduction of indirect fire and close support engineering capabilities within the Infantry Corps is simply empire building, or worse, that it is an attempt to grab capabilities post-Afghanistan. This is misguided as the effect would actually be very symbiotic. The Corps would necessarily become more integrated as Mortar Platoon and Pioneer Platoon would be working closely with their counterparts in the Artillery and Engineers, necessarily, on a regular basis. Both corps would benefit from having infantry soldiers that could speak their language when deploying on short notice in a combined arms team. The current 30 days required to produce an 81mm mortar troop is not conducive to the readiness levels expected of combat capable forces in the current, uncertain security environment. This would be eliminated by having a standing capability in each infantry battalion.

CONCLUSION

16. Informally, most engineers and gunners will tell you that it was a mistake to divest Mortar and Assault Pioneer Platoons and that they fulfilled a vital role which they haven't replicated. Reintroduction of these platoons would be a boon to retention within all corps.

Currently within the Infantry Battalion, the only specialised platoons are Reconnaissance (Recce) and Snipers. A soldier must be Basic Recce Qualified to attempt the Basic Sniper Course. Not all of the personnel within the battalion are suited to this type of employment. Not all Recce Patrolmen or Snipers have the proficiency to serve with Mortars or Assault Pioneer Platoon. This ability to specialise and do something different will give soldiers another option, besides release, when they look at their future within the infantry and the wider Canadian Armed Forces (CAF).

17. The corollary effect within the Artillery and Engineers is that they will no longer have to maintain skillsets or mandates to support the Infantry Corps, which diverts their attention and resources away from their own core, specialised capabilities. This should also have the effect of improving retention. The Artillery will be able to concentrate on the M777 without having to have a latent surge requirement to man the 81mm Mortar. This is normally accomplished with composite troops, brought together for a limited time and then disbanded once the task ends. The benefit to the Engineers is just as great. They will be able to focus on their various specialisations, as they work to rebuild them after the Afghanistan employment model, which saw them take a backburner to close support to the Infantry Battle Groups. This should lead to greater job satisfaction and retention as sappers are able to do more of what they joined to do.

RECOMMENDATION

18. Understanding that COs will all have their own take on the issue, this paper recommends that the third rifle company within each battalion be the transitional organization to bring these capabilities back to operational functionality. They would be manned with personnel with as many personnel as possible who already held the requisite qualifications and built on existing

platoon structures. They would also be expected to augment the Infantry School with those personnel who hold advanced qualifications in their fields.

19. The career progression model for infanteers would have to be adjusted to reflect this change, which is not too onerous as there is still corporate memory of how it worked in the recent past. This would also mean that junior officers would have the opportunity to command more and varied specialised platoons, giving them a greater breadth of experience to draw from when they are posted on extra regimental employment within the CAF. The Artillery and Engineers would have to maintain some latent capability to fulfill these functions until the Infantry once again reached operational functionality and there would be a training bill for them, at least initially. The short term pain will be well worth the long term gain for all parties.

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