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MOVING PAST THE POST: ARGUMENTS FOR A NEW CAF RELOCATION PARADIGM

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Exercise Solo Flight

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EXERCISE *SOLO FLIGHT* – EXERCICE *SOLO FLIGHT*

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Introduction

From enrolment to release, Canadian Armed Forces members are subjected to a constant refrain: the needs of the service come first; your family bends to your career, not the other way around; relocations are a fact of service life. These themes and the policies from which they originate are long-standing but are increasingly at odds with the shifting cultural and social conditions under which members serve, creating unbearable tensions between service and family life. The resulting loss of experienced members incurs a steady drain of institutional knowledge and talent which the CAF can ill afford. Yet, by considering alternative personnel management approaches which support the principle of unlimited liability, the CAF can quickly realign itself with modern social norms and greatly mitigate such tensions. This paper will show that in order to stem the aforementioned loss of institutional knowledge, CAF strategic leadership must revisit and challenge the assumptions underpinning the existing paradigm of geographic relocations.

Current Posting Policies and Rationale

CAF members and their families frequently undertake relocations across Canada and around the world for a variety of operational and administrative reasons. The most common justification involves changes in the CAF's manning level: recruits who successfully complete basic and occupational training must be posted to operational units, and retiring members create

vacancies that, depending on the position's priority, must be filled.¹ Strong performers are duly promoted and are often posted as a result. The reasons for this second scenario are as much disciplinary as they are administrative. It can be awkward for the individual to continue in a new role in a given group dynamic without upsetting unit cohesion, but that aside, there simply may not be any suitable position open at the time for a member of particular rank, occupation and experience. Finally, individuals relocate in order to gain work or operational experience not available in their existing location. In the Signals Officer occupation, for example, a high percentage of cost moves are dedicated to satisfying criteria for succession planning.²

These justifications for members' relocation must be considered against Canada's particular geography and the CAF's corresponding domestic bed-down, as follows:

- The Canadian Army includes four Regular divisions based in four different provinces, with Reserve elements across the whole country;
- The Royal Canadian Navy is divided into two fleets servicing each of Canada's coasts;
- The Royal Canadian Air Force maintains airbases in eight provinces to address its various national and continental missions; and
- Canadian Special Operations Forces Command houses units in multiple locations in the province of Ontario.³

It is natural that a relatively small force such as the CAF would be so widely spread out so as to address its core mission to defend Canada. The situation is exacerbated by the requirement to train in rugged, remote locations that a) realistically simulate the contemporary operating

¹ Pierre Daigle, Special Report to the Minister of National Defence, *On the Homefront: Assessing the Well-Being of Canada's Military Families in the New Millennium* (Ottawa: DND/CF Ombudsman, 2013), 31

² Maj Marc L. Prince, telephone interview with author, 1 April 2018

³ National Defence, "Organizational Structure" (30 January 2018), accessed 11 May 2018, <http://www.forces.gc.ca/en/about-org-structure/index.page>

environment; and b) prevent CAF activities from unduly interfering with Canadians' day-to-day lives. It would be ill-advised, for example, to establish a CF-18 bombing range outside suburban Toronto. When this geographical context is considered along with the CAF's institutional imperatives, it is clear that CAF members will move far more frequently and across far greater distances than their civilian counterparts.⁴ These relocation aspects figure largely in posting tensions as discussed below.

Interestingly, the policy driving this relocation paradigm is far less specific than the practices adopted by the CAF. The principle of universality of service, which reflects the CAF's core value of service before self, would seem to justify the measures described above, in that it requires service members to perform whatever functions Canada requires at any given place or time.⁵ Other than consideration of contingency cost moves for personal reasons, no other policy affecting relocations exists. It will be shown next that the broad application of this policy, combined with geographical factors, will inevitably cause tensions in a modern family and social context.

Posting Tension in Theory

In her seminal paper on military families, Mady Wechsler Segal quoted Coser's definition of greedy institutions, defining them as follows:

... Groups which... make total claims on their members and which attempt to encompass within their circle the whole personality. These might be called *greedy*

⁴ Karen Blaisure, Shelley Wadsworth, Amy Dombro, Tara Saathoff-Wells and Angela Perira, *Serving Military Families: Theories, Research and Application* (London: Routledge, 2012), 80

⁵ National Defence, *Defence Administrative Order and Directive 5023-0, Universality of Service*, 19 May 2005

institutions, insofar as they seek exclusive and undivided loyalty and they attempt to reduce the claims of competing roles and status positions no those they wish to encompass within their boundaries... Their demands on the person are omnivorous.⁶

Through emphasis on universality of service, tradition and cohesion, the military exerts pressure directly on its members and indirectly on their families. It expects its members to deploy anywhere and perform potentially life-endangering tasks, and expects members' families to adjust to the member's career and accommodate the associated tempo.⁷ A family will make similar demands on a serving member to fulfill both legal and tacit responsibilities as spouse, parent, caregiver, etc. Segal presciently predicted that the cultural and societal changes already underway in the 1980s would inevitably bring the competing demands of these two institutions into conflict. Men, for example, would be expected to accept more responsibility for child-rearing and household chores as women joined the professional ranks. This would not only create more tension between members and their families but would also induce rifts between the member and one or both of the greedy institutions, should the member be forced to choose between the two.⁸

Unquestionably, the aforementioned social and cultural changes have come to pass: military spouses commonly seek gainful employment outside the home, and the definition of "family" has expanded well beyond the traditional 'nuclear' model.⁹ Given the aforementioned CAF relocation practices, one might expect CAF members to report greater dissatisfaction with either their family lives or military careers, or perhaps both greedy institutions, as the resultant

⁶ Mady Wechsler Segal, "The Military and the Family as Greedy Institutions" in *Armed Forces and Society Vol 13 No 1* (Fall 1986), 11

⁷ Segal, "Greedy Institutions," 13

⁸ *Ibid.*, 15

⁹ Kerry Sudom, Defence R&D Canada, "Impact of Military Life on Families and Single Canadian Forces Members: Current State of Knowledge and Research Gaps" (May 2012), 6

competing demands seem difficult to reconcile. The next section examines whether these theoretical conflicts are borne out by observation.

Posting Tension in Practice

In a 2013 report, the CAF ombudsman produced the most recent comprehensive study of CAF members' attitudes towards the competing demands of their occupations and their families. It noted the tremendous pride members take in contributing to CAF missions and reinforced the changing nature of Canadian families.¹⁰ However, its top key finding cited the relentless upheaval of military life, in the form of geographic relocations and operational deployments, as the major cause of disruption and strain for military families.¹¹ Members complained of having little control over where they are posted, when and for how long. The report also notes the detrimental effects of secondary factors such as spousal employment, access to child care and education, and the re-establishment of social networks.¹²

Research from the same period also confirms the link between the aforementioned disruption and members' job satisfaction. Many members cite the family conflicts related from separations (both deployments and relocations) as affecting their work performance and job satisfaction.¹³ In a 2012 survey, releasing members cited the desire for geographical stability as their top reason for leaving the CAF.¹⁴ Another study reports that dual income families are now the norm, and since spouses often can't find work in isolated CAF base locations, families suffer

¹⁰ Daigle, *Homefront*, 24

¹¹ *Ibid*, 30

¹² *Ibid*, 34

¹³ Sanela Dursun and Kerry Sudom, "The Military Family: Contemporary Challenges" in *Military Human Resource Issues: A Multinational View* (Kingston: Canadian Defence Academy Press, 2013), 133

¹⁴ Sudom, "Impact," 3

financial setbacks during relocations.¹⁵ It has also been established (possibly as a consequence of the foregoing) that military spouses generally earn less than their civilian counterparts.¹⁶ As Wechsler Segal predicted, where military spouses must disproportionately shoulder professional compromises to accommodate military moves, family friction is exacerbated.¹⁷ Thus, it is established that a) modern military families are less portable than is assumed by current relocation practice, often as a result of spousal employment; b) this incompatibility causes increased friction; and c) this friction is increasingly likely to result in a member's release, all other career factors being equal.

Little comparable data linking relocation with military career dissatisfaction exists for US forces, but a study of European allies reports similar trends. For example, a Slovenian Armed Forces study found that, once conflating factors were adjusted for, 77.3% of those having to travel only 10 km to their place of work would consider re-enlistment; this percentage dropped to 61.9% when the distance increased to 81 km.¹⁸ Slovenia is a relatively small country, spanning only hundreds of kilometers from end to end. Once overlaid against Canadian geography, and also against the social upheaval cited by the Ombudsman, it is possible this particular aspect of posting dissatisfaction would be even more pronounced for the CAF. Unfortunately, Director General Military Personnel Research and Analysis has conducted very little work in this realm since the Ombudsman's report was released.¹⁹

¹⁵ Jason Dunn, Samantha Urban and Zhigang Wang, "Impact of Spousal Employment on Military Personnel Career Decisions" in *Military Human Resource Issues: A Multinational View* (Kingston: Canadian Defence Academy Press, 2013), 147

¹⁶ Sarah Meadows, Beth Ann Griffin, Benjamin Karney and Julia Pollak, "Employment Gaps Between Military Spouses and Matched Civilians" in *Armed Forces & Society Vol 42 No 3* (2016), 555

¹⁷ Daigle, *Homefront*, 40

¹⁸ Eric Kopac, "Retaining Military Manpower: The Propensity to Re-Enlist in the Slovenian Armed Forces" in *Europe Without Soldiers? Recruitment and Retention across the Armed Forces of Europe* (Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010), 244

¹⁹ L. Stemate, Director Research Workforce Analytics, e-mail correspondence with author, 1 March 2018

Discussion: Theory vs Practice

In aggregate, the data supports two conclusions. First, it confirms Wechsler Segal's characterization of militaries and families as greedy institutions and bears out her anticipation of changing social norms; and second, it confirms the detrimental effect of military relocations on retention, with spousal support as a major factor. Apples-to-apples comparisons with allies are risky given the disparate sizes of the forces and land masses involved. In essence, the CAF-specific problem is that current posting practice has not adapted to changing social norms, and the negative effects thereof are exacerbated by the CAF's particular geographical circumstances.

Any experienced military professional will agree that in trying to solve a problem, no matter how complex, it is essential to separate facts from assumptions. In this problem, certain elements are unchangeable and others, while theoretically malleable, should be similarly considered:

- CAF will always have a mission to defend both Canada and North America
- CAF must train in realistic environments which are often remote areas of Canada
- CAF must spread its forces across Canada to achieve its continental mission
- CAF/DND HQ will remain co-located with the federal government in Ottawa
- Adherence to unlimited liability is essential for operational success

Within the confines of those facts, a wide array of assumptions and/or beliefs regarding posting practices may be questioned. What if more control were afforded to individuals, rather than centralized career management? What if operational HQ functions, authorities and resources were decentralized to various Force Generator nodes? What if the criteria for succession were revisited and reprioritized? These types of questions allow the potential to identify option space

which respects unchangeable facts and yet may help stem the unacceptable loss of institutional knowledge incurred by existing posting practices.

It is worthwhile to pre-emptively address the question of why action on this matter should be prioritized, given the myriad of resource-based challenges the CAF perennially faces. The answer may be found in the mistrust and cynicism taking root in CAF members and their families. Their sense is that however well-substantiated the problems may be and however well-intentioned CAF leadership may seem, significant action is unlikely; that leadership is more interested in being seen to ask questions rather than truly listening to the answers.²⁰ Nothing erodes CAF morale and the sacred trust between soldiers and officers faster than the former catching the latter making a promise both know to be empty. Therefore this paper will henceforth examine potential areas for practical change to posting practices within the power of CAF leadership to implement.

Proposal for a Paradigm Shift

The underlying principle behind any reconsideration of the relocation paradigm is a shift in the CAF's view of unlimited liability. Current practice applies the broad language of a single Defence Order and Directive to every aspect of CAF members' lives.²¹ It is from this interpretation that career managers extrapolate the themes discussed in this paper's introduction, based on the central principle that the needs of the service always come first. However, in order to address the loss of institutional knowledge, the CAF should consider a more practical principle, to wit: *apply unlimited liability only where it matters, and limited liability everywhere*

²⁰ Daigle, *Homefront*, 21

²¹ DND, *DAOD 5023-0*

else. If the CAF were to demand unquestioned obedience and commitment to its missions only in those areas which truly affect the national interest, such as operations (and training for operations), and seek to grant its members maximum flexibility in the administrative areas of service life, it would open significant option space to revisit those aspects of posting practice documented as causing the greatest friction. Such a new perspective would reinforce CAF members' steadfast commitment to Canada, validate CAF leadership's intention to make substantive change, and grant members more positive control over their family-related circumstances, resulting in more favourable views of service life and consequently greater likelihood of retention.²²

Armed with this new outlook and its emphasis on members' flexibility, CAF leadership may challenge the practices and assumptions underpinning relocation practices. The following three areas are particularly apt and offer potential alternatives to the status quo.

Assumption #1: breadth of experience is important for all members

According to current practice, as individuals advance in their careers they are expected to work in a wide variety of positions at a particular rank level. Breadth of experience is tied to suitability for promotion, as those who excel only in one particular niche are less frequently promoted than their generalist counterparts.²³ An alternative would be to stream members into specializations relevant to their occupations rather than insisting on an approach of "checking boxes." Research shows that many military professionals simply seek to excel in one specific

²² Blaisure et al., *Serving Families*, 82

²³ Canadian Army, "Royal Canadian Corps of Signals – Career Management" (14 May 2018), accessed 15 May 2018, http://acims.mil.ca/org/DLCI/Site%20pages/CM_RCCS.aspx

area, not become jacks of all trades.²⁴ If members could specialize in a particular field for the balance of their career, they would find themselves undergoing far fewer relocations in order to progress. Giving members the choice to stream and stay put, rather than branch out and move around, would allow them to arrange their personal circumstances to their preference, thus optimizing their focus and attention to their profession: unlimited liability where it matters. In a similar vein, a less tumultuous change could be the extension of standard posting lengths from two years to three, four or five: over a 25-year career, this could lessen family stress considerably, especially with regard to spousal employment.²⁵

It is important to note that the professional development (PD) model for all CAF members lies entirely within the CDS' purview to modify and/or modernize. As long as CAF missions are met, the CDS holds a wide degree of discretion on how personnel develop within the system. The main impediment to "streaming" is that it requires a certain critical mass of personnel for feasibility. If Signals officers join the Cyber stream, for example, there must be enough positions, subordinates and resources available (and in the same place, if relocation is to be addressed) to substantiate viable career paths within that stream. Challenging other assumptions can potentially free up resources in this regard.

Assumption #2: postings must be dictated by a central authority

Military careers are currently managed through a Command in the National Capital Region, responsible for ensuring that vacancies created through postings, promotions, releases

²⁴ Tim Kane, *Bleeding Talent: How the US Military Mismanages Great Leaders and Why It's Time for a Revolution* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012), 139

²⁵ Dunn et al, "Impact of Spousal Employment," 149

and/or infusions of new recruits are fulfilled in accordance with extant priorities.²⁶ Under this system members receive inflexible posting messages ordering relocation. Members whose spousal and/or family circumstances have evolved to make relocation challenging have little to no options save release, and as documented above, many exercise that option.

However, it is worthwhile to investigate the extent to which this process can be decentralized, affording greater freedom to commanders and supervisors at the various major CAF nodes to manage the filling of positions within their geographical area. Under such a system, members would have the flexibility to apply for locally-available vacant positions. Positions of greater importance or urgency can be prioritized and/or incentivized to ensure operational capabilities are maintained.²⁷ If the PD model is simultaneously revisited to enable more distributed training and learning, local commanders might be able to address local vacancies while simultaneously ensuring personnel receive the requisite PD to prepare for future challenges.

The most obvious counterargument is that such an arrangement would leave undesirable locations deserted and key positions unfilled. Recent research supports the idea of market-based incentives, such as pay bonuses, to offset such concerns.²⁸ The introduction of such incentives tied to geography could make areas with otherwise challenging economies for spouses' employment more palatable, and with greater flexibility to stay in one place, the frequency and risk of losing such employment would be considerably mitigated.

²⁶ Commander Military Personnel Command, "Military Personnel Management" (6 April 2018), accessed 15 May 2018, <http://cmp-cpm.mil.ca/en/index.page>

²⁷ Kane, *Bleeding Talent*, 136

²⁸ *Ibid*, 169

Assumption #3: operational command and control functions must be centralized

A significant percentage of annual CAF postings concern the National Capital Region, where a large number of operational headquarters and corporate functions are based. The disproportionate share of positions forces frequent postings between Ottawa and the operational bases where the lion's share of the CAF primarily trains and operates. In the spirit of the Leslie Report, which famously recommended more teeth and less tail,²⁹ it is worthwhile to determine a) how many such functions are truly essential to CAF missions; b) to what degree such functions require military Personnel Years (PYs), as opposed to civilian; and c) of those functions that are both valid and require military PYs, which can be decentralized to the operational nodes where the manning pools already exist. A certain degree of Ottawa-based bureaucracy is essential for CAF to maintain links with government in general and DND in particular, but civilianization of any functions not bound by unlimited liability would lessen the frequency of CAF postings to Ottawa.

This would not be a panacea: for example, operational-level military functions must be done somewhere, and if not Ottawa, where? However, modern advancements in teleconferencing and high-speed networking suggest that operational-level functions could be achieved even if their HQs are dispersed and their members collaborating through virtual means. Unlike operational units which must train in particular environments across the country, staff work is not tied to ground.

²⁹ National Defence, "Report on Transformation 2011" (6 July 2011), accessed 13 May 2018, <http://www.forces.gc.ca/en/about-reports-pubs/transformation-report-2011.page>

Summary of the New Paradigm

Taken in combination, by challenging these assumptions, decentralizing the posting process and exploiting modern information systems, CAF could plausibly address relocation-related frictions while maintaining its mandated operational capabilities. In fact, this has already been done, once. In 2016, due to in-year financial constraints, a significant proportion of cost moves were suspended that fiscal year.³⁰ Unsurprisingly, the CAF suffered no loss of operational capability and was able to fulfill its missions despite its inability to relocate personnel. It would be an interesting experiment to extrapolate this condition over a protracted time period – at what point do the various PD/training implications affect capability? Would changes in the areas outlined above affect those implications? Much more research is required, and likely additional resources either from within or from new funding, but the above discussion represents a clear starting point for CAF leadership to address the problems caused by its relocation practices.

Conclusion

Option space exists to re-examine several facets of CAF professional development and centralization which would greatly mitigate the tensions between service obligations and family life. Research data invalidates long-standing assumptions that still drive CAF policy and practice for relocations. By adopting a new perspective on unlimited liability and putting its members' needs first outside of operations, CAF can both fulfill its missions and properly take care of its people, which will preserve the institutional knowledge so vital to the CAF's existence. Strategic

³⁰ MWO A. Birch, CANSOFCOM Chief Communications Operator, e-mail correspondence with author, 16 May 2018

leaders must act now to maintain the Forces' trust and confidence and properly look after the institution's most important resource: its people.

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