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WHAT TO DO WITH THE MASS DROP PARACHUTE INSERTION CAPABILITY

Maj J.C. Thamer

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Maj J.C. Thamer

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I have watched with interest the organization here of such special units as Commandos, Ski Battalions and Paratroops. The cycle is always the same-initial enthusiasm which is very high, drawing good officers and men from regular units, distracting and unsettling others, and upsetting the units' organization. With a prolonged period spent in awaiting employment, the enthusiasm evaporates...In consequence I do not advocate the establishment of any separate Paratroops in the Canadian Forces.

- Lieutenant-General McNaughton, National Archives Canada,
19 August 1941, as quoted in *Bastard Sons* by Bernd Horn, 25

AIM

1. Acknowledging that the Army's light force capability development efforts are likely to continue for some time, this paper will propose that the Canadian Army (CA) take a clear eyed look at its mass drop parachute insertion capability now. I believe static line mass insertion parachuting is the low hanging fruit of our light force evolution. The current state of mass drop parachuting in the CA is a paper tiger at best. At worst it is an antiquated legacy which drains our limited resources while offering very little in return (other than creating a false positive). Given the ongoing state of flux of CA light forces I will search for a better way to man, train and equip its mass parachute capability. This will be done with resource limitations and potential future tasks in mind. Dissatisfied with the status quo, I will compare a couple different courses of action (COA) before making a recommendation.
2. While I feel that the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) should avoid niche capabilities and specialization, I believe that light forces are not niche and that they should be available to provide the Government of Canada (GoC) with different options. For our new Liberal government in particular, I believe the higher level of readiness, smaller footprint and suitability for peace support operations offered by light forces (over medium/heavy forces) is ideal.

Conversely, when committing to a future major operation I believe light forces should be ready to be first out the door. At the commencement of a major operation a light force should be deployed to the new area of operations for the first 90 days. In this scenario light forces would provide the rapid response desired by politicians and would serve as the theatre entry/theatre activation team that would be relieved by a slower but more substantial medium force which would cover the 3 to 12 month timeframe of the new mission. However, this service paper will not focus on the ongoing effort to design a valid force employment concept for light forces within the CA. I will avoid delving into topics such as force management, readiness and composition of light forces. This paper will focus more specifically on what to do with the mass drop parachute insertion capability.

INTRODUCTION

3. The core of the CA land force is classified as a medium force which aims to be effective in combat “but also highly mobile, adaptive, networked, sustainable and capable of operating in a joint, interagency, multinational and public context”.¹ The CA mission states that “The Army will generate combat-effective, multi-purpose land forces to meet Canada’s defence objectives”.² Light and heavy forces are added to this medium core to enhance the agility and adaptability of our general purpose force. Light forces increase CA flexibility and responsiveness. Light forces also naturally lend themselves to fulfill important political roles such as security force capability building, stability operations and peacetime engagement. Despite periodic effort to develop and refine a force employment concept for our light forces, out of necessity, the CA spent the beginning of the 21st Century focusing on the Afghan mission. Furthermore, since World War II,

¹ B-GL-310-001/AG-001, *Land Operations 2021 Adaptive Dispersed Operations – The Force Employment Concept for Canada’s Army of Tomorrow*, Kingston, ON: Directorate of Land Concept and Design, 2007, 4.

² B-GL 300-000 AG-003. *Waypoint 2018: The Canadian Army Advancing Toward Land Operations 2021*. Kingston, Ont. Canadian Army Land Warfare Centre (CALWC), 2015, 1.

parachute forces have lacked a credible role (in an ever increasingly mechanized Army) and suffered from a partially soiled reputation within the military, amongst politicians and the Canadian public (the unfortunate legacy of the Canadian Airborne Regiment). “In Ottawa, no doubt some soldiers and politicians thought the demise of the Airborne was a good thing, while others smugly believed that the leadership crisis in the military had gone away. They were wrong.”³

DISCUSSION

Strengths

4. Light forces contribute to the CA by helping meet the requirements of the Canada First Defence Strategy in a number of ways. Requiring comparatively less air/sea lift than medium and heavy forces do, light forces elevate the CA’s responsiveness. If properly trained and equipped, light forces are well suited for strategic tasks such as expeditionary humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, securing key terrain for theatre entry (airfield seizure in a permissive environment), or working as a theatre activation team.⁴ Due to the fact that light forces are generally free from being tied to a specific fleet of fighting vehicles, they are the most suitable forces to train, equip and organize as parachute forces. In a very limited number of scenarios, mass drop parachuting is seen as a possible insertion method in support of these tasks.

5. The current purpose of maintaining parachute companies is to assist the CAF in meeting the implied mandate of being able to rapidly project anywhere in the world, especially in areas not readily accessible by road, water, aircraft (areas without suitable runways) or rail. My own recent “no notice” deployment as a Parachute Company Commander to NUNAVUT for Ex

³ Bernd Horn, *Bastard Sons – An Examination of Canada’s Airborne Experience 1942-1995*. Vanwell Publishing Limited, St. Catharines, Ont, 2001, 237.

⁴ CALWC Kingston: *Light Forces Definition and Roles - Working Paper Version 2.2 (Draft)* http://acims.mil.ca/board/ACDB/20112015/150325/Item_14_Light_Forces_v2.2.docx, 5.

ARCTIC RAM (Feb 2014) was testament to the potential force projection that can be achieved by using parachute forces. As demonstrated, this can be done in any environment on limited notice. Swift, expeditionary, force projection was also showcased during the initial deployment of CAF elements in support of NATO Alliance members' collective goal of restoring regional stability in EASTERN and CENTRAL EUROPE. Despite being the last element notified, well behind the Air Task Force and HMCS REGINA, the Land Task Force (my company) was quickly mounted and the first to arrive in the joint operations area. This no notice deployment saw the company declared 'Operational Readiness' in 72 hours with a platoon deployed in 7 days and the remainder of the company shortly after. Only 72 hours after landing in GERMANY the CA paratroopers conducted a full equipment, tactical parachute insertion into POLAND (with live ammunition) in order to link-up with Polish forces and commence multi-lateral training.

6. The rapid arrival in POLAND for Op REASSURANCE in May 2014 was a testament to the readiness of 1 Canadian Mechanized Brigade Group (1 CMBG) but it also speaks to the utility of light force employment during peacetime military engagements. The parachute capability enabled the Canadian company to foster engagement and remain connected to allies (POL 6th Airborne Brigade and US 173rd Brigade Airborne) in accordance with the Army Operating Framework.⁵ Light forces, including parachute forces, increase the CAF's options when looking to employ land forces at home or abroad. Of note, some other benefits mass parachuting provides the CA are in areas of recruiting, retention and motivation. These benefits are difficult to quantify but largely accepted and easy to understand. The demanding and unique

⁵ B-GL-005-000/AC-001. *Advancing with Purpose: The Army Strategy, 3rd Edition*, Ottawa, Ont. Director Army Staff, 2014, 13.

nature of military parachuting makes it a tool to attract new members, bolster retention and to motivate and generate interesting training opportunities.

Weaknesses

7. Historic and recent parachute missions in combat have enjoyed a mixed level of success. In combat, in only very few cases where specific conditions exist, airborne forces are able to achieve relative superiority over an adversary long enough to enable a larger combat operation. Some good examples include Mali 2013, Iraq 2003, Afghanistan 2001, Panama 1989, Grenada 1983 and Crete 1941.⁶ Countries that are deliberately trained and equipped for airborne operations are able to select parachute forces for tasks such as airfield seizures. These are conducted in support of larger operations. This is typically done only when access by ground or helicopter is unachievable or very inefficient. Airborne forces, paratroopers in particular, differ from other land forces in that they begin operations disorganized, lightly armed, vulnerable and isolated. They typically seek to achieve the desired concentration of force for a specific period of time in order to gain relative superiority.⁷ Even in a best case scenario, parachuting into an opposed environment is risky. When one compares the vulnerability of even the most cohesive, purpose built parachute forces with the capabilities of potential enemies, the thought of conducting a mass parachute insertion in anything less than a permissive environment defies conventional wisdom. Canada's current construct (three piece meal companies spread across the country) makes the CA incapable of conducting a mass parachute descent into contested territory.

⁶ United States. Department of Defense.
<http://www.benning.army.mil/mcoe/maneuverconference/presentation/pdf/LTCCheneneau.pdf>

⁷ William McRaven, "The Theory of Special Operations" (Naval Postgraduate School Thesis – Monterey, California), June 1993, 5-11.

8. The current construct of three dispersed Regular Force infantry parachute companies does not provide a real combined arms combat capability. I believe that a cohesive parachute 'battalion group' is likely the smallest acceptable size of unit that would be capable of commanding, generating, planning, and supporting tactical parachute operations. The status quo (three dispersed companies) lacks the intellectual framework and joint planning support expertise for parachute operations. If an enhanced para-capable force package was needed by the CA today, there is no deliberate command and control structure that ties parachute companies together. The three individual companies are only 'parachute companies' by default, not really by design. CA's mass parachute capability is limited by size, resources, planning ability, combat support (indirect fire, reconnaissance, combat engineers), combat service support (parachute riggers and packers, equipment) and command support (communications). While a few people show an interest in developing the CA's skills in conducting parachute operations, our current force employment model does not define this as a requirement. Therefore the CA does not organize or resource the potential parachute enabled capability. As a result, the individual companies who regularly conduct tactical parachute training realistically maintain only a minimal amount of proficiency (just enough to keep individual soldiers current). Simply put, the CA's mass parachute capability is not technically dead; it is on life-support.

9. Another issue with maintaining the status quo is the obvious lack of importance given to this insertion method by the CAF. On average the individual parachute companies work with Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) CC-130J crews to conduct parachute descents at least once every three months. This is the minimal amount needed to maintain a soldier's basic currency. Due to the large number of tasks given to RCAF Hercules Squadrons, and the incredibly low priority given to routine/tactical parachute company training, the best chance to train with

aircraft are typically realized by synchronizing parachute exercises with the Hercules Squadron's Basic Tactical Air Transport qualifications. Marquee exercises such as Exercise MAPLE RESOLVE are the exception. Exercise MAPLE RESOLVE is normally well supported by the RCAF. For routine parachute training helicopters sometimes are able to serve as an alternate platform, as do civilian contracted planes, but neither is a good alternative to training with the larger high performance CC-130.

Miscellaneous

10. When considering any of the COAs that I will outline in the next section regarding the future of mass drop parachuting in the CA, I suggest the CAF should discontinue the use of the maroon beret. Within parachute companies the maroon beret is a source of pride. While participating in commemorative descents with allies the maroon beret can be seen as a symbol of an international brotherhood. However, I feel that vastly more CAF personnel, and certainly more politicians, hold that particular headdress in contempt rather than respect. No single symbol quietly drives a wedge between military members quicker than the maroon beret. The maroon beret has a great and proud legacy in Canada (i.e.: First Special Service Force), but the negative stigma associated with it outweighs the positive legacy, comradery and esprit du corps it offers. The source of pride it provides to some is outweighed by the negative effects the perceived sense of elitism brings. It is generally understood that influential leaders outside of the so called 'airborne brotherhood' view the maroon beret with disdain. I believe that replacing the maroon beret with the uniform beret colour of the services years ago (admittedly a purely symbolic change) could have done more to promote the use and health of parachute forces within the CAF than any other change attempted in the last 20 years.

CONCLUSION

COA 1 - Maintain the Status Quo

11. The current construct of three dispersed Regular Force infantry parachute companies offers a valid retention and recruiting tool while maintaining a minimal degree of proficiency and familiarity with parachute operations inside the CAF. The way it is currently organized and understood it is unable to produce a true capability or achieve a solid effect for the CA.

COA 2 - Optimization

12. There are arguably very few tasks for which light forces are the only option. There are even fewer still that would call for the use of a mass insertion by parachute. However, there are scenarios where light forces, and specifically parachute forces, could potentially offer an advantage over medium forces as an option for the GoC. With negligible investment in resources the CA could create one group that is fully mandated, doctrinally capable, trained and resourced to conduct mass parachute operations (in permissive to semi-permissive environments) in support of CAF missions. For this option the CA must regroup the CA's designated paratrooper positions that currently reside in the three Regular Force light infantry battalions to just one battalion. That battalion must be the closest to the aircraft (CC-130J) that will be used to generate, develop, maintain, and sustain the capability (i.e.: an infantry battalion from 2 CMBG). This battalion would also then be closer to the Canadian Army Advanced Warfare Centre, another critical asset, which could support individual and collective training as well as doctrine development.

13. Create a cohesive combined arms capability. Augment the number of designated parachutist positions within the CA (within 2 CMBG in particular) to acknowledge and formalize the requirement for combat support, combat service support, and command support personnel in enabling of the new parachute battalion group. Force development, training, and

employment of the battalion must be done in concert with the enablers that support them; thus, creating a combined arms battalion group.

COA 3 - Discontinuation

14. Cease wasting the time and resources spent keeping the CA mass parachute capability on life-support. Continue to develop a sound force employment concept for light forces within the CA without the static line mass parachute option. Stop mass drop parachuting and do without the meagre benefits that have been realized by the CAF for the last 20 year.

RECOMMENDATION

In all, the continuing animosity between the airborne soldiers and the remainder of the military establishment, often exacerbated by the silent debate on elitism, as well as the larger failure to fully rationalize the role, structure, and relevancy of airborne forces, condemned them to an uncertain future. Their existence was continually challenged. They were consistently the target of acrimonious debate. The lack of acceptance by the military establishment as a whole, in regard to the relevancy of paratroopers in the Canadian context, proved to be a difficult obstacle to overcome. Consequently, the nation's paratroopers represented, for most of their existence, the Army's bastard sons.

- Bernd Horn, *Bastard Sons – An Examination of Canada's Airborne Experience 1942-1995*, 276

15. Regrettably I recommend COA 3. There are scenarios where soldiers could be inserted by mass parachute drop in order to achieve an effect; however, I cannot honestly foresee Canadian leaders and politicians ever choosing this as a viable option. This is partly because parachuting is inherently risky but more so because of a lack of understanding surrounding the use of this capability. Training and equipping a battalion group of parachute capable forces in order to add another arrow to the 'Nation's quiver' is not insurmountable. The interest just isn't there. If it is highly unlikely that the GoC and their military advisors are going to select this 'arrow from the quiver' in the foreseeable future, then let's stop wasting our time and discontinue the mass drop parachute insertion capability.

16. Despite the fact that the option to regroup the Regular Force parachute positions from the three dispersed battalions to one would take negligible investment (and could be done while the CA continues to develop a viable force employment concept for light forces writ large), making these organizational changes without effectively defining a requirement would be pointless. I believe optimization is a bridge too far. The CA would need to speak with one voice, the CAF would need to acknowledge the requirement and utility of the capability, and the GoC would need to understand the advantages and disadvantages associated with a parachute battalion group and have the will and desire to use them.

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