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## MANNING AND THE FUTURE OF THE CANADIAN INFANTRY

Maj G.P. Vander Kloet

**JCSP 42**

**Service Paper**

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**PCEMI 42**

**Étude militaire**

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CANADIAN FORCES COLLEGE – COLLÈGE DES FORCES CANADIENNES  
JCSP 42 – PCEMI 42  
2015 – 2016

JCSP SERVICE PAPER – PCEMI ÉTUDE MILITAIRE

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Word Count: 2463

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## **MANNING AND THE FUTURE OF THE CANADIAN INFANTRY**

### **AIM**

1. The aim of this service paper is to identify whether the regular force infantry regiments within the Canadian Army will be able to fulfil their mandated tasks within the future operating environment, given their manning trend and current shortfalls.

### **INTRODUCTION**

2. Although the Canadian Army's force employment concept is a nine year old document, it clearly points out that "a flexible organization structure will enable forces to be tailored to specific missions from across the five operational functions."<sup>1</sup> This structure is depicted as a modular, flexible and adaptable fighting force which will "employ JIMP capable brigades and/or task forces, of which the basic close combat component will be the optimized battle group."<sup>2</sup> Although the optimized battle group experiment failed in its initial trial (2007-2009), due to inefficiencies that are beyond the scope of this service paper to discuss, at its nucleus, and what remains as the nucleus of any deployed modular force, is the infantry.

3. With the infantry acting as the core around which deployed land forces are built, the current manning levels of deployable soldiers within the Canadian Army's regular force infantry units are dangerously low, and will continue to dwindle if current practices are left unchanged. Further, in the near future, this trend will prevent the infantry corps from being able to effectively execute its mandated tasks. This service paper will commence discussion by examining the doctrinal emphasis the Canadian Army places on

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew Godefroy, and Canada Dept. of National Defence. Land Operations 2021: Adaptive Dispersed Operations : A Force Employment Concept for Canada's Army of Tomorrow. . 2007; 13.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

the infantry in the execution of the defence strategy's three roles. Next, the current manning situation will be examined, coupled with trends employed to address these shortfalls. It will then be highlighted that the current manning situation is not new, and how historical solutions were not effective for the long term. Prior to the final recommendations, it will be argued that the Canadian Army will be unable to sustain future operations due to manning.

## **DISCUSSION**

4. The Canadian Armed Forces (CAF), as defined in Canada's First Defence Strategy, has three roles: the defence of Canada; the defence of North America; and contribution to international peace and security.<sup>3</sup> These in turn lead to the six core missions required of the CAF, which are: conduct daily domestic and continental operations...; support to a major international event in Canada; terror attack response; aid to civilian authorities during a crisis; conduct international extended operations; and short international crisis response.<sup>4</sup> These six missions lead to the creation of the army's lines of operations (LOOs). Should the CAF be required to deploy a modular deployable land force to represent Canada in fulfilling any these roles, at the lowest level, it would be built around an infantry battalion. Enablers would then be attached, the end state of which would be a task force both prepared and capable of executing Canada's defence policy domestically and abroad. For the last few hundred years, the unit that mattered most when conducting a deployment or an intervention was the infantry battalion.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Canada Dept. of National Defence, Canada. Ministère de la défense nationale. Canada First Defence Strategy. . 2008; 7.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>5</sup> John English, and Bruce Gudmundsson. *On Infantry*. Westport, Conn: Praeger; 1994; i.

5. *Canadian Military Doctrine* states that the central tenet of the CAF is to maintain a combat-ready force that is adaptable, deployable and willing to fight in support of the government's interests.<sup>6</sup> In both the current and predicted future operating environment, for the land force, deploying a combat force in a fighting capacity likely implies occupying terrain in an asymmetric environment. This again must be built around the infantry, which is the only element capable of holding ground (with the exception of SOF in a limited scope). "Victory is achieved by the side that devoted the greatest share of its resources, and, in particular, its human resources, to its infantry."<sup>7</sup>

6. Despite the Canadian Army being world renowned for its flexibility, resourcefulness, and ability to 'get the job done', phrases such as 'do more with less', are common lingo at the unit and brigade level, due both to budget cuts and low manning levels. This is not solely an infantry issue, as it spreads across most of the field force. The Canadian infantry has recently been faced with devastatingly low numbers of boots on the ground, as recruiting has not met the strategic intake plan (SIP), coupled with an increase in voluntary releases, and occupational transfers. This has left regular force battalions across all three regiments currently struggling to fill tasks. What frequently occurs are platoon level tasks taking a company effort to fill, and company tasks becoming a battalion effort. Easily done in a pinch, this clearly works against one of the characteristics of land forces, as it is not sustainable over time. The result is soldier burn out, which leads to personnel leaving the infantry, or being left out of battle due to medical restraints. Although the numbers of soldiers within regular force infantry units do not meet the person year (PY) establishment, that number is a misrepresentation of the

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<sup>6</sup> Canada Dept. of National Defence. *Canadian Military Doctrine*. . 2009; 6-1.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.

total number of deployable soldiers as those left out of battle due to medical issues are still counted on army level personnel status reports. All too often western armies since WWII have permitted their infantry to deteriorate numerically until, in the moment of truth, they discover their error. The armies of non-western states have been much less susceptible to this temptation.<sup>8</sup>

7. Tough choices regarding altering force structures, i.e. cutting the number of sections/platoons/companies, are being considered at the unit level. In some cases, cuts have already been made in order to create organizations containing the requisite number of soldiers to perform mandated tasks. Altering battalion force structure or composition is not isolated to recent activities. The majority of the task forces (TF) sent to Afghanistan throughout the early 2000's were built around a specific infantry battalion battle group (BG), with augmentation from another battalion, brigade or division. As an example, TF 1/07 was a 2 RCR BG with Charlie Company augmented from 3 PPCLI. Further, the subsequent TF opted to collapse one of its companies, creating two robust companies containing four platoons each. In both cases, these choices were made to account for manning shortfalls.

8. Although it is not clear why so many soldiers are opting to voluntarily release from the CAF, or conduct an occupational transfer to a new trade, estimates point to a myriad of reasons. Many pre-release interviews indicate that a lack of a clear mission (post-Afghanistan) is a cause for soldiers leaving the Infantry. Other examples site boredom as a reason, as soldiers can spend up to 20 years within the same unit, conducting the same training over and over again. Until recently, on the west coast,

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 167.

economic opportunities were yet a third reason. The argument could also be made that Canada's youth of today are not as robust and lack an element of pride that existed in the past. This is clearly demonstrated during physical training, as in the past pride and a sense of competition compelled soldiers to do their best and perform at the required standard. Today, soldiers tend to be less fit and frequently complain about the tough standards required of an infanteer. As history indicates, current manning trends are not a new phenomenon.

9. The infantry, and the CAF writ large, has experienced mandatory force reductions after major wars, as well as in the 1990s. These reductions were coupled with PY establishment shrinkage as well. Additionally, the phenomenon of low manning (lack of personnel for established PY positions), is also not new, as the Canadian Army faced a manning shortfalls in the past. The 1994 White Paper on defence directed the augmentation of the field force as its authors recognized the need to maintain adequate forces in order to meet and sustain operational requirements. These numbers came in the form of airborne soldiers following the disbandment of the Canadian Airborne Regiment in 1995.<sup>9</sup> What this clearly indicates is that Canada has succumbed to the aforementioned trend of letting its infantry force decline in the past, and continues to do so today. Simply making an attempt to bolster regular force infantry numbers provided a temporary solution; however, it didn't alter the trend, so in as little as 15 years later, the issue again became obvious.

10. Given the trend over the last several decades with regards to a decline in manning, simply bolstering numbers within infantry battalions, as was done in 1995, was not a

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<sup>9</sup> David Pittfield. Is there a Future for the Canadian Light Infantry? *Canadian Defence Quarterly*. 1997; 27(2):10.

permanent answer. According to the former commander of the Canadian Army, Lieutenant-General Devlin (ret), as risks continue to challenge Canada in the future, increased reliance will be placed on the Army to defend Canadian values. To remain effective, the Army must, among other things, continue to adapt.<sup>10</sup> This not only implies changes to operating procedures et al., but changes to recruiting and retention as well. Devlin further stated that in order to address manning levels, “the army will need to explore new recruitment mechanisms, career flexibility, and approaches to retention to remain effective in the ‘army of tomorrow’ environment.”<sup>11</sup> This will do more than simply create a ‘Band-Aid fix’; however, it is only part of the problem. Should the recruiting and enrolment challenge be solved, the issue of retention will still persist.

11. Given cultural changes, and the emergence of the ‘Nintendo generation’ within the army ranks, it is difficult to determine what change is needed in order to solve the retention problem. The notion of ‘train to excite’ has been implemented into unit level planning in response to soldier complaints about traditional mundane tasks (physical training, ranges, general duty tasks and field exercises). It is thought that creating dynamic ranges, varied training exercises, and even adventure training, will re-invigorate soldier interest to remain within the infantry corps. On the contrary, with units facing up to a two thirds cut in annual budgeting, coupled with decreases in ammunition allotments, ‘training to excite’ becomes a significant challenge. Additionally, with very recent unit and sub-unit level deployments to Europe as part NATO training exercises, and to the Middle East in support of the Syrian refugee migration to Canada, it is possible that interest has once again began to elevate. That stated, as these deployments are either still

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<sup>10</sup> Canada Dept. of National Defence. Designing Canada's Army of Tomorrow: A Land Operations 2021 publication. 2011; 3.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.



ongoing, or have recently returned, it is too early to analyze their impact in this respect. Regardless of where retention levels currently rest, “the army’s capacity to effectively conduct operations is a function of its ability to recruit, train and sustain its people.”<sup>12</sup>

12. Given its current manning challenges, the question remains whether the regular force infantry units within the Canadian Army will be able to fulfill its expected role(s) within the future operating environment. It is the contention of this paper’s author that it certainly will, albeit only for a short period of time. There is no doubt that the current state of regular force infantry units see them very well trained and even better equipped. This will undoubtedly set it up for success should a requirement arise to deploy a BG with attachments to fulfill a given task, anywhere within the full spectrum of conflict. The characteristics of a land force are its mobility, agility, modularity, adaptability and flexibility, to name but a few. The Canadian infantry’s current deployment construct sees it possess these characteristics, and by extension, enable it to carry out the function of land power, being, find, fix, strike, and exploit. As alluded to earlier, the critical component missing from the equation is the sustainment piece.

13. Sustaining a deployed force, regardless of whether it is a domestic or international operation, and regardless of where it falls within the spectrum of operations, requires more than rations, bullets and fuel (in the kinetic sense). It likely requires a training cycle paired with a continuous rotation of personnel. Canada can certainly deploy a robust TF based on an infantry unit, for a few rotations. As mentioned earlier, it will take a battalion with infantry augmentation from another unit to deploy a BG. Very quickly, manning levels will present itself as a fatal restraint in sustainability. With infantry units up to 30%

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

below deployable manning levels, their start state sees them combat ineffective.

Borrowing augmentation from another unit leaves the augmenting unit further depleted due to injuries, fatigue, releases etc... When its turn to form the nucleus of the next BG arrives, the issue becomes further compounded. Although reserve augmentation was a valuable tool through the Afghanistan years, Devlin argues that viewing the reserve force as an augmentation mechanism has negative effects on current recruitment trends and does not work towards maintaining a credible defence capability.<sup>13</sup>

## **CONCLUSION**

14. Manning shortfalls within the Canadian Infantry Corps is a serious issue that has persisted for many years. Despite ‘Band-Aid’ fixes in the past, the corps has reached a point where it is no longer able to sustain prolonged operations which fall within the CAF’s three main roles, or the six core functions. CAF doctrine places the infantry as the nucleus of any deployed force yet the army level is seemingly unaware that its regular force infantry units are currently combat ineffective due to, in many cases, up to 30% deployable manning deficiencies. A large reason why manning is low is due to those left out of battle due to medical reasons. There are numerous indicators; however, it isn’t entirely clear why those categorized as ‘deployable’ are opting to re-muster out of the infantry. Regardless, the challenge the CAF will face over the next 10 years will be make itself once again appear as an attractive opportunity to Canada’s youth, in order to recruit enough boots on the ground to meet the CAF’s future demands.

## **RECOMMENDATION**

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

15. Structure change within regular force infantry units is not the answer to solving manning issues. Collapsing sections, platoons and/or companies will certainly bolster the ranks of sister sub-units, but clearly won't solve the retention issue. Within a few years, these structurally depleted units will again be paired with depleted ranks. In accordance with the argument raised by Lieutenant-General Devlin (ret), reliance on reserve augmentation is likewise not the answer. This challenge is one which merits attention and further exploring at the CAF and Canadian Army level, with a view to transforming the army from combat ineffective to a healthy state. It is the recommendation of this paper's author that the first step required in this process is to take the requisite steps to increase recruiting by effectively enticing civilians to join the army. It is also imperative for the army's budget to be drastically increased so money is available for units to 'train to excite', and retain a level of interest in the infantry. Finally, it is essential for Canada to provide a sense of purpose for the CAF, and specifically the infantry. As mentioned previously, this will come in the form of operational deployments. Although these steps may not completely solve the current manning issue facing the infantry corps, it will certainly curb the trend and commence the rank bolstering process.

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