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## IMPROVING CORE STRENGTH - FLEXIBILITY IN THE INFANTRY

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**JCSP 44**

***Exercise Solo Flight***

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Maj Jeremy Hiltz

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## IMPROVING CORE STRENGTH - FLEXIBILITY IN THE INFANTRY

*No plan of operations can look with any certainty beyond the first meeting with the major forces of the enemy. The commander is compelled...to reach decisions on the basis of situations which cannot be predicted.<sup>1</sup>*

- General Field Marshal von Moltke

### INTRODUCTION

The Canadian Armed Forces (CAF), specifically the Canadian Army (CA) has seen an uptick<sup>2</sup> of smaller missions<sup>3</sup> around the world since the withdrawal of CAF members from combat operations in Afghanistan. Subsequently there has been several smaller, company plus sized contributions to NATO missions within Europe and the Middle East. Most recently, there has been a commitment to a UN mission in Mali and it is only logical that the CA will eventually be called upon to contribute there. This in no way discounts all the smaller contributions of niche capabilities around the globe as well as the domestic operations that the CA and greater CAF have always maintained at home.

This being the case, at least for the near future, the appetite for smaller, more task tailored contributions globally seem to be the norm for the current government. In addition, most of the larger CA missions are tasked primarily to either an infantry company or armoured squadron as the core group. With many of these missions being either capacity-building or deterrence

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<sup>1</sup> David (Selwyn David) Evans and Royal United Services Institute for Defence Studies. *War: A Matter of Principles*. Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1997, p 96.

<sup>2</sup> Canada. National Defence and the Canadian Armed Forces. Current Operations – as of May 2, 2014. Last accessed 3 May 2018. <http://www.forces.gc.ca/en/news/article.page?doc=current-operations-as-of-may-2-2014%2Fhvsuxem>.

<sup>3</sup> Canada. National Defence and the Canadian Armed Forces. Current Operations List. Last accessed 3 May 2018. <http://www.forces.gc.ca/en/operations/current-list.page#details-panel-1424977816603-3>.

oriented, it is important to remember that the core skillset or role of the infantry remains the ability to “close with and destroy the enemy.”<sup>4</sup>

Even though this role is very much on the far right side of the spectrum of conflict, the principle is that with a well-trained and combat capable force, the CA can respond to any mission-set along that spectrum. Historically, the ability of the infantry to achieve this was based on several characteristics to include mobility, firepower and flexibility. For the purposes of this paper, it will focus on flexibility as the central theme that enables the infantry, within the combined arms team to be adaptable, agile and ultimately successful in answering the call across the entire spectrum of conflict.

However, systematic centralization of resources, capabilities and decision-making within the Canadian infantry has created the situation where flexibility as a characteristic is no longer achievable at the tactical level. Lacking tactical flexibility will only compound in times of complexity and threaten operational goals. In the operating environment that Canadian soldiers are finding themselves today, both operational and tactical flexibility is critical. Leaders are required to find solutions to increasingly complex situations, yet from a core skillset, are not being enabled to be able to provide flexible tactical solutions for operational and strategic objectives. The lack of this is seemingly creating a highly risk-averse and un-adaptive organisation, clearly the opposite to what is desired in accordance with *Strong, Secure, Engaged: Canada's Defence Policy*<sup>5</sup> (SSE) or even B-GL-310-001/AG-001 *Land Operations 2021*

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<sup>4</sup> Canada. Canadian Army Doctrine and Training Centre and Canada. Dept. of National Defence. *The Infantry Section and Platoon in Operations*. Kingston, Ont: Army Doctrine Centre, Canadian Army Doctrine and Training Centre Headquarters, 2016, p 1-1.

<sup>5</sup> Canada. Dept. of National Defence. *Strong, Secure, Engaged: Canada's Defence Policy*. Ottawa, Ont.: National Defence 2017.

*Adaptive Dispersed Operations: The Force Employment Concept for Canada's Army of Tomorrow*<sup>6</sup>.

As recent as the early 2000's the Canadian infantry battalion was structured around either a mechanised or light construct each with anti-armour, indirect fire, mobility and counter-mobility, reconnaissance and sustainment capabilities resident within.<sup>7</sup> This combination of capabilities permitted the battalion to operated independently for short durations of time.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, all of these capabilities resided at varying degrees down to the platoon and section level. It provided the CA with a very versatile organisation that, when combined with other arms and services, became independent battle groups with a host of capabilities that could be applied to a wide array of problem-sets.

This is arguably no longer the case. Those capabilities have been systematically removed from within the battalions for a variety of reasons. Whether those decisions to remove them were correct is irrelevant to this paper. The discussion here is that without the capabilities resident within the infantry, the flexibility of the lower echelons within the battalions has atrophied to the point where commanders have less and less options available to them to solve their higher commander's problems without seeking the commander's resources or guidance. If the CA wants to maintain a relevant and flexible fighting force, built around a strong core that is able to adapt to a wide variety of problem-sets across the spectrum of conflict, they will first need to rebuild a strong foundation.

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<sup>6</sup> Canada. Dept. of National Defence. *Land Operations 2021: Adaptive Dispersed Operations: A Force Employment Concept for Canada's Army of Tomorrow*. Kingston, Ont: Directorate of Land Concepts and Doctrine, 2007.

<sup>7</sup> Canada. Dept. of National Defence and Canada. *The Infantry Battalion in Battle*. Vol. 1. Ottawa: Issued on the authority of the Chief of the Defence Staff, Dept. of National Defence, 1992, p 2-3-1 – 2B-1/2B-2

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p 1-3-2.

In order to prove the above thesis, this paper will examine two strata of flexibility: cognitive or command and structural or organisational. This will be looked at with an understanding of operational versus tactical flexibility as both must play a role in the CA providing flexible responses. Prior to this, it is important to define flexibility. In simple terms, flexibility is the "...ability to adjust or adapt to change."<sup>9</sup> More specifically, it is best understood within a military context as a form of self-sufficiency whereby there is an ability to adapt to a wide array of tasks within complex operating environments across the spectrum of conflict. When looking at flexibility from an organisational perspective, it can be subdivided into four areas. The areas are: "...conceptual and doctrinal; organisational and technological; command and cognitive; fast learning and rapid circulation of lessons."<sup>10</sup> The scope of this paper will not examine the doctrinal or the learning area as these areas are better addressed across the CAF vice simply within the infantry.

First, it will examine the cognitive or command and control (C2) domain, specifically the ability of commanders at all levels to adapt to changing situations. Within this stratum, there are two components. First, the commander's actual cognitive capacity. Given the extreme level of diversity between one commander to the next, this paper will briefly discuss this component only to reinforce that commanders must be flexible from a cognitive standpoint. The second component is the C2 structure and ultimately the ability to make decisions in a timely fashion. This will be the primary focus of this argument in that a removal of available options lower down has created a less streamlined decision-making process throughout.

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<sup>9</sup> Canada. Government of Canada. Termium Plus: The Government of Canada's terminology and linguistic data bank. Last accessed 1 May 2018. [http://www.btb.termiumplus.gc.ca/tpv2alpha/alpha-eng.html?lang=eng&i=1&srchtxt=FLEXIBILITY&index=alt&codom2nd\\_wet=EB#resultrecs](http://www.btb.termiumplus.gc.ca/tpv2alpha/alpha-eng.html?lang=eng&i=1&srchtxt=FLEXIBILITY&index=alt&codom2nd_wet=EB#resultrecs).

<sup>10</sup> Meir Finkel and Moshe Tlamim. *On Flexibility: Recovery from Technological and Doctrinal Surprise on the Battlefield*. Stanford, California: Stanford Security Studies, 2011, p 53.

Second, this paper will examine the structural or organisational stratum. From this perspective, the argument will explore the removal of the previously mentioned capabilities from within the organisation by replacing them with a centralized combined-arms solution. It will be shown that while the final answer to overall flexibility is the ability of the CAF to maintain a joint or combined arms approach to problem solving, it is crucial to maintain combat capabilities throughout the organisation and not centralize them into potentially unresponsive stovepipes.

## **COGNITIVE AND C2**

As stated earlier, the discussion on cognitive ability of commanders will only be briefly discussed as it is readily apparent that there is consensus across the board that if flexibility is to be achieved, commanders must possess flexibility of thought. Throughout CA doctrine, the recipe is simple, commanders must have "...experience, flexibility, will, determination and above all, ...decisiveness in the face of the time-uncertainty challenge."<sup>11</sup> The expectation is that they are "...required to exercise judgement and flexibility in modifying plans to meet changed circumstances, taking advantage of fleeting chances or shifting a point of emphasis."<sup>12</sup>

Strongly linked to a commander's cognitive abilities are the C2 capabilities fielded by the force. It is not the intent of this paper to delve into the physical infrastructure and technology employed to support C2, however it will focus on the theoretical. As such, there are basically two forms upon which a C2 structure can be built, centralized versus decentralized. The CA attempts to teach a decentralization of C2 or mission command. In this way, operational commanders can more easily direct tactical actions based on strategic guidance. The infantry is

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<sup>11</sup> Canada. Dept. of National Defence. *Command in Land Operations* (English). Ottawa: National Defence Headquarters, 2007, p 1-7

<sup>12</sup> David Evans. *War: A Matter of Principles*, p 96.

no different. Retention of decision-making at the highest of levels, or centralized, will not permit flexibility of action, especially in conflict zones where the lines of communications are often strained within "...high-speed, rapidly changing environments that have become increasingly diverse, complex, and multinational in nature."<sup>13</sup>

Application of the mission command C2 structure "...promotes decentralized decision-making, freedom and speed of action, and initiative."<sup>14</sup> The theory behind this is that it will provide flexible C2 such that it attains "...an autonomous responsiveness capacity of the different operational units of the organization and the different levels of command in the course of the military operation."<sup>15</sup> The reality for the infantry is much more complex. At the operational level, commanders are generally provided with combined arms groupings, however the critical enablers that are being attached to the units are always limited in scope generally as a result of political force size constraints or actual availability. The ability for the commander to apportion the capabilities such as indirect fire, anti-armour, engineer support, reconnaissance or sustainment across the entirety of the organisation is generally limited by pure numbers and specific enabler organisational constraints.

It is the lack of these capabilities internal to the infantry that is challenging the ability to achieve flexibility. In the past, units such as armour, artillery and engineers were considered brigade or divisional assets and they were controlled by high tactical or operational commanders. The effects of prioritisation of these vital capabilities to the main effort was less of an impact due to the former ability of the infantry to sustain itself decentralized even down to the company and

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<sup>13</sup> Anne Lise Bjørnstad and Frederick M.J. Lichacz. "Organizational Flexibility from a Network Organizational Perspective." *Leadership & Organization Development Journal* 34, no. 8 (2013), p 764.

<sup>14</sup> Canada. *Command in Land Operations*, p 2-4

<sup>15</sup> Dan Horowitz. "Flexible Responsiveness and Military Strategy: The Case of the Israeli Army." *Policy Sciences* 1, no. 2 (1970), p 193.

platoon level with its own resident limited capabilities. This new model of centralization of these capabilities without the integral infantry capabilities is removing resources and options at the lower levels. Commanders at the lower levels no longer have command of those resources and therefore are unable to remain flexible in their decision-making processes unless they have been assigned them. This requires them to seek solutions from their higher command vice solving the problems at their levels, thus expanding the time for action. Essentially, leaders in the infantry at the lower levels have become less of a commander and more of a manager.

The alternative to this can be looked at through an economic model where many businesses seek centralization to achieve a level of efficiency in the expenditure of scarce resources. The CA has undergone several initiatives to achieve efficiencies in order to return resources back to the center. This makes sense from an economic perspective, however, in spite of this, "...the efficiency of a [business], in the narrow technical sense associated with productivity, does not guarantee its success in the market."<sup>16</sup>

After examining a case study on the *Impact and Adoption of Flexibility in a Rigid and Centralized Distribution Network*<sup>17</sup> of a global manufacturing company, the results, when compared to a tactical environment in which an infantry organisation will find itself is telling. Specifically, "the high priority on economies of scale has created initiatives for sub-optimized decisions..."<sup>18</sup> at the lower levels of command. Additionally, the company examined had a "...strong centralization of capabilities which impedes local responsiveness."<sup>19</sup> One of the solutions presented in this study was to "increase the capabilities in the local units...[and] enable

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* p 193.

<sup>17</sup> Anton Söderberg and Alexander Wallenberg. "Impact and Adoption of Flexibility in a Rigid and Centralized Distribution Network: A Case Study on a Global Manufacturing Company." (2016).

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* p 51.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* p 52.

[them] to better handle diversified and complex tasks.”<sup>20</sup> Seemingly, this would be the decision-making model of the former infantry units vice the current ones.

## **STRUCTURAL AND ORGANISATIONAL**

With decision-making abilities residing higher up the chain of command due to the lack of flexibility in the lower echelons of the infantry, the argument for a structural or organisational construct to embrace flexibility is critical. There are several ways to look at the challenge of building a flexible organisation. The first way to examine this is to look at it from the relationship between the basic elements such as firepower and manoeuvre, fighting echelon versus the supporting echelon, or the overall offensive versus defensive capabilities of the force. Simply put, this is balance. While important, these relationships reside more in the CA as a whole and are better viewed when looking at it from a joint perspective vice simply within the infantry. As such, this paper will not discuss balance except to support the need for it.

The second option would be to look at the force built around physical weapons themselves. While tools are important and the capabilities presented by a specific tool may well set the conditions for specific structures, the discussion on which weapons to acquire rests clearly at the highest of levels and is more of a procurement issue. The infantry must have input into the discussion but ultimately, the decisions to acquire particular weapons capabilities will reside with the political realm and therefore not be discussed here.

Finally, the third option to look at would be the organisation of the physical units within the greater organisation. Specifically, the “...weapons diversity in units and the level where

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* p. 53.

combined arms are employed.”<sup>21</sup> Ultimately, the challenge that is posed by examining the organisational structure from this perspective is merely a discussion of redundancy. Redundancy is defined as “the deliberate duplication of parts in a system so that its function is not impaired in the event of a malfunction or failure.”<sup>22</sup>

From a flexibility standpoint, an organisation must have some form of redundancy if it is expected to adapt to a changing situation and ultimately survive. For the military, this is crucial as the environment in which the military works, no matter where it falls on the spectrum of conflict is fraught with uncertainty. “Operations in the future will be widespread and noncontiguous in nature.”<sup>23</sup>

With the infantry generally providing the core organization in the majority of major CA operations, it is critical that they be able to achieve flexibility through redundancy.

According to the redundancy principle, when a major operational problem arises (such as a need to confront tanks or planes) and the danger exists that the enemy will make a supreme effort to neutralize any countermeasures, then the side facing the danger must develop a few weapons systems, each based on another working principle. Thus, if one weapon is countervailed, for whatever reason, another weapon can still be employed to answer the operational challenge.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Meir Finkel and Moshe Tlamim. *On Flexibility*, p 73.

<sup>22</sup> Oxford English Dictionary. Last accessed 4 May 2018.  
<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/160537?redirectedFrom=redundancy#eid>

<sup>23</sup> Michael A. Vane, Robert M. Toguchi, and Institute of Land Warfare (Association of the United States Army). *The Enduring Relevance of Landpower: Flexibility and Adaptability for Joint Campaigns*. Vol. no. 44. Arlington, VA: Institute of Land Warfare, 2003, p 13.

<sup>24</sup> Meir Finkel and Moshe Tlamim. *On Flexibility*, p 88-89.

In its current state, the infantry only possesses relatively limited capabilities that the combined arms model being employed attempts to offset. The solution provided by the institution to the lack of redundancy within the infantry is by building combined-arms groupings at the battlegroup level or higher. The theory that is being employed here is one in which the military force “consists of the synchronized or simultaneous use of several operational functions...to have greater effect upon the enemy than the independent implementation of each of these functions.”<sup>25</sup> Each of the companies are to be capable of forming combat team groupings with the additional enablers, however the reality is that there is never enough to go around. Ultimately, the ability of the commander to allocate these critical capabilities is severely restricted by numbers and they must prioritise them to where they can have the most impact.

The answer to this shortage of capabilities in the combined arms model is twofold. One, acquire enough enablers to go around such that there is no need to prioritise because all elements have everything that they could possibly need, which would be significantly costlier. Or, the alternative would be to reintroduce limited redundancy within the core elements, the infantry, such that they can buy time for commanders to make decisions, thus bending with or absorbing the enemy action vice breaking. “Organizational diversity at the unit and weapon levels is based on the understanding that ‘super weapons’, as good as they can be, will eventually be countered, and that their battlefield effects will have to be complemented by other weapons.”<sup>26</sup> Therefore, the logical solution would be to provide the infantry with enough redundant capacity such as internal indirect fire, anti-armour, mobility and counter-mobility support, reconnaissance and service support such that they can achieve real self-reliance for brief periods of time.

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<sup>25</sup> Julian Lindley-French, Yves Boyer, Oxford Handbooks Online, Oxford ebook, and Oxford University Press. *The Oxford Handbook of War*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012, p 417 – 418.

<sup>26</sup> Meir Finkel. "Flexible Force Structure: A Flexibility Oriented Force Design and Development Process for Israel." *Israel Affairs* 12, no. 4 (2006), p 793.

The most likely rationale behind this systematic reduction of capabilities within the infantry is due to political and economical pressures. More recently, the additional pressures brought about by the Department of National Defence's Strategic Review and Deficit Reduction Action Plan has done little to remedy these problems. Efficiency became the goal and the centralization of many capabilities and resources became the answer. The infantry was not immune to this and as indicated above, many of the capabilities that used to be resident within the infantry were removed and replaced by the periodic creation of combined arms groupings. For example, the infantry used to possess an Assault Pioneer capability that would provide limited engineering capabilities at the tactical level. By removing this, the burden now falls to the engineering branch to provide both tactical and operational level support. When prioritised, tactical flexibility becomes the last to be addressed. Centralization does not work very well for combat units. On the other hand, there is much evidence out there to prove that "...decentralizing processes and flattening the hierarchies may contribute to higher levels of organizational flexibility in military organizations."<sup>27</sup>

If flexibility is the goal, at either the operational or tactical level, then the organisational structure needs to reflect this. Notwithstanding any greater challenges across the CA, the infantry must have internal redundancy in order to enable commanders to make decisions. Centralization might work in some economic models but they seldom work well the closer to the conflict one gets. The resultant decision-making chain is therefore lengthened due to this lack of inherent flexibility. There is not doubt that combined arms are the answer to future conflicts, however the reality is that there will never be enough to go around and the entire force requires redundancy.

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<sup>27</sup> Anne Lise Bjørnstad and Frederick M.J. Lichacz. "Organizational Flexibility from a Network Organizational Perspective.", p 779.

## CONCLUSION

With the world seemingly getting more complex, military organisations must be more adaptable so that they can provide viable solutions to the political demands of their nation. Flexibility is paramount to this adaptability. This paper started out to prove that, for the infantry, systematic centralization of resources and capabilities was creating an environment where decision-making and tactical flexibility are at risk. This will not be something that can be reversed immediately, however, with time and effort the infantry can regain its flexibility.

In order to achieve this, the CAF should become cognizant of the impacts of centralization on the infantry. While it takes an entire team effort in the missions the CAF conducts today, the central component of most of the larger missions is built around the infantry. Limiting the capabilities within the infantry puts the entire mission at risk. From the decision-making and C2 perspective, the leaders are present, but the CAF just needs to empower them down to the lowest levels with the resources and capabilities that will permit them to be as flexible as possible. By restricting or centralizing resources and ultimately providing critical capabilities that are only one deep, commanders will continue to have to seek guidance and authorization from the higher echelons, thus making the C2 structure less flexible.

The solution is seemingly to return many of the previously removed capabilities back into the infantry. Providing them with limited internal indirect fire, anti-armour, mobility and counter-mobility, reconnaissance and sustainment capabilities will only strengthen the whole organisation. That way, when missions are decided upon, the operational commanders will have flexible combined arms teams assigned to them. With this redundancy built in across the board, commanders at all levels will be given back the decision-making capacity and they can now prioritise the more critical enablers to where and when it is needed most without having to seek

solutions from higher. All the while knowing that they are in command of a “...highly trained, versatile and well-equipped combat forces [that] can rapidly adapt to humanitarian assistance, disaster relief or peace operations.”<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Canada. Dept. of National Defence. Strong, Secure, Engaged, p 36.

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