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THE HOLLOW BATTALION: A STRUGGLE FOR PLATOON AND SECTION COHESION

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I am sure that not numbers or strength bring victory in war, but whichever army goes into battle stronger in soul, their enemies cannot withstand them.¹

- Greek Military Leader Xenophon (434-355 B.C.), *Fighting Spirit*

AIM

1. The aim of this service paper is to highlight a seemingly overlooked problem within infantry battalions, specifically that the constant state of change to internal organizational structures and competing demands on critical leadership at the section and platoon level is creating a lack of cohesion within the unit. Simply put, future deployments will be combined, often joint in nature, and ultimately built using a plug a play method during the road to high readiness (RtHR) in accordance with the managed readiness plan (MRP). As such, it is absolutely critical that the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) build a strong foundation for operational deployments should the future operating environment continue to trend towards adaptive dispersed operations against adversaries who are increasingly more willing to adopt hybrid warfare tactics and strategies.

INTRODUCTION

2. Our current doctrine illustrates an infantry battalion with a personnel strength of approximately 1,000 personnel.² The reality of today is that, on paper the number for force employment (FE) is closer to 820. In contrast, if the battalion is in force generation (FG), then

¹ Jasen J. Castillo. *Endurance and War: The National Sources of Military Cohesion*. Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2014, 17.

² Department of National Defence. *The Infantry Battalion in Battle*. Vol. 1. Ottawa: Issued on the authority of the Chief of the Defence Staff, Department of National Defence, 1992.

the total numbers of personnel on paper for a battalion is 593.³ It is not the scope of this paper to examine any challenges that may face the combat support and combat service support personnel within the battalion. Nor is it the intent to dig deeply into specific personnel or leadership challenges of any one battalion, but rather to expand generally on this problem to encourage discussion and thought.

3. First, in order to illustrate the premise that cohesion is lacking, this paper will establish an understanding of what cohesion is. Second, the importance of cohesion in a military organization will be examined through the use of a variety of reference materials to demonstrate the negative relationship that the reality on the ground has on the ability of small-units to achieve cohesion. Finally, using the 2nd Battalion, The Royal Canadian Regiment (2 RCR) as an example, a limited analysis of data will be presented from Monitor Mass (MM) and the Canadian Forces Taskings, Plans and Operations (CFTPO) software for the 2016 – 2017 fiscal year (FY). This data, plus the experiences of the author as a former Operations Officer (Ops O) and Officer Commanding (OC) India Company within 2 RCR will be used to frame the demands on the ground for the section and platoon leaders.

DISCUSSION

4. Ultimately, the goal of the CAF is to defend Canada and promote Canadian values abroad and the government will decide what missions they want the CAF to achieve. The most recent guidance is the Strong, Secure and Engaged (SSE) policy that was delivered in 2017. In it, it is clear what the defence priorities for the next 20 years are and the intent is a CAF strong in

³ Department of National Defence, Force 2013 – Master Implementation Directive Distribution. Ottawa: Directorate Land Force Development, 11 July 2011, G-2/4 – G-4/4.

Canada, secure in North America and Engaged worldwide.⁴ In order to achieve this, Canada will need “...an agile, multi-purpose, combat-ready military, operated by highly trained, well-equipped women and men.”⁵ This is further reiterated in the army’s training doctrine, *Training for Land Operations*.

5. While this policy is wide-ranging in possible missions both domestically and internationally, the primary focus is on building combat-ready forces that are able to task tailor their capabilities across the spectrum of operations.⁶ This requires units to master a wide variety of areas of development and transformation before they are able to successfully complete missions. Those areas are: “task proficiency, teamwork, confidence, cohesion, and distributed leadership.”⁷ While cohesion is only one element of this complex challenge of taking a wide variety of Canadians into an organization and unifying them towards one purpose, it is strongly believed to be the glue that holds units together in times of stress.

6. Military cohesion has intrigued social scientists for many years and when looked at through the lens of the military, “the ability of soldiers to create and sustain group solidarity in combat is a specific example of the fundamental phenomenon of human social cooperation.”⁸ Morale is often considered linked to cohesion. Field-Marshal Montgomery summarized it as “the

⁴ Department of National Defence and Canada. *Strong, Secure, Engaged: Canada's Defence Policy*. Ottawa: National Defence, 2017, 8.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁶ Department of National Defence. *Training for Land Operations*. Ottawa: National Defence, 2010, 2-1 – 2-3.

⁷ Department of National Defence, *Leadership in the Canadian Forces: Conceptual Foundations* Ottawa: Canadian Defence Academy – Canadian Forces Leadership Institute, 2005, 79.

⁸ Anthony King. *Frontline: Combat and Cohesion in Twenty-First Century*. 1st ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015, 6.

morale of the soldier is the greatest single factor in war.”⁹ Field-Marshal Slim stated that “High morale means that every individual in a group will work – or fight – and, if needed, will give his last ounce of effort in its service.”¹⁰ It is the ability to take individual morale and bond several individuals together into a cohesive small-unit so that they can deliver unified effects on the battlefield, either lethal or non-kinetic. The obvious next step is to bond multiple small-units together to create even greater capacity at the sub-unit, unit, brigade, etc.

7. Even though morale is clearly important and the CAF has several methods to assess the morale of its members, cohesion is something less definitive and seemingly something that is overlooked or disregarded for those units that are not on deployment. It is almost as if the fact that organizational structures have already established these groupings of small-units together, that cohesion is naturally there. With morale being a mental or emotional state towards the particular task being completed, cohesion is the element that unifies the group inward and ultimately towards the accomplishment of a common goal. The CAF defines cohesion as “the degree to which group members feel a sense of attachment and loyalty to their group. Peer cohesion, or mutual loyalty among peers, is sometimes distinguished from hierarchical cohesion, mutual loyalty between superiors and subordinates.”¹¹

8. Additionally, having good cohesion within a unit has possible mental health ramifications. Based on research completed in the United States, it is said that “...as cohesion increased, so did resilience, confidence managing reactions to stress, and positive states of

⁹ Frank Richardson. *Fighting Spirit: A Study of Psychological Factors in War*. London: Cooper, 1978, 1.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹¹ Department of National Defence, *Leadership in the Canadian Forces: Conceptual Foundations*, 129.

mind.”¹² Both the United Kingdom and Australia have conducted studies examining the linkages between unit cohesion and mental health and came to the same conclusion that “unit cohesion was associated with lower levels of probable PTSD and common mental disorder...”¹³ in soldiers who were deployed.

9. With many benefits, understanding how to create cohesion, the CAFs leadership doctrine, specifically *Leadership in the Canadian Forces: Conceptual Foundations* provides an overview of what is expected from leadership. A significant part of being able to create cohesion is the ability of leaders to adhere to the CAF Principles of Leadership, such as: “know your subordinates and promote their welfare; train your subordinates as a team and employ them up to their capabilities; and keep your personnel informed of the mission, the changing situation, and the overall picture.”¹⁴

10. The functional responsibilities are laid out and major leadership functions important to both leading the people and the institution all have aspects critical to fostering cohesion within each effectiveness dimension. It is the ability of a leader to use major leadership functions within the effectiveness dimensions of mission success, internal integration, member well-being and commitment, internal integration, and military ethos that help leaders “...develop and improve individual, group, and organizational capabilities that contribute to performance.”¹⁵

¹² Jason Williams, Janice M. Brown, Robert M. Bray, Erin M. Anderson Goodell, Kristine Rae Olmsted, and Amy B. Adler. "Unit Cohesion, Resilience, and Mental Health of Soldiers in Basic Combat Training." *Military Psychology* 28, no. 4 (2016), 246.

¹³ J Du Preez, J. Sundin, S. Wessely, and N. T. Fear. "Unit Cohesion and Mental Health in the UK Armed Forces." *Occupational Medicine* 62, no. 1 (2012), 50.

¹⁴ Department of National Defence, *Leadership in the Canadian Forces: Conceptual Foundations*, 55.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 50.

11. In an attempt to assess cohesion in an army, the assessment must consider the following areas:

the overall organizational structure, which includes the party, army, or other sources of goals, policy, and support; the “human element” or the small intimate groups that control and motivate soldiers through their norms; and the influence of the leader on the small group and the resulting commitment of the individual soldier toward achieving army goals.¹⁶

12. Arguably, the level at which all three of these elements can be found is at the platoon and section.¹⁷ It is here that the effects of the organizational structure are intimately felt by soldiers and it is at this point where leaders have the closest ties with their direct subordinates, thus it is where cohesion begins. In addition, it is also believed that “cohesion is inverse to size”¹⁸ in that with a larger force, the less concrete cohesion becomes. So, it is apparent that in order to create cohesive sub-units to be able to integrate into joint and combined forces selected for operational deployments, the foundation must be at the section and platoon level and protecting those organizations should be paramount.

13. In 2 RCR, during the 2016/17 FY, the battalion received 62 separate tasks to support individual training (IT) from the Infantry School, the Canadian Army Advanced Warfare Center (CAAWC) and Division Training Centers. These tasks translate into 3,194 personnel days with

¹⁶ William Darryl Henderson. *Cohesion: The Human Element in Combat: Leadership and Societal Influence in the Armies of the Soviet Union, the United States, North Vietnam and Israel*. Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 1985, 9.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 12.

an average task duration of 52 days. If the assumption is made that the battalion is fully manned to 593 personnel, in a mechanised battalion, only approximately 475 of those are infantrymen or infantry officers.¹⁹ Finally, it is also important to remember that there are also an undetermined number of personnel who are on temporary and permanent medical categories, some of whom are non-deployable or medically restricted.

14. Obviously, this does not account for all tasks filled by 2 RCR, but does highlight the infantry only tasks. In terms of additional tasks, these range from national level task to simply connecting with Canadians in the local areas. The total tasks numbered approximately 250 plus. When assessing the actual total days available to section and platoon leaders, the reality is that they had 63 days of approximately 202 total days (weekends and leave days removed) to develop cohesion in a training environment. That also depended on if they were actually available during each particular training event. Of the 63 planned training days, only 15 days are specifically allocated for section and platoon collective training.²⁰ It should be noted that this was during the RtHR when 2 Canadian Mechanised Brigade Group (2CMBG) stood up Task Force TOMAHAWK (TFTH).

15. In addition to all exterior tasks given, the battalion also had to conduct its own internal training cycles. With personnel away on exterior taskings, predominately section and platoon leadership at the MCpl to WO ranks, 2 RCR had to internally move the remaining leadership around in order to conduct its own IT. Concurrently, the battalion is required to complete

¹⁹ Major Jesse van Eijk. Summary of Individual Training (IT) Institution Tasks to Battalions. Research compiled from Monitor Mass (MM) and Canadian Forces Taskings, Plans and Operations (CFTPO). Received 1 February 2018.

²⁰ Major Jeremy Hiltz. Ops O 2 RCR - Analysis of original 2 RCR Op Plan Calendar for 2016/17. Mar 2016.

necessary gateway training in order to achieve the progressive training requirements for the RtHR. This continuous shuffling of personnel and internal prioritisation of demands created a significant amount of stress on the soldiers and leaders of the battalion.

16. To further illustrate the strain on the section and platoon, India Company deployed to Wainwright, Alberta on Exercise RUGGED BEAR and MAPLE RESOLVE 17 as part of TFTH on the RtHR. The final organizational structure was fluid throughout but on day one of the exercise, the three platoons consisted of a total of 83 personnel. Of those, 61 were Corporals (Cpl) and Privates (Pte). Across the three platoons, there were 11 Master-Corporals (MCpl), 4 Sergeants (Sgt) and 3 Warrant Officers (WO). The majority of the MCpls were newly promoted and only one of the Sgts was actually employed as Section Commander with the remainder in Light Armoured Vehicle Sgt positions. In contrast, what should have been deployed was 3 WOs, 12 Sgts, 12 MCpls and 66 Cpls and Ptes for a total of 96 personnel including the platoon commanders. Furthermore, due to the lack of key leadership, the majority of personnel were moved up one or two levels within the platoon structures and the company and platoon weapons detachments were essentially non-existent.²¹

17. Unfortunately, this problem is not new. In 1984, an occupational analysis was completed for the infantry, armoured and artillery. The analysis spanned from September 1981 until April 1983 and its purpose was to “assess the efficacy of the individual trades and recommend/propose either the maintenance of the ‘status quo’ or that trade structure changes be made to better meet

²¹ Major Jeremy Hiltz. OC India Company: Analysis of original India Company ORBAT. March 2017.

the needs of the Army.”²² As a result of the study, the board found that within the infantry battalions, “50 percent of those responding to the Platoon 2ICs job title were not WOs but Sgts and MCpls...in the case of Section Commander and Section 2IC it was even worse at 70 and 71 percent being under ranked respectively.”²³

CONCLUSION

18. It is the primary argument of this paper that the competing demands on infantry units are what is creating poor conditions for the development of small-unit cohesion. It is only selected for an operational deployment that units are able to protect some of their personnel from additional tasks and focus on building the team. In many cases today, even brigades in the RtHR still have to fulfill army tasks with personnel preparing to deploy. This does little to reinforce morale and foster cohesion in the adjacent units who must offset the demand by taking on more and the soldiers at all levels see their section, platoon and company structure disintegrate to meet the demands. The CAF doctrine even states that “once teams and sub-units have formed a sense of unity and collective esprit, experience indicates that it is important to keep them reasonably intact and to minimize personnel turnover in order to maintain cohesion.”²⁴

19. If infantry battalions are required to continue with the status quo approach to achieving IT and FG through a virtual “robbing Peter to pay Paul”, then the levels of cohesion within the units will continue to slip. Morale of soldiers and cohesion of the ad hoc organizations left behind from missions where their leadership has deployed or those that are not on the

²² C. L. Hearnden, F. C. Ayers, R. L. Powley, and Canada. Dept. of National Defence. Directorate of Military Occupational Structures. *Occupational Analysis of the Combat Arms Trades MOCs 011, 021 and 031*. Ottawa: Directorate of Military Occupational Structures, Dept. of National Defence, 1984, 13.

²³ *Ibid.*, 5-58.

²⁴ Department of National Defence, *Leadership in the Canadian Forces: Conceptual Foundations*, 79.

deployment cycle in accordance with MRP will continue to drop. However, it cannot go without saying that there needs to be balance as “...more of a good thing is not always better. In fact, too much emphasis on any single value dimension (e.g., mission accomplishment, efficiency, cohesion, obedience, and so on) can be decidedly counter-productive.”²⁵ Leadership must find a more effective way to share the competing priorities in order to better protect junior, and developing, leadership so that small-unit cohesion can be better achieved.

20. It is this very attachment and loyalty that is at question in this paper. There is no doubt that while on operations, the bonds that are created within units are strong, however, this generally depends on many factors such as leadership, levels of hardship and stress, clarity of purpose, etc. The real challenge to cohesion is when units are at home, have no unifying mission and have a significant amount of competing demands on their personnel. Cohesion is critical to success on future missions and ultimately the relevance of the CAF to the Canadian public.

RECOMMENDATION

21. Organizational structure should be established as early as possible in the RtHR. Once known that the Battalion has been selected for a specific mission, the organization needs for reorganize to as close the final structure as possible. This way, even if tasks or career courses come up, leadership and their respective soldiers know who is in their organization and they can begin to have faith that any future changes will be minimal. This will allow them to develop bonds with their subordinates and understand each of their particular situations. This will strengthen the link all the way to the battalion leadership and the chain of command will have confidence that soldiers are being looked after.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 25.

22. Where possible, protection of section and platoon integrity during the reconstitution and support phase of the MRP so as to create the conditions for quick and efficient development of cohesion within the infantry. Thus, combined arms teams can come together sooner and begin training for specified missions. If tasks come up, the institutional army should strive to request collective vice individual augmentation. For example, it would be much better to the section integrity if the entire section were to be used together. That way, even if a section gets broken up at points in the task, the original structure is nearby.

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