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Alcohol Culture in the Canadian Armed Forces: An Opportunity for Change

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Alcohol Culture in the Canadian Armed Forces: An Opportunity for Change

Introduction

The Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) is amidst a generational change not seen since arguably the 1990s. The External Review into Sexual Misconduct and Sexual Harassment in the CAF, better known as the Deschamps Report, was released in April 2015 and highlighted the absolute need for culture change within the Canadian Military.

Former Supreme Court of Canada, Justice Marie Deschamps, led the External Review Authority (ERA) which uncovered findings that can easily be defined as horrendous, findings that have led CAF leadership to taking an active role in implementing culture change. To quote the report verbatim:

the ERA's consultations revealed a sexualized environment in the CAF, particularly among recruits and non-commissioned members, characterized by the frequent use of swear words and highly degrading expressions that reference women's bodies, sexual jokes, innuendos, discriminatory comments with respect to the abilities of women, and unwelcome sexual touching. Cumulatively, such conduct creates an environment that is hostile to women and LGBTQ members, and is conducive to more serious incidents of sexual harassment and assault.¹

The report does an excellent job in highlighting the undercurrents of CAF culture that must change; CAF leadership has taken strides towards rectifying current problems through a myriad of programs. However, there are aspects of the CAF culture that must be further explored if the organization truly wishes to transform.²

¹ Marie Deschamps (Canada), External Review Authority, External Review into Sexual Misconduct and Sexual Harassment in the Canadian Armed Forces – Culture of the CAF, (Canada, 27 March 2015), ii.

² Maya Eichler, "Learning from the Deschamps Report: why military and Veteran researchers ought to pay attention to gender." *Journal of Military, Veteran and Family Health*, 2016, 1. While there are no direct quotes, after having read Maya Eichler's article, there are some similarities to the introduction. The author wanted to highlight the influence.

The attitude towards alcohol is an aspect of CAF culture that has warranted, to date, little discussion although it remains a bastion of both CAF identity and internal problems. To fundamentally change its overall culture, culture change must also occur at the mess, sanctioned activities, and at Training Establishments (TE). This paper examines how the CAF should explore the role of alcohol within its customs and traditions, specifically analyzing the future of the ‘mess philosophy’ and how taking an active role in the current alcohol culture can protect members in the future. First a discussion of *wicked* problems³ is explored, followed by an analysis of the current available sexual harassment / sexual assault data as it pertains to the CAF. Finally, two distinct recommendations to Canadian Military leadership are offered.

Theory Behind Complex Issues

The idea of a *wicked problem* was, arguably, not very prolific in the CAF’s vocabulary until a short time ago. Now, the notion of a *wicked problem* appears to be common knowledge within CAF leadership.⁴ Understanding that fundamentally changing overall CAF culture is indeed a wicked problem, one must understand this concept before data analysis and recommendations can be presented.

A *wicked problem* was first portrayed by Rittel and Webber (1973)⁵ where they argued that a certain type of problem tends to not be straightforward or exacting, not an answer to a math question, but an issue that has no specific *clarifying traits*.⁶ They further contend that “the

³ The concept of a *wicked problem* is discussed within the methodology section.

⁴ The author attended the 1 Canadian Air Division Commander’s Combined Training Session in May 2020, which includes virtually all RCAF Wing Commanders and Wing Chief Warrant Officers. Both groups referred to the idea of a *wicked problem* on numerous occasions.

⁵ There is a contention that Rittel did not introduce the idea of the *wicked problem*, but it was in fact Churchman (1967), this paper does not discuss this academic argument.

⁶ Horst Rittel and Melvin M. Webber, "Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning." *Policy Sciences* 4, no. 2 (Jun 01, 1973): 160.

kinds of problems that planners deal with – societal problems – are inherently different from the problems that scientists and perhaps some classes of engineers deal with[, as] planning problems are inherently wicked.”⁷

The role of alcohol within the context of the CAF’s social paradigm is undeniably a wicked problem. It is the right of our members to drink, within the confines of the law, and over hundreds of years, alcohol has cemented its place as a ‘social lubricant’ and engrained within mess culture.

A wicked problem requires complex recommendations. Before those recommendations are proposed, understanding that there is a problem associated with mess culture and TEs must be examined. The following discussion highlights how alcohol is prevalent in cases of sexual harassment and sexual assault within the CAF.

Discussion

The use of alcohol is prolific in CAF culture, where over 95% of its members were involved in its consumption alcohol at least once throughout the past year.⁸ “While the majority of individuals drink moderately, alcohol use has been linked to many health and social concerns in our society.”⁹ This statistic serves as a launching point for discussion surrounding alcohol use and sexual harassment / sexual assault within the Canadian Military. The Deschamps report highlights the linkage between alcohol and sexual assault by stating that:

the use and abuse of alcohol by CAF members appears to be one of the most significant contributors to sexual assault. While the consumption of alcohol is not in and of itself

⁷ Horst Rittel and Melvin M. Webber, "Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning." *Policy Sciences* 4, no. 2 (Jun 01, 1973): 160.

⁸ Government of Canada, “Alcohol,” March 22, 2019, <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/services/benefits-military/health-support/staying-healthy-active/addiction/alcohol.html>. Resultantly, this 95% data description is a few years old.

⁹ Ibid.

problematic, and may have some benefits in terms of enhancing esprit de corps, the ERA heard repeatedly from members that the excessive consumption of alcohol, which significantly lowers social inhibitions, made the chance of sexual harassment or sexual assault more likely to occur.¹⁰

It is an interesting statement from the Deschamps report. On one hand, the statement acknowledges that alcohol is a ‘significant contributor’ to sexual assault, on the other hand, it argues that alcohol “is not in and of itself problematic”¹¹ and emphasises its benefits.

Despite the report’s unintended consequences of putting alcohol in a positive light, there are societal issues towards liquor,¹² and drinking continuously remains a staple within the social construct of CAF culture. Rankin (2018) in her doctoral thesis argues that:

despite changes in societal norms regarding alcohol consumption, most militaries—including the CAF—have been slow to change policies and common practices involving alcohol consumption in the work environment in both on- and off-duty hours. Although alcohol consumption at work, during working hours, and on operational deployments has changed over the years within the CAF as a reflection of Canadian society, some of these changes have only occurred in recent years. ... Explanations for why the CAF was slower in changing alcohol consumption policies can be better understood when the military culture, in relation to alcohol consumption, is considered.¹³

While the CAF has made strides in recent years, such as banning alcohol (for the most part) in Afghanistan and on Her Majesty’s Ships, the influence of the alcohol sub-culture persists.

“Studies have illustrated that the established drinking culture; ease of availability; permissive attitudes toward alcohol consumption before, during, and after work; ..., or leave following a deployment”¹⁴ can lead to a problematic context surrounding drinking.

So how does this all tie into how the CAF leadership should examine the role of alcohol within its customs and traditions? The Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) “publicly accepted the

¹⁰ Marie Deschamps (Canada), External Review Authority, External Review into Sexual Misconduct and Sexual Harassment in the Canadian Armed Forces – Culture of the CAF, 20.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Karen Rankin, "The Influence of Stressors and Strain on Alcohol Use in Canadian Armed Forces Members," (Doctoral thesis, Carleton University, 2018, 22.

¹³ Ibid, 23.

¹⁴ Ibid, 24.

ERA's recommendations and committed the CAF to addressing sexual misconduct as a top priority. In August of 2015, General Vance¹⁵ launched Operation HONOUR ... to respond to the crisis."¹⁶ Unfortunately, (and shockingly) the CAF did not have the means to track or record cases of sexual misconduct prior to the launch of Operation HONOUR.¹⁷ As a result of this analytical blind spot, "in January 2018, the Operation HONOUR Tracking and Analysis System (OPHTAS) was created for use by the chain of command as a dedicated means of recording, tracking and conducting trend analysis of incidents of sexual misconduct."¹⁸

In 2018 OPHTAS begins to provide data to CAF leadership on several topics. This paper focuses on the information from the 2019 Sexual Misconduct Incident Tracking Report that links the use alcohol to sexual harassment and sexual assault and where these incidents occurred.

Table 1 presents the data for sexual assault cases where alcohol involvement was recorded as a factor involving incidents of sexual assault.¹⁹

¹⁵ The author will refrain from comment regarding the issues surrounding General (ret'd) Vance.

¹⁶ Government of Canada, "The Path to Dignity and Respect: The Canadian Armed Forces Strategy to Address Sexual Misconduct," National Defence Headquarters, 2020, <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/corporate/reports-publications/the-path-to-dignity-and-respect.html>.

¹⁷ Government of Canada, "2019 Sexual Misconduct Incident Tracking Report," August 2019,3, <https://www.canada.ca/content/dam/dnd-mdn/documents/reports/2019/2019-sexual-misconduct-report-en.pdf>.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid., 12. Table 7 within the report.

Table 1. Sexual assault cases occurring in the fiscal year involving alcohol (data accessed 15 May 2019)

| | FY 2016–2017 | FY 2017–2018 | FY 2018–2019 |
|-------------------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| | 63 cases | 114 cases | 84 cases |
| Reported alcohol involved | 6 9.8% | 19 25.0% | 33 75.0% |
| Reported alcohol not involved | 55 90.2% | 57 75% | 11 25.0% |

Key Observations from the report:

- Alcohol was involved in the minority of cases in fiscal years 2016–2017 and 2017–2018 (10% and 25%), but was very high in fiscal year 2018–2109 (75%).²⁰

There is a rising trend in cases involving alcohol, importantly, this data presented next to the recorded number of incidents of sexual misconduct other than sexual assault (found below), further illustrates the CAF’s situation.

Table 2 presents the data for sexual assault cases where alcohol involvement was recorded as a factor involving incidents of sexual misconduct other than sexual assault.²¹

Table 2. Incidents of sexual misconduct other than sexual assault occurring in the fiscal year involving alcohol (data accessed 15 May 2019)

NOTE: Full information is not available for each case; numbers and percentages are based on the data available

| | FY 2016–17 | FY 2017–18 | FY 2018–19 |
|-------------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| | 390 incidents | 254 incidents | 172 incidents |
| Reported alcohol involved | 13 3.7% | 26 11.2% | 33 28.0% |
| Reported alcohol not involved | 337 96.3% | 207 88.8% | 85 72.0% |

Key Observations:

- There was an increase year to year in the proportion of incidents of sexual misconduct other than sexual assault in which alcohol was known to be involved (4% to 28%).²²

²⁰ Government of Canada, “2019 Sexual Misconduct Incident Tracking Report,” August 2019,3, <https://www.canada.ca/content/dam/dnd-mdn/documents/reports/2019/2019-sexual-misconduct-report-en.pdf>. Table Data and Observations are near verbatim from the report.

²¹ Ibid., 16. Table 1 within the report.

²² Ibid. Table Data and Observations are near verbatim from the report.

Again, one can see a sharp rise in cases involving alcohol, when one combines this data with the location of incidents, it becomes apparent that CAF leadership must be cognisant of current trends.

Table 3 highlights the specific locations involving incidents of sexual assault using the data from OPHTAS to demonstrate where an incident of sexual misconduct took place.²³

Table 3. Locations for sexual assault cases occurring in the fiscal year (data accessed 15 May 2019)

| Location | FY 2016–2017 | FY 2017–2018 | FY 2018–2019 |
|---------------------------------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|
| At the Unit During Work | 4 6.3% | 4 3.5% | 5 6.0% |
| While on Military Course/Training | 7 11.1% | 16 14.0% | 10 11.9% |
| At the Mess During a Sanctioned Event | 12 19.0% | 8 7.0% | 8 9.5% |
| In Quarters/Personal Residence | 9 14.3% | 31 27.2% | 31 36.9% |
| Civilian Establishment | 10 15.9% | 18 15.8% | 12 14.3% |
| While Deployed | 5 7.9% | 7 6.1% | 2 2.4% |
| During a Field Exercise | 3 4.8% | 3 2.6% | 1 1.2% |
| Other | 13 20.6% | 27 23.7% | 15 17.9% |

Key Observations:

- Cases in the category “in quarters/personal residence” increased in every fiscal year and was the most frequent location of incidents in fiscal years 2017–2018 and 2018–2019.
- The second most frequent location of incidents in all three fiscal years was at a civilian establishment. Another frequent location was “while on a military course or military training.”
- The most frequent location in fiscal year 2016–2017 (19.0%) was “at the mess or during a sanctioned event,” but it was less common in subsequent fiscal years (7.0% and 9.5%).
- The least frequent locations were “at the unit during work”, “while deployed” and “during a field exercise.”²⁴

²³ Government of Canada, “2019 Sexual Misconduct Incident Tracking Report,” August 2019,3, <https://www.canada.ca/content/dam/dnd-mdn/documents/reports/2019/2019-sexual-misconduct-report-en.pdf>, 13. Table 8 within the report.

²⁴ Ibid. Table Data and Observations are near verbatim from the report.

The resulting picture is beginning to take shape, the involvement of alcohol is on the rise for reported incidences, arguably against societal norms, and locations that are prominent include ‘while on Military Course / Training’ remaining in double digits, and ‘at the mess or during a sanctioned event.’

Table 4 is the final data presented to highlight specific locations regarding incidents of sexual misconduct other than sexual assault from OPHTAS.²⁵

Table 4. Locations for incidents of sexual misconduct other than sexual assault occurring in the fiscal year (data accessed 15 May 2019)

| Location | FY 2016–2017 | FY 2017–2018 | FY 2018–2019 |
|--|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| At the Unit During Work | 106 27.2% | 60 23.6% | 45 26.2% |
| While on Military Course/Training | 65 16.7% | 45 17.7% | 23 13.4% |
| At the Mess During a Sanctioned Event | 43 11.0% | 31 12.2% | 19 (11.0%) |
| In Quarters/Personal Residence | 39 10.0% | 15 5.9% | 26 15.1% |
| Civilian Establishment | 30 7.7% | 15 5.9% | 16 9.3% |
| While Deployed | 21 5.4% | 34 13.4% | 8 4.7% |
| During a Field Exercise | 15 3.8% | 8 3.1% | 6 3.5% |
| Other | 71 18.2% | 46 18.1% | 29 16.9% |

Key Observations:

- For all three fiscal years, “at the unit during work” and “while on a military course or training” were consistently common locations.
- The second most frequent location in fiscal years 2016-2017 and 2017-2018 was “while on a military course or military training, while “in quarters/personal residence” was the second most common location in 2018–2019.
- The third most frequent location in 2017–2018 was “while deployed.”
- Incidents “during a field exercise” were consistently the least common (3% to 4%).²⁶

²⁵ Government of Canada, “2019 Sexual Misconduct Incident Tracking Report,” August 2019,17, <https://www.canada.ca/content/dam/dnd-mdn/documents/reports/2019/2019-sexual-misconduct-report-en.pdf>.

²⁶ Ibid. Table Data and Observations are near verbatim from the report.

‘While on Military Course / Training’ remains consistent with table 3 and ‘At the Mess During a Sanctioned Event’ also has a high level of occurrence.

The data provides a clear picture that alcohol is increasingly involved in cases of sexual harassment and sexual assault and the locations of the incidents have a correlation to military activities such as sanctioned events and while on training. To fundamentally change its overall culture, the CAF must strive for culture change at the mess, sanctioned activities, and at TEs. Two major recommendations are presented, rethinking the CAF mess culture and the role of alcohol at TEs.

Recommendations

The prior discussion and theory highlights the fact that alcohol culture is engrained within the CAF’s overall ethos and a significant contributor to the sexualized culture highlighted in the Deschamps report. Having considered that the Canadian Military’s attitude towards alcohol is a ‘wicked problem,’ providing recommendations to CAF leadership as to how positive change can be affected. For the CAF to continue its culture change, a new attitude towards the mess is needed, including sanctioned activities therein. This new attitude leads to a recommendation surrounding the CAF’s TEs as well discussed later.

Sadly, Aviator Emily Tulloch underlines the inherent issues within the CAF when she stated to a panel of Members of Parliament:

I am here today to tell you that I was raped only one month into my basic training at St. Jean (Que.). One month. I was also sexually assaulted during my training at Borden (Ont.). And I have been groped and kissed unwillingly at group parties and mess events. These degrading behaviours are more common than you think.²⁷

²⁷ Murray Brewster, “MPs hear harrowing account of sexual assault in the military,” *CBC*, 20 April 2021, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/military-sexual-misconduct-1.5995295> (accessed 14 May 2021).

Both recommendations are needed to counteract the growing trend of alcohol being a contributing factor to cases of sexual harassment and sexual assault within the Canadian Military.

Rethinking the Role of the Mess

While “the CAF culture with respect to drinking has shifted quite a bit in the past couple of decades,”²⁸ there is an aspect to the drinking culture within the organization where one may believe that he or she must partake in alcohol related activities to feel accepted, a member of the unit, a part of the team.²⁹

This idea of wanting to belong is a tenet of unit cohesion, a trait that is arguably cultivated as members join and progress in the ranks. The mess is an important aspect of the ethos within the large military organization, a place to enjoy a Friday, celebrate a graduation, or merely ‘hang-out.’ Unfortunately, drinking culture comes at a cost. Richer et al (2016) highlights this in their study noting that,

a recent report examining alcohol use among [CAF] Regular Force members reveals that more than 90% reported having consumed alcohol in the past 12 months. Among drinkers, 48% reported high-risk drinking, almost 20% demonstrated hazardous and harmful alcohol consumption, and more than 72% reported binge drinking at least once in the past year.³⁰

The idea of alcohol being involved in sexual harassment and sexual assault has been established through previous data presented. The mess and sanctioned events continue to be a location as to where these events occur. Resultantly, a re-thinking of the mess itself must be examined to change to the CAF’s overall culture.

²⁸ Government of Canada, “Alcohol, Gender and the Unique Situation for Canadian Armed Forces Personnel,” The Maple Leaf, November 26, 2021, <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/maple-leaf/defence/2021/11/alcohol-gender-unique-situation-caf-personnel.html>.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Isabelle Richer, Jennifer Lee, & Jennifer Born, “Patterns of alcohol use among Canadian military personnel and their associations with health and well-being,” *Health Psychology*, 35(7), 2016, 685.

The subsequent recommendation discusses drink limiting at TEs, and while this could be a course of action for all mess halls, it would likely be very poorly received throughout the CAF. Nevertheless, there are steps that the armed forces could take to reduce the drinking culture found within the CAF.

Providing of non-alcoholic drinks for no cost. It is no secret that most mess halls have a surplus of funds available. When the idea of the designated driver became popular, free beverages was a constant staple that a bar scene offered. The mess offering non-alcoholic drinks (including ‘near-beer,’ pop, virgin cocktails – to name a few) provides options to CAF members whereby he or she can feel as though they are accepted, while not necessarily becoming inebriated.

Also, the CAF can re-examine traditions such as a glass of port at the end of a Mess Dinner. The argument of ‘tradition’ is holding less sway as the CAF embarks on societal reform and new regulations. Removing the aspect of alcohol from some traditions could further benefit CAF leadership, as it makes it clear that the chain of command is not promoting alcohol consumption.

While not all options are examined, there are steps that can be taken to reduce alcohol intake at the mess and sanctioned events. While one argument of shutting all messes was not discussed, that is another course of action CAF leadership should discuss as a viable option. Intertwined with the mess is the recommendation of protecting our people at TEs and how limiting alcohol consumption may be a viable option as members are trained.

Protecting our People at our Training Establishments

Tied to the discussion on rethinking of the mess facilities and sanctioned events is protecting our people at TEs. Aviator Emily Tulloch highlighted that at two TEs she was

assaulted. Furthermore, the previously provided data demonstrated a double-digit occurrence of sexual harassment / assault while on Military Course or Training. Resultantly, this is a subject that demands dialogue.

The CAF recruits and send members to train at centralized schools; typically, within the 18 to 34 age-bracket. The organization trains individuals in often demanding circumstances and, in the case of basic training, restricts movement and then allows rewards such as weekend leave or mess hall access. Statistics Canada³¹ provides clear evidence that this age group is susceptible to binge drinking, coupling this data with studies that illustrate alcohol use in the CAF, there is an opportunity for leadership to be informed of the risk.

The author was the executive assistant to the 1 Canadian Air Division Commander during a time when Operation HONOUR incidences were occurring at an increased rate during Force Generation exercises of multiple units. The Commander, Major-General (ret'd) Drouin, ordered a drink limit of 2 drinks per 24-hour period³² to combat the increasing trend. While no data is available to analyse, the initial results witnessed was a severe drop in Operation HONOUR occurrences. Furthermore, the author has deployed to numerous United States Deployed bases where one's Combined Access Card (CAC Card) is tied to the purchase of a maximum of 2 Drinks in an 18-hour period.

It is apparent that a drink limiting procedure within the TEs would give the Chain of Command more control of the drinking culture within its purview. It appears to be a common-sense notion that if the mess halls were restricted in what they may serve at our TEs, incidents will drop. One may argue that aspects such as pre-drinking will become more prevalent; however, the contention is that mess halls and TEs are the responsibility of the CAF, limiting the

³¹ Statistics Canada, Table 13-10-0096-11, Heavy drinking, by age group, accessed 15 May 2022.

³² Unfortunately, the author was not able to find the Operation Order for this paper to reference.

easy access to alcohol is a logical step in reducing consumption and could lead to a reduction in the stats provided in the discussion.

While no rule can perfectly encompass all situations within a complex environment such as the CAF, these recommendations are meant to be a springboard to further debate. The Deschamps Report was a first step in highlighting the underlying issues within CAF culture; perhaps, an honest discussion of the role of alcohol can continue the process.

Conclusion

The examination of alcohol culture within the CAF is by no means an easy or straightforward topic, hence the theoretical discussion on wicked problems. One argument against any control of alcohol is that the Chain of Command would be perceived as ‘anti-fun’ or counter the legal rights of its members. One must be careful with the proposed recommendations, as a strict implementation could lead to unintended consequences, such as a reduction in recruitment. Nevertheless, if the CAF wishes to change its overall culture, culture change must also occur at the mess, sanctioned activities, and at our TEs.

The External Review into Sexual Misconduct and Sexual Harassment in the CAF by Justice Marie Deschamps “highlighted the presence of a permissive sexualized culture that tolerated acts of sexual misconduct and was conducive to more severe incidents, including sexual harassment and sexual assault,”³³ a wicked problem with an absolute need to be corrected. Nevertheless, the culture surrounding alcohol has necessitated little discussion up to the present time even though it can be directly linked to incidences of sexual harassment and assault within

³³ Government of Canada, “The Path to Dignity and Respect: The Canadian Armed Forces Strategy to Address Sexual Misconduct,” National Defence Headquarters, 2020, <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/corporate/reports-publications/the-path-to-dignity-and-respect.html>.

the CAF. This paper examines how the CAF could explore the role of alcohol within its customs and traditions, specifically analyzing the future of the mess and how taking an active role in the current alcohol culture can protect members in the future.

Alcohol is a cornerstone of a social atmosphere and networking. Its use has deep societal roots and is consumed almost globally in a collective setting. The author is most definitely someone who partakes in libations and does not intend on being ‘anti-fun;’ nevertheless, how alcohol can influence the people of the CAF and its impact on the current military culture must be a topic of discussion at the highest levels of Canadian Military Leadership as culture change is addressed.

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