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THE CANADIAN ARMED FORCES: ON THE PRECIPICE OF A SECOND DECADE OF DARKNESS?

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AIM

1. This paper will address the challenges that the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) are currently experiencing as we head towards a second “decade of darkness”. It will discuss the underlying themes that are resoundingly similar to the 1990-2000 era, which the previous Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) General (Ret’d) Rick Hillier referred to as the “decade of darkness”. It will discuss the stressors contributing to this dark period that hindered the CAF’s progress during this time and offer recommendations on how the organization may be able to evade a second occurrence. Finally, it will provide recommendations for how the CAF may address these issues in response to the recent Chief of Defence Staff Planning Directive for CAF Reconstitution (CDS Reconstitution Directive).¹

INTRODUCTION

2. In his memoir, *A Soldier First*, “Canada’s former “top soldier” – General (Ret’d) Rick Hillier – referred to the 1990s as a “decade of darkness” for the Canadian Armed Forces, and particularly for the army”.² At that time, the CAF was predominantly mired by negative reports on abuses and scandals by Canadian soldiers in both Somalia and Bosnia. Additionally, following a massive decrease among military personnel following Force Reduction Plan (FRP) initiatives in the 1990s, the CAF simultaneously experienced a significant increase in operational requirements and deployments to other locations such as Rwanda and the Balkans.³ These tensions were further exacerbated by the Canadian government’s consistent and significant decrease in federal budget cuts from 1986 to 2016 (Annex A), and with the added pressure of equipment that was tired, worn or wearing out. Comparatively, in present day, the ominous concept of another “decade of darkness” is once again looming over the CAF as disparate, but distinct, challenges of significant personnel shortages, recruitment difficulties, and an extensive list of inappropriate behaviour among some of the senior leaders has cast another dark shadow on our military two decades later. To complicate the aforementioned issues even more is the layering of the Coronavirus-19 (COVID-19) pandemic from late 2019, which continues to persist and affect normal business operations within Canada and throughout the globe.

3. Recently, the CDS Reconstitution Directive provided guidance for the next strategic bound of the CAF following the pandemic with a view to achieve its objectives

¹ W.D. Eyre, *CDS Planning Directive for Canadian Armed Forces Reconstitution* (Ottawa: DND Canada, 2021): 20-21.

² David. Last. "Out of Dark Decades." *Peace Magazine* 30, no. 4 (Oct, 2014): 21.
<https://www.proquest.com/magazines/out-dark-decades/docview/1644487989/se-2?accountid=9867>.

³ Rick, Hillier. Inc OverDrive, and OverDrive ebook. *A Soldier First: Bullets, Bureaucrats and the Politics of War*. (Toronto: HarperCollins, 2009), 295. *A Soldier First: Bullets, Bureaucrats and the Politics of War* (overdrive.com)

by 2023. In it, the two imperatives highlighted were: to develop a “leadmark ... as we look to restore numerous defence activities and the readiness of our forces which were impacted by the pandemic,” and, “to continually improve our operational capability ... while simultaneously advancing critically important changes to our culture”.⁴ These challenges include, but are not limited to, the CAF’s persistent contributions to domestic and expeditionary operations, the loss of over 2,300 Regular Force (Reg F) members over the past year,⁵ persistent training backlogs, and enduring recruitment issues. However, these do not include the interplay of other numerous factors contributing to an already complicated work environment, such as the need for rapidly evolving information or communication platforms, changing societal norms, new fiscal realities, aging CAF infrastructure and equipment, to name a few. Here, the CDS Reconstitution Directive emphasizes that these challenges will further “threaten to aggregate and imperil our ability to recruit, train, and retain diverse Canadian talent, thus jeopardizing the readiness and long-term health of Canada’s force”.⁶ A review of all these culminating factors assures that the tenuous actuality of today’s CAF struggles signify that it is on the precipice of another ‘decade of darkness’.

4. The current issues the CAF is experiencing will be further explored through an analysis of our perpetual recruitment issues which are exacerbating our fundamental capacity to sustain and retain the CAF forces, thereby affecting its ability to achieve Canadian government directed mandates. Additionally, it will also explore how the ‘missing middle’ attributions are degrading our ability to train the next generation of soldiers and increasingly affecting our ability to support present day operational requirements. Finally, it will discuss how culture change has become the most pressing factor that the CAF is presently facing during an exceptional time of additional pressures, and thus unknowingly creating a ‘perfect storm’ of issues all culminating concurrently. This paper will contend that these three principal issues are the driving forces that will be the impetus for propelling the CAF towards a second “decade of darkness”.

DISCUSSION

5. The CAF strategic 2017 document *Strong, Secure and Engaged (SSE)*, articulates the Canadian defence priorities over a 20-year horizon.⁷ The key tenets to its concentration of effort depicts rebuilding core military capabilities in the Navy and Air Force, supporting operational initiatives to strengthen our defence partnership in North America and internationally, to include our engagements with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the United Nations (UN) and Coalition partners. All of this is envisioned in tandem while maintaining and supporting an “agile, multi-purpose, combat-ready military, operated by highly trained, well-equipped women and men.”⁸ Presently, the recent CDS Reconstitution Directive has stressed that while SSE remains extant, the

⁴ Eyre, W.D., *CDS Planning Directive...*, 1-2.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁷ Government of Canada, *Strong, Secure, Engaged: Canada’s Defence Policy*. (Ottawa: DND Canada, 2017), 11.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 14.

organization is in a significant deluge of transformation following the pandemic crisis and a disconcerting number of conduct impediments at the highest ranks within the CAF. Yet, when delving further into the lines of effort and outlined objectives of SSE, it is quick to ascertain that the assessment of the personnel required to achieve all of these stalwart objectives were not taken into account and it neglected to address the continuous issue of the ‘missing middle’.

6. In Fall 2016, the Office of the Auditor General (OAG) reported that there was a perpetual gap in the identified number of training, effective Regular Force members when compared to the actual numbers of trained personnel from 2011 to 2016 (Annex B). This report identified that the CAF had failed to meet its annual recruiting benchmarks over a number of consecutive years, thereby contributing to a significant gap in required trained personnel.

It is unlikely that it (i.e. the CAF) will be able to recruit, train, or retain sufficient personnel to meet its target of 68,000 members by the 2018–19 fiscal year...also found that the number of Regular Force members who were trained and effective was lower than its required number, and the gap between its required number and the actual number had increased.⁹

The report further recommended that in order to sustain CAF personnel levels that “approximately 5,550 new recruits are required annually to offset attrition.”¹⁰ Unfortunately, due to the onset of the pandemic crisis, these recruitment goals were further demolished due to the virtual cessation of recruitment and recruit training during this times. To add further complexity to this issue, the failure of the CAF’s recruitment in its inability to keep pace with the aggregate attrition rates and impending releases over the past decade has also aggravated the existing recruitment struggles. Annexes C and D demonstrate that recruiting has failed to achieve an adequate inflow of personnel into the forces (total 3,228 as of 10 January 2022) when compared with the outflow of personnel (total 6,017 as of 10 January 2022 – 4,261 attrition and 1,756 impending releases). These results, which were extracted from the Military Command Software database and tracked by the Chief of Military Personnel, in early January 2022, further substantiate that the CAF continues to move towards another era of darkness as our personnel numbers continue to dwindle and our recruitment has been insufficient to sustain the required numbers to meet our national mandates.

7. To complicate matters further, the CDS Reconstitution Directive also highlighted that persistent training backlogs and the “compounding issue of the ‘missing middle’ – nearly 10,000 total vacant CAF positions, many of which are empty senior non-commissioned officer (SNCO), junior officer and senior officer leadership billets”¹¹ were a contributing factor to the CAF’s ability to plan and oversee activities effectively.

⁹ Office of the Auditor General of Canada, 2016 Fall Reports of the Auditor General of Canada – Report 5 – Canadian Armed Forces Recruitment and Retention – National Defence (Ottawa: OAG, Fall 2016), 5.17.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 5.23.

¹¹ W.D. Eyre, *CDS Planning Directive ...*, 5.

Annex E demonstrates a dismal truth that 6,049 of the aforementioned ‘middle’ ranks are currently vacant. Likewise, a recent article published in January 2022 further elucidated the disturbing reality that “the CAF is dealing with a mounting personnel shortage, as new figures show military recruitment and training have failed to keep pace, resulting in more than 12,000 unfilled positions”.¹² It cannot be understated that the CAF’s reliance on the ‘missing middle’ ranks is paramount to its capacity to train, plan, and execute its operational and tactical orders and directives. Members of the aforementioned ranks are the backbone to the institution who are heavily relied upon to develop soldier proficiencies and train the next generation of competent, mission focused military professionals. However, with the continuing level of relative high operational tempo and deployments, combined with recruitment issues, the ability to sustain the expected operational levels are becoming increasingly more challenging and problematic. These sentiments were further buttressed in the CDS Reconstitution Directive that identified heavily taxed trades, many of which are specialist or technical experts, are experiencing low densities across the CAF.¹³ So, while the tempo of work has not changed, nor the expectations to meet strategic mandates and objectives, the numbers of key military ranks have continued to be overextended and strained, which further challenge the Forces retention issues. Nonetheless, the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) and the Canadian Army (CA) have put forth new initiatives to retain personnel with Operation TALENT and the recent Advancing with Purpose: The Canadian Army Modernization Strategy.¹⁴ However, these initiatives have not yet achieved their intended benchmarks and the added external pressure of the pandemic closures has continued to impair the recruitment initiatives and incentives.

8. The CDS Reconstitution Directive also highlights that the CAF’s “painful reckoning with the CAF culture and the narrative surrounding it could challenge recruit attraction and retention efforts.”¹⁵ Moreover, a survey conducted by the CAF in 2016, found that “80% of Regular Force members saw, heard, or experienced inappropriate sexual or discriminatory behavior”¹⁶ in what is acknowledged to be a more prevalent male-dominated occupation or institution holistically. The same study also found that the CAF, much like other militaries throughout the world, also fostered a sexualized culture

¹² Lee Berthiaume. “Military Dealing with more than 12,000 Unfilled Positions Amid Growing Pressures,” *Canadian Press*, 19 January 2022. Military dealing with more than 12,000 unfilled positions (barrie360.com)

¹³ Canada. Department of National Defence. “Military Command Software Centre,” last accessed 13 October 2021. <https://mcs-lcm.forces.mil.ca/MCSPersonnel/>. The MCS database, which provides current tracking of occupational health in the CAF, measured the effective employable strength of the following healthcare occupations as an example of heavily taxed specialist trades: Nursing Officer (63%), Medical Officer (51%), and Medical Technician (75%).

¹⁴ Canada, Department of National Defence, “Operation TALENT: Quality of Life – Quality of Service,” last modified 18 August 2021, <http://www.rcaf-arc.forces.gc.ca/en/services/benefits-military/quality-life-quality-service.page>; Canada, Department of National Defence, *Advancing with Purpose: The Canadian Army Modernization Strategy, 4th Edition* (Ottawa, Canada, 2020), 19.

¹⁵ Eyre, W.D., *CDS Planning Directive*..., 8.

¹⁶ Mohammad, Hajizadeh, Alice Aiken, and Chelsea Cox. "Risk Factors Associated with Sexual Misconduct in the Canadian Armed Forces: Does it Vary by Sex and Environmental Command?" *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 48, no. 8 (11, 2019), 2581. <https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/risk-factors-associated-with-sexual-misconduct/docview/2251862308/se-2?accountid=9867>

which historically seemed to superficially accept sexual misconduct at systemic levels and did not differ much between varying elements in the organization. To further complicate this issue, the study also found that many of the CAF members who fell victim or were at a higher risk to being victimized by a sexual misconduct event were young CAF members generally under the age of 24 and junior in rank.¹⁷ These distressing statistics are likely a contributory factor to our recruitment issues and initiatives to recruit young employees, especially women, during a period where the CAF is attempting to diversify its workforce to include up to 25% females by 2026.¹⁸

9. Nevertheless, the precipitating factors of the current CAF culture issues are not solely relegated to sexual misconduct cases. In fact, work-related stress and overwork has become an increasingly significant element contributing to an additional culture issue in the CAF. Another recent survey conducted in 2018 indicated that “almost one-third of the Reg F members reported high burnout rates”¹⁹ (Annex F). This particular survey assessed members’ emotional exhaustion and disengagement from work contributing to high job-related burnout and overall discontent in the work environment. The results, although overarching in terms of work parameters and ranks, highlight that there exists a concerning level of work-life balance in the organization which could further contribute to added cultural, retention and even future recruitment issues.

CONCLUSION

10. The CAF is currently experiencing a multitude of issues and pressures, both internal and external, which are the driving impetus for the organization to head towards a second “decade of darkness”. The interrelated issues of recruitment and retention problems coupled with ongoing training gaps, the ‘missing middle’ dilemma and disturbing cultural fissures are not small issues to contend with. These factors are creating critical pressures on the Force and affecting its ability to meet certain operational demands and requirements. While the causal factors may slightly differ when compared to the 1990s era of downsizing, financial cutbacks, pressures of operational demands and deplorable behavior, the significance of what the CAF is currently experiencing are analogous to those same stressors – retention (‘missing middle’), recruitment, and cultural issues. It remains that the one crucial factor to the efficacy of the CAF, are its people. Without them, the CAF could not sustain the current tempo, operational expectations, and national security mandates expected of them.

RECOMMENDATION

11. In order to mitigate the escalating tensions and to avoid the CAF heading into another “decade of darkness”, it is recommended that the CAF thoroughly analyze what

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 2591.

¹⁸ Government of Canada, Strong, Secure, Engaged: Canada’s Defence Policy. (Ottawa: DND Canada, 2017), 12, 104, 107. <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/corporate/reports-publications/canada-defence-policy.html>

¹⁹ Carina Daughtery, *CAF organizational effectiveness: Benchmarking, performance, and workplace well-being results from the Spring 2019 Your Say Survey* (Ottawa: Defence Research and Development Canada, 2021), 11, 14.

the precipitating factors are that are creating a whirlwind of friction in the organization. In particular, the CAF needs to assess which mandates and operational priorities the organization can meet with the existing personnel available and take into account the present concerns in recruitment, the 'missing middle', and the hovering requirement for culture change. A thorough review of the CAF's existing tasks, both domestic and expeditionary, should be conducted and the necessary reduction in tasks should be implemented immediately. To maintain the same operational tempo with less trained and experienced personnel is impractical, dangerous, and will not help the organization in retaining or possibly even recruiting new personnel. It is essential that in order to encourage a workforce with special skills to remain, an organization must nurture and look after that workforce. Intuitively, if operational tasks far outweigh the number of personnel to complete them, then a reduction or refinement of tasks should be conducted.

12. It is also recommended that the CAF focus not only on recruiting new members to the organization, but ensuring that these new recruits are not "bottle-necked" in the training system and potentially waiting months or up to years to be occupationally trained. It is a known fact that the same 'missing middle' are the same cadre of military professionals expected to train the next generation of soldiers to the Operational Functional Point (OFP), but are also the same group expected to plan and lead CAF missions. The ongoing requirement for these leaders to work to support operations and simultaneously train new recruits has the potential to further burnout an already stressed and vital group of CAF professionals. Accordingly, it is recommended that the CAF transition to a primary focus on the training institution backlog in order to ensure they develop the new recruits enrolled in the Forces, moderate the work load on the 'missing middle' and subsequently attempt to retain these key ranks in order to abate the potential for burnout.

Annex(es):

- A. National Defence Spending in Canada 1986-2016
- B. OAG 2016 Audit – CAF Recruitment and Retention
- C. Canadian Forces Recruiting Group Numbers 2021
- D. CAF Attrition and Impending Releases in 2021
- E. Military Command Software – "Missing Middle" Vacancies/Unfilled Positions
- F. CAF Organizational Effectiveness Spring 2019 Your Say Survey: Burnout Results

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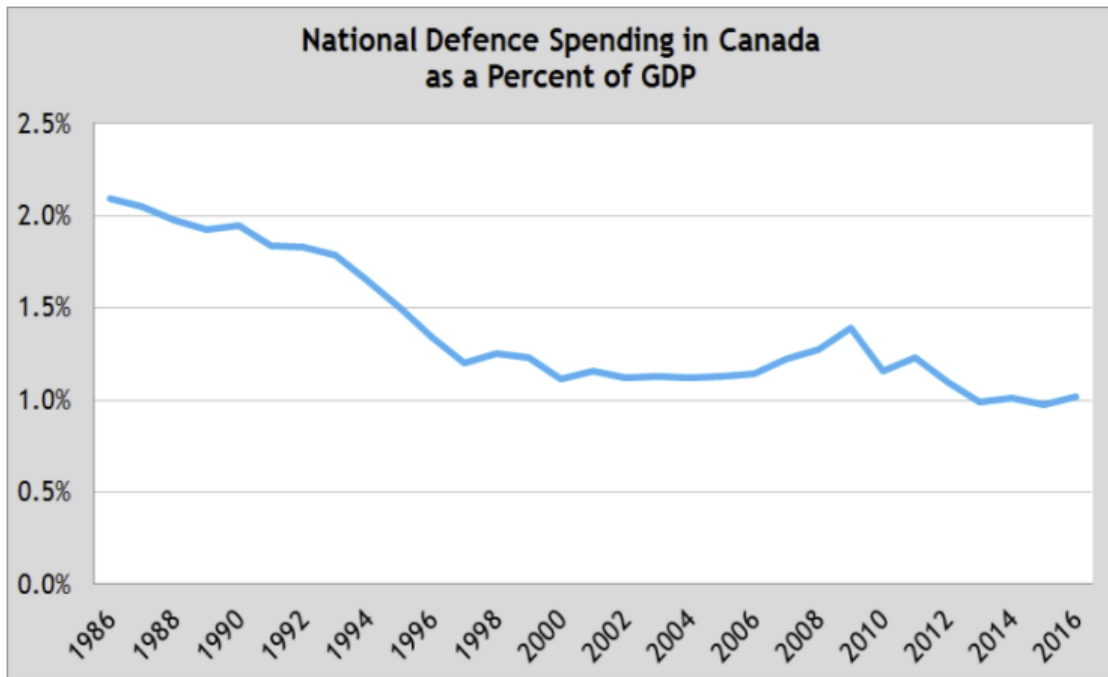


Figure 1 – National Defence Spending in Canada by GDP Percent

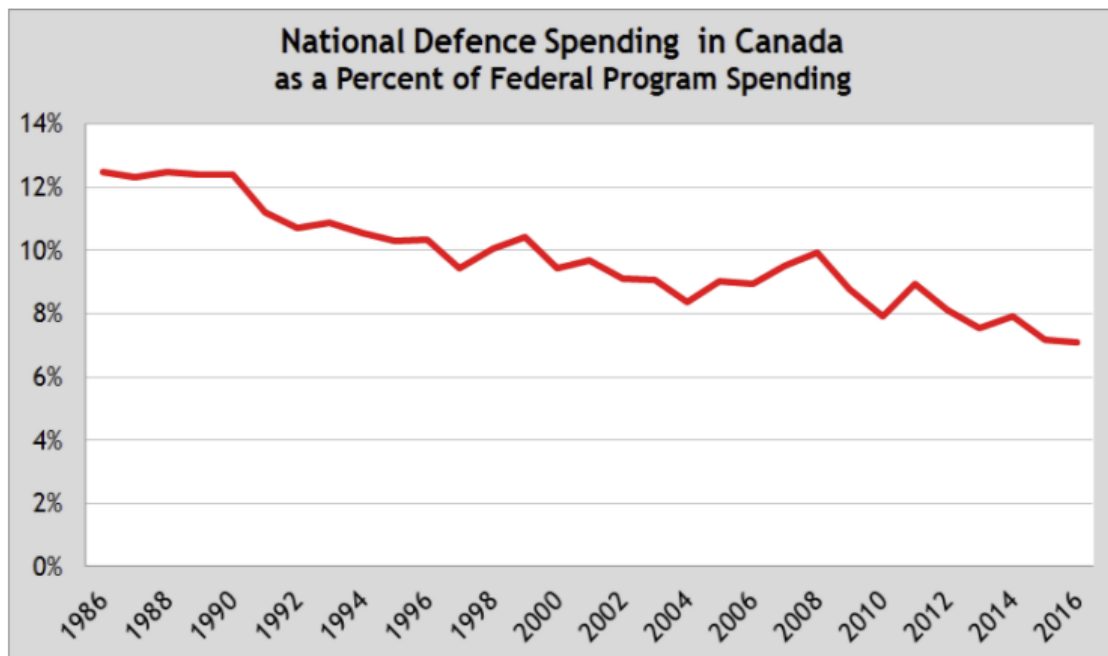


Figure 2 – National Defence Spending in Canada by Federal Programming

Source: National Defence Spending, retrieved 10 January 2022 from Defence spending in Canada—a look at the data | Fraser Institute

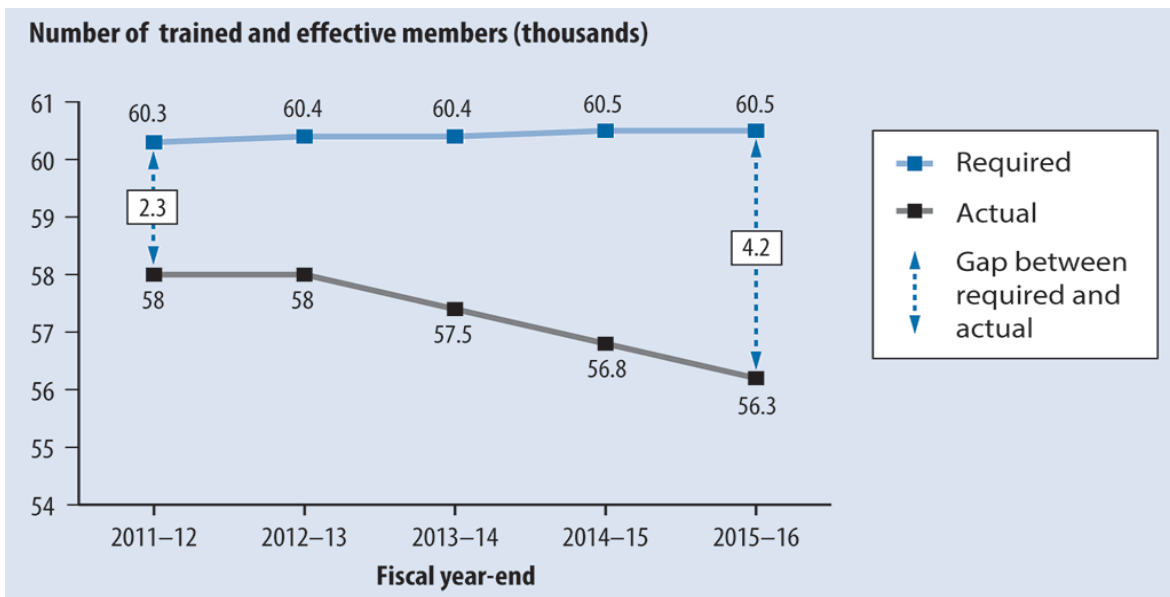


Figure 3 – Gap Between Required and Actual CAF Regular Force Members

Source: Office of the Auditor General of Canada, 2016 Fall Reports of the Auditor General of Canada – Report 5 – Canadian Armed Forces Recruitment and Retention, Exhibit 5.1

Annex C – Canadian Forces Recruiting Group Numbers 2021

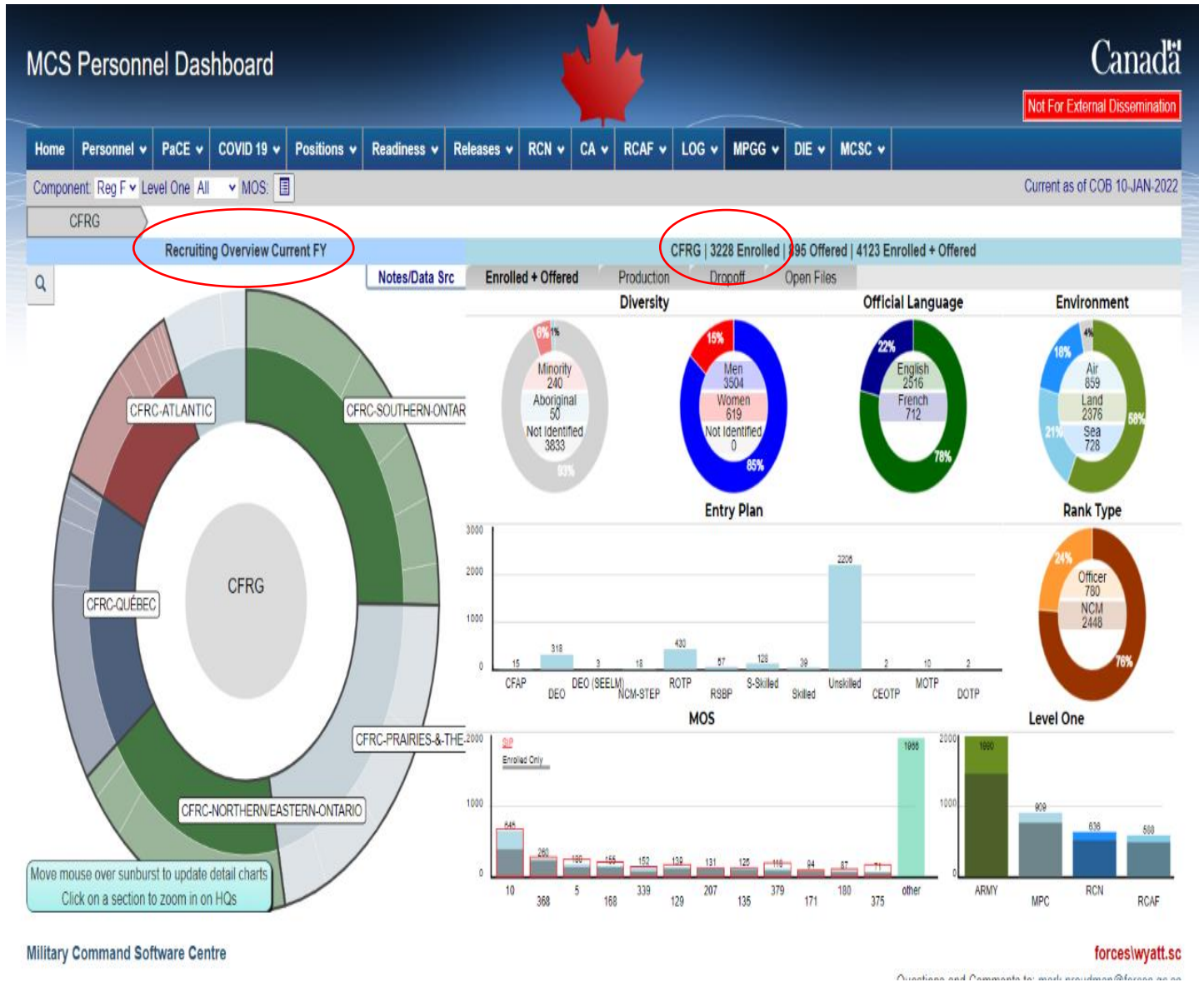


Figure 4 – CAF CFRG Recruiting Totals as of 10 January 2022

Source: MCS Dashboard

Annex D - CAF Attrition and Impending Releases in 2021

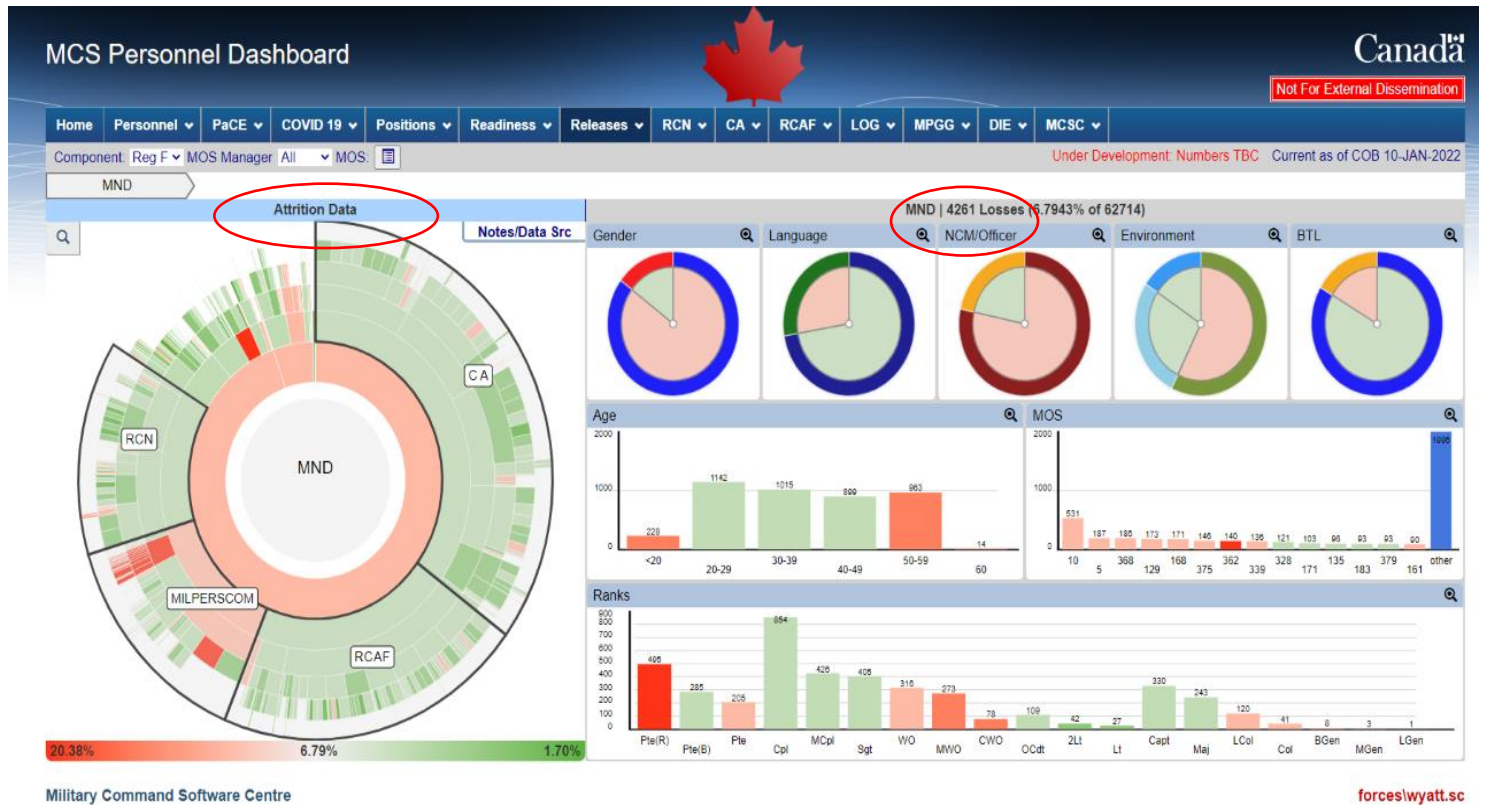


Figure 5 – CAF Attrition Rates as of 10 January 2022, Source: MCS Dashboard

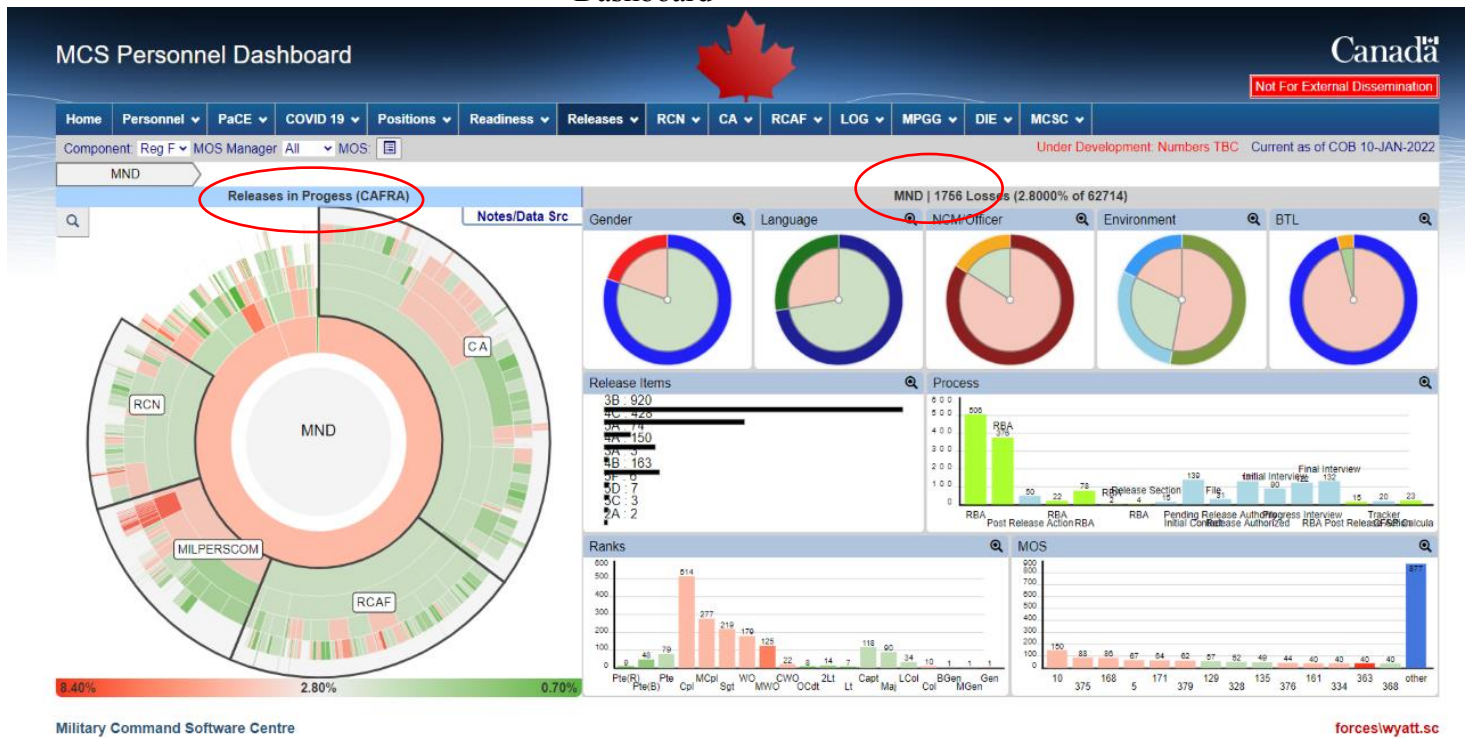


Figure 6 – CAF Releases in Progress as of 10 January 2022, Source: MCS Dashboard

Annex E – Military Command Software – “Missing Middle” Vacancies/Unfilled

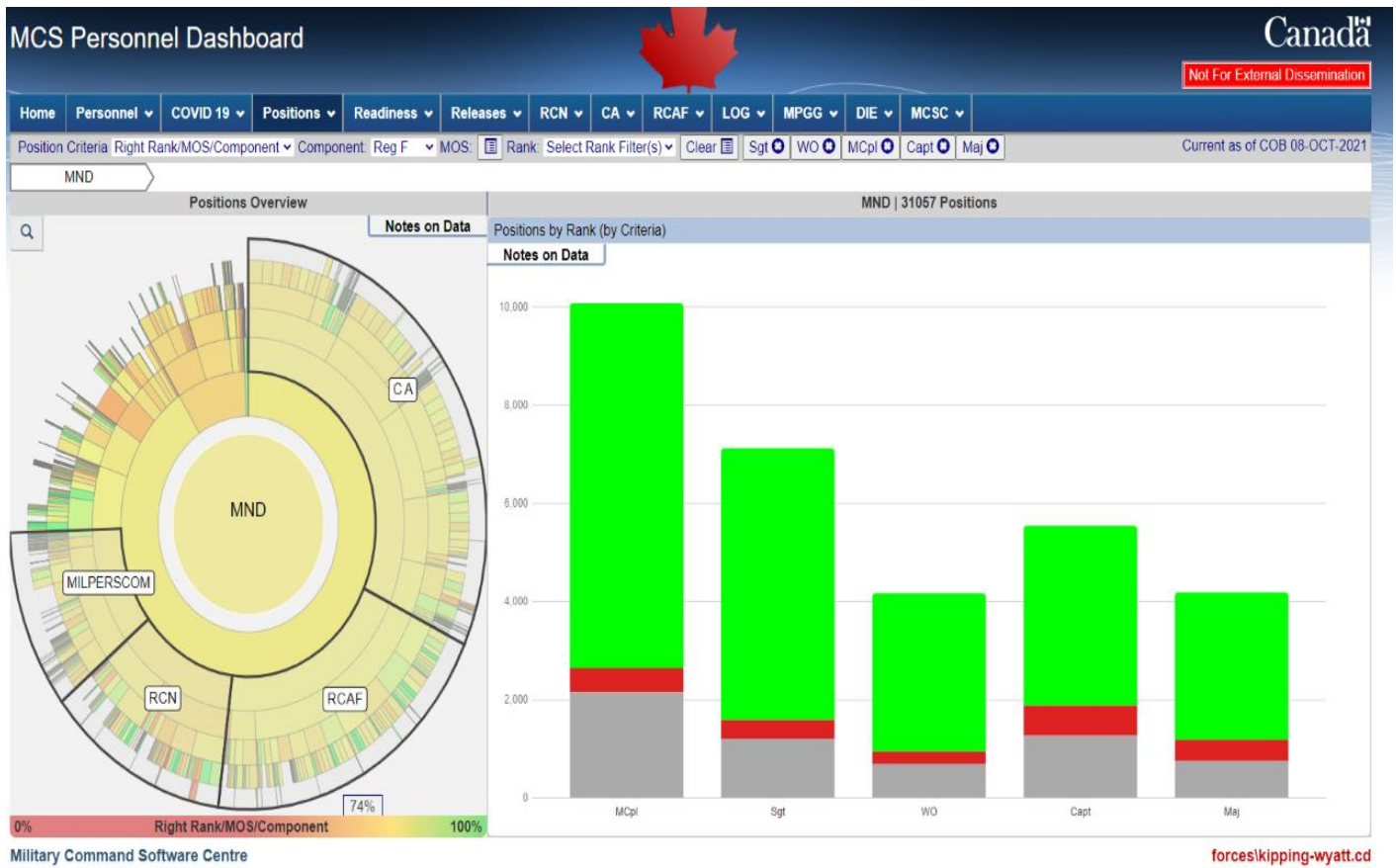


Figure 6 – ‘Missing Middle’ Vacant/Unfilled Positions

Source: MCS Dashboard

	MCpl	Sgt	WO	Capt	Maj	Total Unfilled (MCpl, Sgt, WO, Capt, Maj)
All rank reqrs met (green)	7428	5531	3223	3661	3002	
Reqr(s) not (red)	491	379	254	607	432	
Unfilled positions (grey)	2149	1203	684	1267	746	6049
Total	10,068	7113	4161	5535	4180	

Annex F – CAF Organizational Effectiveness Spring 2019 Your Say Survey: Burnout Results

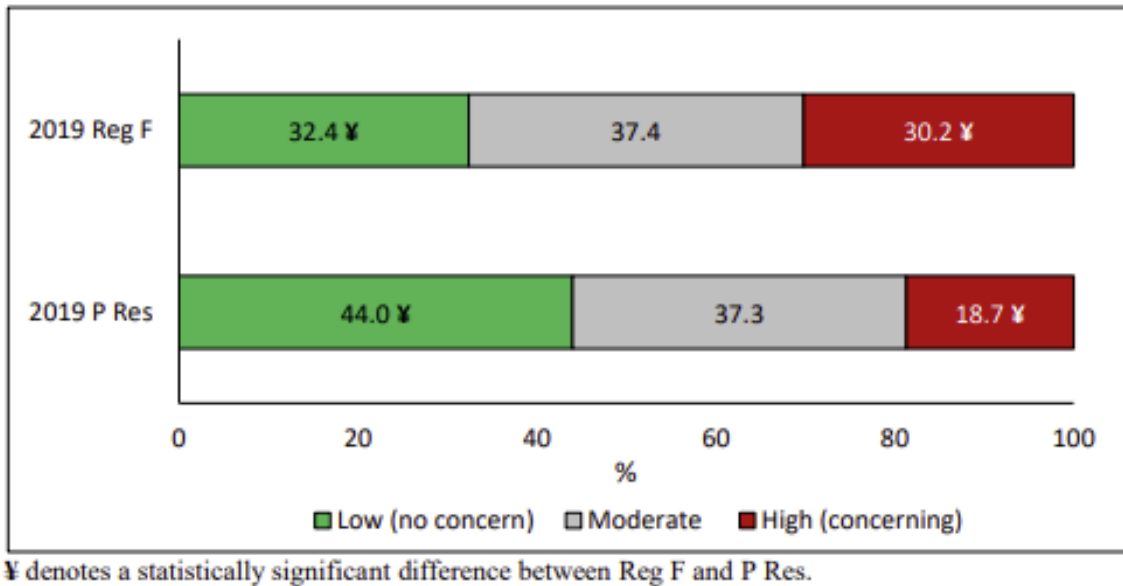


Figure 7 – Burnout: Ref F and Pres results (2019)

Source: CAF Organizational Effectiveness, Spring 2019 Your Say Survey ²⁰

²⁰ Carina, Daugherty. *CAF Organizational Effectiveness...*, 11. Burnout: Job-related burnout was assessed using an 8-item version of the Oldenburg Burnout Inventory (Demerouti, Bakker, Vardakou, & Kantas, 2003). This scale assessed members' emotional exhaustion and disengagement from work.15 Almost one-third of Reg F members (30.2%) reported high burnout, while just under one-fifth of P Res members (18.7%) reported high burnout.