



## CANADA'S NATIONAL SEARCH AND RESCUE PROGRAMME: A GOVERNANCE MODEL IN NEED OF RESCUE?

Major Anonymous

### JCSP 49

#### Exercise Solo Flight

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**CANADA’S NATIONAL SEARCH AND RESCUE PROGRAMME:  
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**Major Anonymous**

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## THE CANADIAN ARMED FORCES AS AN EMPLOYER OF CHOICE AMONGST MODERN MILITARY FAMILIES

### INTRODUCTION

Several outlets reported recently that the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) is "*facing its highest attrition rate in 15 years and will need more than a decade to get numbers of soldiers back up to needed levels*".<sup>1</sup> The Armed Forces Council (AFC), made up of the senior military body of the CAF and acts as an advisor to the Chief of the Defence Staff (CDS), determined that attrition was directly related to compensation and benefits. The AFC recommended that "*military leaders should make it a priority to fast-track increases for various benefits*."<sup>2</sup> Though adequate compensation and benefits may attract and retain specific individuals, the AFC overlooked one critical reason the CAF is having difficulty attracting and retaining service members. The demands of the CAF to put 'service before self' is incongruent with the ideals and values of modern families. In the 2013-2017 CAF Exit Survey, geographical instability, postings, and lack of family support accounted for 56.6% of why CAF members released voluntarily.<sup>3</sup> By 2019, the impact of a military spouse or partner, lack of geographical instability, and impact of military lifestyle on child or children scored 25.4%, 19.1% and 15.6%, respectively, as reasons for leaving the CAF.<sup>4</sup> The figures in both CAF Exit Surveys revealed that over 60% of military members chose to leave the CAF not because of compensation and benefits but because the military demands of mobility and separation are incompatible for a modern military family.<sup>5</sup> The CAF is one of the few employers in Canada with a unique requirement for military members to uproot their lives once every few years during the Annual Posting Season (APS). This requirement is mentioned in DAOD 5044-1 on Families, citing that members must place service to the country and needs of the CAF ahead of personal considerations.<sup>6</sup>

The CAF requires its members to be mobile and deployable to meet operational demands and fill career development opportunities. It recognizes that this requirement causes significant disruption for CAF members and their families.<sup>7</sup> While the DAOD 5044-1 and other DND/CAF policy documents outline some of the CAF's commitments to improve the lives of modern military families, the reality is that the CAF's expectation to place service to the country before families are no longer compatible with the family dynamic of the 2020s. As an ever-evolving organization, the CAF must evolve in its expectations and in emphasizing 'service before self' and change to become an

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<sup>1</sup>David Pugliese, "Military Attrition Has Hit Its Highest Level in 15 Years, Warns Prepared Generals," Ottawa Citizen, October 31, 2022, <https://ottawacitizen.com/news/national/defence-watch/military-attrition-has-hit-its-highest-level-in-15-years-warns-briefing-prepared-for-generals>.

<sup>2</sup>Canada, Department of National Defence. Canadian Armed Forces Retention Strategy. 2022.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>For the 2013-2017 and 2019 CAF Exit Survey, Salary and Benefits accounted for only 12.4% and 16.7%, respectively.

<sup>6</sup>Department of National Defence, DAOD 5044-1, Families, 2013, <https://www.canada.ca/en/departmentnational-defence/corporate/policies-standards/defence-administrative-orders-directives/5000series/5044/5044-1-families.html>.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

organization that promotes and supports ‘service *and* self’ (which includes families) consistent with the first chapter of the Strong, Secured, Engaged: Canada’s Defence Policy (SSE). Failure to do may mean that the CAF will not be an employer of choice for many modern families and thus will not meet the numbers required to meet its domestic and expeditionary commitments.

## PROBLEM DEFINITION

This essay defines a modern military family as a dual-earner family (that includes at least one member in the Regular or Reserve Force), with or without a child(ren) under 18. It acknowledges that the modern family is more complex than the above definition, differs amongst individuals, and extends beyond immediate families.<sup>8</sup> However, given that approximately 40,000 Regular Force and 17,000 Reserve Force dual-earner families comprise most of the military demographic, this essay will focus on a dual-earner family in the same household.<sup>9</sup>

In the last 40 years, the number of families with two employed parents has nearly doubled, resulting in a staggering increase in dual-income families.<sup>10</sup> There are multiple impetuses for this increase, including social (i.e. women joining the labour force and narrowing of gender gaps) and economic (i.e. increase in the cost of living) factors. Despite the steady increase in dual-income families, the CAF has not evolved quickly or fully to address the social change, causing frustration and stress for modern military families. 76% of military spouses have relocated at least once to accommodate a partner’s military posting.<sup>11</sup> These postings adversely affect many educated and driven non-serving spouses as they undergo periods of unemployment or underemployment to accompany their spouses.<sup>12</sup> Besides finding new employment, military families must concurrently find a new home, schools, healthcare, childcare, and social networks, heightening the stress level for all family members. Securing healthcare for military families is especially contentious, as frequent postings result in Canadian military families having four times less likely to have a family physician than civilian families.<sup>13</sup> There are no federal or provincial-led programs to facilitate the transfer of medical care nor a prioritization from the new location to military families to secure a family doctor and specialist practitioner.

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<sup>8</sup>CFMWS has sought to compile information about different types of families, referred to as “family personas.” There are about a dozen different family personas according to CFMWS.

<sup>9</sup>“Best Advice - Caring for Military Families in the Patients’ Medical Home,” September 2017, 1–4, [https://www.cfpc.ca/CFPC/media/Resources/Practice-Management/BAG\\_Military\\_Families\\_EN\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.cfpc.ca/CFPC/media/Resources/Practice-Management/BAG_Military_Families_EN_FINAL.pdf).

<sup>10</sup>Government of Canada, Statistics Canada, “The Rise of the Dual-Earner Family with Children,” Statistics Canada, May 30, 2016, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/11-630-x/11-630-x2016005-eng.htm>.

<sup>11</sup>Canadian Paediatric Society, “Caring for Children and Youth from Canadian Military Families: Special Considerations | Canadian Paediatric Society,” Canadian Paediatric Society, May 3, 2017, <https://cps.ca/en/documents/position/military-families>.

<sup>12</sup>Office of the National Defence and Canadian Armed Forces Ombudsman, “On the Homefront Update,”

<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

In some cases, the family will choose to separate geographically so the non-serving spouse can maintain employment, resulting in the physical separation of the family unit. Though the family members ultimately decide to separate geographically, it is often the only decision driven by CAF's expectation to relocate. Deciding to separate temporarily for both partners to retain employment (whether in the CAF or the civilian workforce) could last several years. This problem is further exacerbated, as CAF members could be posted anywhere in Canada (or outside of Canada). Conversely, many professional licenses, including nurses, teachers, and social workers, are not easily transferrable from province to province and the expenses relating to the transfer are not covered under the CAF Relocation Directive.<sup>14</sup> This forces the military family's hand to either forego employment for the next posting or to choose to separate the family. However, this is not a sustainable solution, as this decision has second and third-order effects on the family dynamic, especially for families with children. Research has shown that children of military families have shown an increase in mental and behavioural disorders because of physical separation (i.e. deployments and IR).<sup>15</sup> These children are at a higher risk for mental health issues as adolescents stemming from stress and anxiety.<sup>16</sup> These issues are aggravated due to frequent postings interrupting continuous care from the same provider and causing lag during the transition.

The instability of modern military families also stems from the CAF's institutional and operational requirements. As noted by the Ombudsman's report in 2013 on the well-being of Canada's military families, three characteristics make the CAF unique: mobility, separation and risk.<sup>17</sup> With little to no downtime from a relocation, a military member may soon face a tasking, deployment, and temporary duty (TD) of varying duration, some as short as one day up to 15 months.<sup>18</sup> While the member is away, the spouse absorbs the parental and home responsibilities left at home. Whether they have a full-time job just as demanding as the military member away, the CAF's institutional and operational requirements separate families and disturb family responsibilities and routines. Dual-service couples are not immune to the stressors of relocation and separation, either. Though not specified, it is understood that one's career goals and aspirations will take 'priority' while the others will take on the supporting role. Not doing so could cause geographical separation with limited benefits to compensate members for the separation imposed by the organization. With less than 15% representation in the CAF, women take on the supporting role because of limited support systems (i.e. Military Family Resource Centre) and social policies geared towards women to take on the caretaker role (i.e. Maternity Leave).

Last, it is crucial to acknowledge that the demographic of the CAF has also changed in the last few decades, shifting from predominantly baby boomers and Generation X to Generation Y and Z. Each generation, driven by its social, political,

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<sup>14</sup>In fact, spousal employment services expense fall under "sundry expense" and comes from the custom account.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid.

<sup>17</sup>Office of the National Defence and Canadian Armed Forces Ombudsman, "On the Homefront Update,"

<sup>18</sup>Ibid.

technological, and economic environments, is empirically different and socially unique.<sup>19</sup> For instance, Generation Y and Z put heavier importance on work-life balance, were more comfortable with change, and open and inclusive society.<sup>20</sup> The desire to balance military life with personal life with the general trend towards stability as a society is out of step with CAF's demand to serve Canada before self.<sup>21</sup> Recent programs and policies such as the SSE and the Retention Strategy have all stressed the importance of people and their families. However, the CAF explicitly and implicitly expects its military members to serve Canada before themselves, sending mixed messages. The discontent corresponds with the CAF Exit Surveys, as the inability to achieve a work-life balance because of the stressors placed on the family was one of the main reasons for voluntarily releasing from the CAF.

## CURRENT FAMILY SUPPORT PROGRAMS AND LIMITATIONS

The CAF has recognized the critical role of military families in enabling their effectiveness. Understanding the challenges of balancing military life with family life, the CAF implemented various commitments and initiatives to support military families over the last few decades. The message from SSE and the senior leadership has been consistent for much of the post-2000 period: military families are the strength behind the uniform, and the CAF needs to enhance support.<sup>22</sup> The DAOD 5044-1 published in 2000 outlined the CAF's commitment to providing services to CAF members and their families, assisting in reducing the impact created by frequent postings and taking measures to mitigate the effects of prolonged and regular periods of family separation. This commitment was further codified in the 2008 Canadian Forces Family Covenant, which served as a cornerstone to recognize military families' vital role in enabling the CAF and pledges to work in partnership to enhance military life.<sup>23</sup> More recently, the SSE outlined a comprehensive military family plan to improve the support and services offered to them.

The commitments led to implementing of various programs and organizations to provide support. These include but are not limited to: the Military Family Resource Centre (MFRC), which offers a wide range of family-related support; the Family Care Plan (FCP), to support families in the event of an emergency or military tasking; Military Spouse Employment Initiative (MSEI), to provide tools and support to pursue careers within the federal Public Service; and the Family Connection Program (formally known as Family Sponsor Program), a program specific to the RCAF to ease the stress of

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<sup>19</sup>Winn, Gary L. and Ava C. Dykes. "Identifying Toxic Leadership & Building Worker Resilience." *Professional Safety* 64, no. 3 (03, 2019): p. 42.

<sup>20</sup>Jorgensen, Bradley. "Baby Boomers, Generation X and Generation Y?: Policy Implications for Defence Forces in the Modern Era." *Foresight : The Journal of Futures Studies, Strategic Thinking and Policy* 5, no. 4 (2003): p. 43.

<sup>21</sup>Ryan Pallas, "The Sinking Ship of Theseus: Adapting the U.S. Military to the Modern Family," *War on the Rocks*, March 22, 2023, <https://warontherocks.com/2023/03/the-sinking-ship-of-theseus-adapting-the-u-s-military-to-the-modern-family/>.

<sup>22</sup>Department of National Defence, *Strong Secure Engaged*.

<sup>23</sup>Department of National Defence, "CAF Family Covenant," Government, CAF Connection, accessed April 18, 2023, <https://www.cafconnection.ca/National/About-Us/Military-Family-Services/CAF-FamilyCovenant.aspx>.

relocation and aid in building a social network. These support structures are in place with the best intentions to support military families, as they experience challenges unique to military families. According to the Ombudsman, these progressive improvements have made the CAF more supportive of families than previously.<sup>24</sup>

However, supporting modern military families and easing stressors that come with postings and separation is a wicked problem. Despite CAF's best efforts to prioritize the well-being of families, recognizing that they are the backbone of institutional and operational effectiveness, the CAF Exit Survey continuously cites the unique challenges that CAF poses on families are the main reason for releasing voluntarily. From the CAF's perspective, this is a dilemma, as the organization inherently needs its members to relocate and separate from their families to meet the exigencies of the service. The CAF understands that this strains modern military families from economic, emotional, social, and physical factors, negatively impacting their well-being. No singular solution could solve the complexities, especially as every modern military family has different needs, issues, and circumstances. The CAF is not dealing with this problem in isolation; the U.S. military also faces the same wicked problem. Despite the significant evolution of the family form, the U.S. military has not updated its personnel system since World War 2.<sup>25</sup> Akin to the CAF's Exit Survey, the U.S. Army Exit Survey revealed that "*many [U.S] soldiers cited impacts on the family as the primary reason they were leaving the force.*"<sup>26</sup> The U.S. military recognizes that maintaining the status quo of putting stressors on military members and their families will jeopardize its ability to achieve national security objectives.<sup>27</sup> Instead of implementing piecemeal programs and policies geared towards enhancing modern military families, a proposal was made to consider an entirely new U.S. military career model, prioritizing modern families and promoting stability.

Despite the CAF's best efforts to support modern military families, it has not addressed the root of the problem: its requirement to relocate and separate families. As outlined in SSE, the CAF plays an important role in protecting Canada and Canadians and maintaining international peace and stability. It cannot mirror the civilian employment model and cease requiring military members to move and/or be away from home for operational or career progression reasons. The right people must fill key positions (i.e. Command), some move more often because of being succession planned, and some trades separate families more frequently than others (i.e. Traffic Techs and Pilots). The CAF cannot simply relegate the solution to those it deems as "easy to move," such as singles (with or without dependants) and dual-service couples, as marital status should not dictate the frequency of the move. AF is in a quandary as it cannot stop the requirement for its personnel to relocate or separate from their families, but this requirement makes up most of the reason for members' release.

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<sup>24</sup>Office of the National Defence and Canadian Armed Forces Ombudsman, "On the Homefront Update"; Manser, "State of Mil Families."

<sup>25</sup>Ryan Pallas, "The Sinking Ship of Theseus: Adapting the U.S. Military to the Modern Family," War on the Rocks, March 22, 2023, <https://warontherocks.com/2023/03/the-sinking-ship-of-theseus-adapting-the-u-s-military-to-the-modern-family/>.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

## WHAT IS THE SOLUTION?

As a unique institution, the CAF has and continues to develop policies and programs to better support military families. For instance, the RCAF has launched the Family Connection Program to build a social community to ease the stressors that come with relocation. In 2020, MSEI was launched to give a wider range of federal Public Service employment opportunities. This program is exclusively geared towards military spouses, giving them the flexibility to transfer, find, and pause employment within the Public Service sector. Albeit these programs and initiatives benefit some military families, these programs have limitations and relocation and separation are still a reality for many and one that comes with many stressors.

Since the CAF cannot change some of its requirements, as it will have negative impacts, one area in which the CAF can influence is *how* the relocation is conducted. Many military members deal with prolonged periods of uncertainty as they wait for their respective trades' outcomes on the posting plan. While some may receive an indication as to where they will be posted to, typically, many members do not receive confirmation of posting followed by a posting message from their respective Career Managers until April or May timeframe. This gives the member and their families only a few months to conduct all the personal administration such as selling and buying a new home, finding new schools/daycare, etc. Concurrently, the spouse, if employed by a civilian employer will have to negotiate alternate work arrangements or find a new job. The posting cycle is too short to give members adequate time to digest, methodically decide on what is best for the family, and then execute the move.

Though the majority of CAF members join the CAF with the expectation of relocating and being separated from their loved ones, they don't understand the real impact that these requirements have on the family until they do it. One or two posting cycles may be digestible, but after a few postings and feeling like they do not have control over their lives, the negative impacts on the families outweigh the benefits of being a military member. If the CAF is able to plan proactively the posting cycles to give members a *minimum* of one year's notice (with a posting message to confirm and give authority to make financial commitments), then it gives its members and their families the time and space to make rational decisions and methodically conduct the relocation. If the trade cannot post a member to a position, at least issue a posting message to a geographic location so the member can make firm plans and decisions knowing where they will be posted. This also gives the spouse at least a year to work with their current employer to develop an alternate work arrangement or to use employment services or MSEI to secure employment at the new location. Further, under the member's profile, spouses' information should extend beyond their name and birthday. It should expand further to include their profession and what professional designations they hold in what province to make better decisions about where the member is posted. Though it is not a perfect solution, giving sufficient time for the members and their families to prepare and transition minimizes heightened levels of stress related to the relocation and allows the spouse to find means to maintain continuous employment.



Another proposal is to work with ADM(HR-CIV) in further developing the MSEI program. Although well-intended, this policy has limitations, specifically that other departments are not obliged to hire employees from the military spousal pool. The limitation of this policy is that it only applies to federal Public Service jobs which may not be desired by the spouse. There are other obstacles, including eligibility limitations, security clearance and official language requirements. As the program is still relatively new, it has the potential to expand and be more robust as a program as it matures, but it requires resources, specifically staff and funding. ADM(HR-CIV) needs to create a mechanism to receive feedback from spouses that use the program to know what is working and what is not so they can better support those for whom this program is intended.

Last, support to military families, specifically on spousal employment, should be a Chain of Command (CoC) responsibility which is amplified in DAOD 5044-1. As leaders, the CoC needs to support its members and the unique challenges that military families face. Adequate training, which includes education on an array of resources (such as the MSEI) needs to be given so that the CoC is well-equipped and well-prepared to have meaningful conversations with its members. The actions or inactions made by the CoC have a direct influence on its members and their decision to remain or leave the CAF. The CoC must engage when individual concerns regarding family and spousal employment are brought to light. Leaders should consider organizing increased family engagement events (including children) at a base level to build connections amongst spouses, as well as children. This helps to foster a sense of community, especially for newly posted members and families. An increase in the social network also helps with spousal employment where ‘whom you know’ sometimes helps in securing jobs, especially in smaller towns where a lot of the bases and wings are located.

## **CONCLUSION**

The CAF is a unique institution that demands its members to relocate and be separated from their families. While these requirements may not make the CAF an employer of choice for many Canadians who seek work-life balance and do not want to relocate every few years, there are over 68,000 Regular Force and 27,000 Reserve Force members that currently serve in the CAF. The CAF could focus its effort on better supporting its members’ families to ensure that serving members continue to choose the CAF as their employer. Relocation and being apart from loved ones may be a part of military life, but the strategies mentioned above can help reduce the impact on members and their families. The CAF is certainly on the right track to embrace ‘service *and* self’ through its commitment to support the ‘backbone’ of the institution. With the right resources and policy choices, it could become an institution where the exigencies of the service are well-balanced with the exigencies of modern military families.

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