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Commanding Officers: Challenges for the 3rd Millennium

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ABSTRACT

The challenges facing leaders in the modern Canadian Army are many and varied. Commanding Officers (COs) may be tasked to lead soldiers into combat or peace support operations in any part of the world with little or no notice. Their soldiers are required to operate in difficult and challenging situations, and at times are called upon to make decisions with little or no direction. COs must be capable of operating at the tactical level while having a thorough understanding of the strategic environment in which they operate. In order to be effective they must understand the changing demographics of the units they command. They must prepare their soldiers for operations while dealing with the realities of an environment of reduced resources, a specific military ethos and changing leadership styles. In addition, these leaders must develop a leadership style that is appropriate for themselves and their followers. Mastering these challenges serves to make the role of CO one of the most important in the Army.

Commanding Officers: Challenges for the 3rd Millennium

The very nature of the probable “penny-packet” deployment of small units of Canadian Force to selected trouble spots around the world will put the national commander, perhaps a major or lieutenant-colonel rank or equivalent, in a very difficult position.¹

Introduction

Much has been written in recent years on the subject of the ‘strategic corporal’.² In Mileham and Willett’s *Military Ethics for the Expeditionary Era*, the term is referred to eight times by various authors.³ While there is little doubt that junior leaders play an increasingly important role in the conduct of military operations at home and abroad, the challenges facing Commanding Officers have also changed. Commanding Officers play a critical role in the training and employment of Canadian combat forces, yet little has been written of the current challenges faced by this important group of officers as they prepare their units for operations. It is logical to assume that if the ‘strategic corporal’ is important, their commanding officers, those charged with training and leading the corporals, are equally vital to having a successful army.

The Army has been described as “a strategic and decisive element of national power.”⁴ The key individuals who wield this element of power are Commanding Officers. They operate at the tactical level yet require a clear understanding of the operational level environment. Furthermore, they must understand strategic considerations in order to prepare their ‘strategic corporals’ for operations. In order to ensure that Commanding Officers are fully prepared and capable of assuming their responsibilities, they must be made aware of the range of challenges they and their soldiers will face and the environment in which they will all operate. This thought is clearly articulated in the Canadian Army manual on Command “...a military force is

unlikely to succeed unless its commander understands the environment of his command – an environment in which the activities of his force and of his adversary play but a part.”⁵

This paper will examine the environment in which Commanding Officers are likely to operate and the challenges they will face at the beginning of the third millennium. Suggestions will be made to assist Commanding Officers in preparing for their duties.

The Strategic Environment

The world is becoming a more complicated place in which to operate. As noted in a recent Department of National Defence publication, “[i]n the aftermath of the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks, we live in a dangerous and unpredictable world.”⁶ A study undertaken by members of the National Securities Studies Course confirmed this idea. The course assessed that the United States will continue to be the hyperpower in a world increasingly influenced by globalization. A range of transnational issues, from the environment to mass migration, will dominate the affairs of most nations. The actions of non-state actors and terrorism will be the focus of security issues. Weapons of mass destruction will pose an ongoing threat to western nations, particularly those closely allied to the United States. Regional and intra-state conflicts will present ample opportunity for the employment of military forces in peace support missions. On the domestic front, natural disasters and terrorist threats will continue to pose challenges to the protection of national values and economic growth. Technology will continue to develop at a rapid rate. All of these factors will require the military to continue to evolve

and maximize the capabilities inherent in the personnel and equipment with which they have been provided.⁷

The Army is first and foremost a war fighting organization. “Central to the army’s purpose and role is its capability to apply force across the spectrum of conflict and continuum of operations.”⁸ The Army applies force on behalf of the Government of Canada. The use of this force is critical to ensuring the security of the nation. Foreign policy relies on the military as a tool to ensure the promotion of national values and global peace and security.⁹ In order to provide Canada with the most effective Army possible, all officers must share a common vision; “...unity of thought, purpose and action is essential to moving the Army forward.”¹⁰ The Army faces significant resource challenges. Lieutenant-General Mike Jeffery, recent Chief of the Land Staff, has stated publicly on several occasions that the Army is under-resourced. This has had a direct and negative impact on the Army’s ability to field capable combat forces for the nation. “Collective training opportunities are inadequate to maintain formation-level combat capability, and we are experiencing serious skill fade in some areas.”¹¹ At the same time General Jeffery led a significant transformation in the Army that will initially prepare it for the technological challenges to come. In a recent briefing to senior Departmental officials, he articulated his plan for transformation into an “information-based Army – a strategically relevant, tactically decisive, agile, lethal, survivable, medium-weight force.”¹² In the same briefing, he noted that ‘credibility’ is the Army’s ‘Centre of Gravity’. In order to be credible the Army must take certain concrete steps.

The Army needs to be more agile and lethal. Army leadership and soldiers need to be imbued with the military ethos [while]...action must be taken to avoid further institutional deterioration in certain critical areas – quality of life for personnel subject to excessive operational and training demands, formation-level combat capability and the morale of the Army.¹³

It will be incumbent on Commanding Officers to lead this change. As the most visible senior leaders in the chain of command, these individuals will play a critical role in realizing the strategic vision of the Army commander.

One final factor that will impact all Commanding Officers during deployments is the ad hoc nature of units. All units, regardless of the service, are augmented in some way prior to deployment. On one hand are naval ships, which enjoy the most stability, while at the other extreme are some Army units, which can be augmented by up to fifty percent. This large influx of personnel, all with varying skills and qualifications, presents enormous challenges to the Commanding Officer in the areas of leadership and training.

Command

There are numerous definitions of command. The NATO definition of command is “the authority vested in an individual for the direction, coordination and control of military forces.”¹⁴ The definition is narrow and may be more applicable to combat operations than to the full range of activities Commanding Officers will deal with in peace and war. The Canadian concept of command is more encompassing. “Command (in particular, identifying what needs to be done and why) embraces both the management activities (allocating the resources to achieve it) and leadership (getting subordinates to achieve it).”¹⁵

Leadership is an important component of command. *Canadian Officership in the 21st Century (Officership 2020)* calls for the development of “leaders who are committed to duty, service and subordinates and who understand the role of the “Warrior” ethos in the profession of arms.”¹⁶ There are some that would suggest the best start to developing

this strong type of operational leader is a sound liberal arts education. Doug Young, as Minister of National Defence, introduced the requirement for a formal university education, when he reported to the Prime Minister on the state of the Canadian Forces following the Somalia affair. A university education was seen as necessary for officers to be able to interact with Canadians and function effectively while deployed on operations.¹⁷ Bernd Horn lent his support this idea in his introduction to *Contemporary Issues in Officership: A Canadian Perspective* where he noted “the basic tool required is simple: a solid educational base balanced with operational experience.”¹⁸ Horn continues with the thought that officers who regard their profession solely from an operational point of view will eventually lead to the stagnation of the institution. Regardless of the educational foundations of a Commanding Officer, the world around him or her cannot be ignored. It is critical for a Commanding Officer to have a clear understanding of the environment in which they may operate. In the words of Noel Iverson, Commanding Officers “must cultivate an understanding of political and geopolitical realities”¹⁹

Commanding Officers cannot reach their full potential on education alone. *Officership 2020* defines the four pillars of the officer professional development system as education, training, experience and self-development. Of these pillars, the two that are the most difficult to achieve are training and experience. Strained operating budgets have restricted the opportunities for Commanding Officers to provide realistic training for their subordinates. The three-year cycle of the Army Training and Operations Framework (ATOF) model, which was developed to bring structure to the operational readiness of the Army, has, in some ways, compounded the training problem. There are now

Commanding Officers who will not have the opportunity to exercise their units as complete entities during their two-year tenure in command. This lack of experience is worrisome. Colonel Stuart Beare argues that experience is essential. He suggests that,

[c]onfidence, cognitive and behavioral complexity, intuition, leadership in the face of uncertainty, and professional competence are just some of the attributes that can be honed only through experience, experience that must be garnered before leaders command soldiers...in battle.²⁰

This is supported by management principles in the business community. Morgan McCall states, “the primary classroom for developing leader skills is on-the-job experience and that this critical resource is controlled by line...not staff.”²¹

While Commanding Officers may not be able to influence the amount of experience they will gain during their tour of command, they have a responsibility to ensure that they continue to develop their professional competencies. While their time will be filled with competing challenges, every effort must be made to pursue self-developmental opportunities. It is the responsibility of all Commanding Officers to follow the strategic issues of the day in order to be ready to meet the demands of the government. It is only with a thorough knowledge of the world around them that Commanding Officers will be able to inculcate the correct values in their team of burgeoning ‘strategic corporals’.

Leadership

Transformational leadership is now in vogue in the Canadian Forces. This style of leadership, while new, may be apropos for our times. Major Jamie Hammond notes that transformational leadership

is based on trust as well as on concepts of pride and self-esteem. It focuses on development rather than evaluation of the followers. It does not come into conflict with the military notions of discipline and duty. In fact, it is particularly well suited for a volunteer, professional military in which members accept altruistic notions of mission before self and service for one’s society.²²

The benefits of transformational leadership have been extolled by Bernard Bass a leading expert in the field. Bass contends that

transformational leaders motivate others to do more than they originally intended and often even more than they thought possible. They set more challenging expectations and typically achieve higher performances. Transformational leadership is an expansion of transactional leadership.²³

Transformational leadership can be a tremendous aid for a Commanding Officer. This type of leadership style is useful in times of increased stress. Subordinates who are comfortable with their superior's intentions and trust in their ability to see past the immediate crisis and to take actions appropriate for the longer term will rise above their own fears and reservations. This will in turn reduce the stress on the Commanding Officer.²⁴

While some benefits can be seen in the transformational leadership model, not everyone sees this model as appropriate for the modern military. Shamir and Ben-Ari suggest in their paper, *Challenges of Military Leadership in Changing Armies*, that current leadership models "do not deal specifically with leaders in inter-organizational and cross-cultural frameworks, nor with the political, moral, and cognitive complexity facing military leaders..."²⁵ Peter Northouse provides some criticisms of transformational leadership in his work *Leadership: Theory and Practice*. He contends that this theory is so wide-ranging that it is difficult to establish the exact parameters of the model. He also suggests that the theory can be elitist, anti-democratic and prone to abuse.²⁶

Although this paper does not pass judgment on the leadership style chosen by the Canadian Forces, it is important to note that not everyone is in agreement as to the utility of this one leadership model in the modern world. The message here for Commanding

Officers is that there are a number of leadership styles available. Not each is necessarily suitable for a given situation or a particular leader. Commanding Officers must choose a style that suits them; one in which they feel comfortable. Soldiers will be quick to discern a Commanding Officer who is not being himself/herself. This will lead to a decrease in the level of trust between soldiers and their leaders. This must be avoided. The more appropriate course is for leaders to “continually study leadership models and adapt them to their own personality and character, not *vice versa*.”²⁷

The Canadian Forces is comprised of several distinct demographic groups. An example of one such group is the new recruit who has needs and expectations that differ greatly from those of the more senior members of the military. Lynda Duxbury, in a lecture to the National Security Studies Course on 10 April 2003, describes this junior cohort in the Canadian Forces as the Echo Boomers or Nexus. These are children of the Baby Boomers and are comfortable in a world fully networked with the latest in information technology while acknowledging an increased level of violence in society. This group is nomadic. They want instant gratification, hate hierarchical institutions and want jobs that are challenging and fulfilling. Above all the Nexus are in demand by other employers and want to be consulted. All in all this is a difficult group for Commanding Officers to understand let alone deal with.

Commanding Officers must recognize the various types of individuals that they will lead. They may have to adjust their personal leadership style for the different groups within their command order to maximize the performance of all their subordinates. In all cases, Commanding Officers must be seen by, and interact with their soldiers. This is critical in peacetime in order to generate the trust necessary for the unit to be successful

in conflict. “The attribute of leadership that is common across all institutional militaries is based on continuous and personalized interaction with subordinates. Leaders are exemplars of the institution; immediate leaders are the institution.”²⁸

The environment in which they operate will magnify the challenges faced by Commanding Officers. As ad hoc units continue to be formed for operations the Commanding Officer will not enjoy the luxury of knowing all of his/her subordinates. Specific step must be taken by the Commanding Officer in order to build cohesion and esprit de corps in his/her unit. Cohesion will bring the unit together and provide a feeling of belong and solidarity for all members but particularly the members who have just joined the unit. Esprit will generate unity of purpose and goals and values that are common to all.²⁹ The direct leadership style that may have served them well as a sub-unit commander will not longer be suitable in the ad hoc unit. Commanding Officers will need to adjust their style to an indirect leadership approach. This is likely the only successful method to inculcate his/her intent into all members of the unit while building a high level of cohesion and esprit de corps. This is increasingly important given the ad hoc nature of Canada’s international military contributions.

The success of Commanding Officers in developing strong unit cohesion and esprit de corps will impact directly on the abilities of the unit. “The unit is...where the army’s moral and physical components demonstrably come together...in which combat potential is transformed in to combat power.”³⁰ It is this combat power, if properly developed, that will provide the nation with a tool that is useful in protecting national security and effectively projecting a favourable image of Canada to the world.

Ethos

Strong command and leadership abilities are essential if a Commanding Officer is to be a success. These abilities will allow a Commanding Officer to take his unit and develop it into a cohesive fighting force.³¹ However, the Commanding Officer requires a framework to control the application of violence. This framework is an ethical code.

To be a good soldier or a good military leader one must act in accordance with a code of ethics, and not just any code that one happens to find appealing but a singular code, formulated by the military community and in keeping with the ethical precepts of the wider society, a code to which all men-at-arms must submit themselves.³²

The fundamental values of the Canadian military ethos as articulated in Canada's Army are integrity, courage, loyalty, selflessness, and self-discipline. These values, when inculcated, allow soldiers to execute their duties in an environment in which right and wrong are clearly distinguished. The role of Commanding Officers in promoting and maintaining the military ethos is one of their most important responsibilities.³³ This can be achieved through a combination of training and example. Instilling the military ethos in all members of a unit must remain an important task of the Commanding Officer. These fundamentals are critical to the success of the 'strategic corporal'. With the proper values guiding the decision-making process, 'strategic corporals' are more likely to make the right decision at the right time. Without these fundamental values, deployed individuals and units will be less likely to meet the high standards expected of them by the nation. The work of Commanding Officers in this area should be aided with the publication of the anticipated Canadian Forces Profession of Arms manual.

Training

Training is the key to building effective teams. As noted previously, the Army is not fully resourced. As a result, the ability of a Commanding Officer to fully train his/her unit is limited. Therefore training must be focused, relevant and carefully planned in order to maximize the value. At the same time training must be focused on war fighting skills. In the words of Brigadier-General (retired) Ernie Beno in his pamphlet *Training to Fight and Win: Training in the Canadian Army* training must be “focused on a modern operational capability, able to fight against a sophisticated enemy.”³⁴ War fighting skills have proven to be the key to success regardless the mission assigned to the Army. Be the task support to fight floods, battling through ice storms, stabilizing Bosnia or conducting combat operations in Afghanistan, the skills learned and honed during high intensity training exercises have ensured the Army was successful.

Commanding officers bear two responsibilities for training. Not only must they train their unit, but they must also ensure that they are themselves prepared for the challenges they will face. They must be physically, mentally and emotionally tough. This requires an individual fitness program to ensure the Commanding Officer is seen as being ready for the demands of operations. David Miller’s review of Commanding Officers from the American War of Independence through to United Nations operations in Bosnia in his book *Commanding Officers* shows that those who command are likely to face tremendous mental and physical challenges.³⁵ Regardless of the type of mission the Commanding Officer will likely face an elevated level of stress. The success or failure of the unit will in large part be attributable to the decisions taken by the Commanding Officer. While this is most obvious in ships where the captain decides where the ship

will go and how it will engage the enemy, it is true in all services. Commanding Officers, whether they mean to or not, carry their unit on their shoulders.

Commanding Officers preparing for peace support missions must also prepare themselves to deal with the range of actors in the theatre. These vary from non-governmental organizations, through United Nations agencies, to belligerent parties. The Commanding Officer must become the warrior-diplomat. This is a result of the competing mandates of relief agencies creating difficulties as they attempt to deal with one another. It is often the role of the Commanding Officer to mediate between all parties in order to ensure that the affected civilians on the ground are not disadvantaged.³⁶ In order to prepare for these challenges Commanding Officers must study the organizations that will be represented in a particular theatre. The focus should be on capabilities and mandates of each organization. Unlike the military, civilian organizations rarely suffer from mission creep.

Turning now to unit training, it must start with basic soldier skills. As with most things, a solid training foundation will allow soldiers to successfully move on to more complex and demanding levels of training. The training level that provides the best return on investment is that of combat team. Combat teams are the first level that combines all arms into a comprehensive team. Combat teams provide an increased level of flexibility to brigade commanders for the employment of their resources.³⁷ These all-arms experiences are critical not only in producing combat power but also in developing leaders at all levels. Further, complex, training exercises will allow for soldiers to practice 'mission command'. This will allow commanders to articulate their intent to their subordinates. This will prove vital in peace support operations where "ordinary

soldiers, and certainly junior commanders will need to understand their commanders' 'intent' very well, and apply it in their dealings with local parties."³⁸

Leader development will ensure that the Army will function effectively into the future. Commanding Officers must ensure that they develop their senior officers so that some day they will be ready to assume the mantle of command. In addition, they must also ensure that leaders are developed at all levels. This is not an area that has been completely addressed in the past. Major-General Hillier as Commander Multi-national Division Southwest, in the NATO Stabilization Force in Bosnia,

observed that Canadian junior officers seemed less likely to seize the initiative than their British and Dutch peers. While our people are good platoon commanders, they did not demonstrate the ability to think beyond the immediate tasks or about the bigger picture element of the operation.³⁹

While we talk about 'strategic corporals' it is essential that all junior leaders, including junior officers, have the opportunity to develop their skills. Training should provide the chance to fail without repercussion. Learning from mistakes in peacetime will save lives on operations.

The purpose of all training is to be ready to execute missions as assigned by the government. Key to the success of each mission will be the actions of the 'strategic corporals'. They will require the confidence gained through focused, warfighting training in order to achieve the intent articulated by their Commanding Officers. Failure to train properly will place the lives of soldiers at risk and the mission accomplishment in jeopardy. Perhaps more importantly Canada as a nation will be seen to have failed. It is strategic consequences such as these that make the role of the Commanding Officer so important.

Conclusion

Commanding Officers are a select group in the Army. The senior leadership in the Army, that is Army Council, selects each individual. A great deal of time and effort is put into ensuring the correct officer commands the correct unit at the correct time. By the time an officer is selected to command he/she will have gathered a great deal of experience, usually including an operational tour, and will have expanded his/her formal training through attendance at the Canadian Forces College. This is important, as there is no single more critical individual in the Army. In the words of David Miller the Commanding Officer's "position is *sui generis* an appointment without parallel, for its holder exercises greater direct power over men and women in that unit than any other individual in the military chain of command."⁴⁰

Commanding Officers face a wide range of challenges in today's quickly changing and dangerous world. Many of these challenges would not be recognized by their predecessors, while others would. There is little doubt that the daily challenges of peace support operations test the capabilities of Commanding Officers as much as combat.⁴¹ Regardless of the challenges, Commanding Officers must learn to deal with them while ensuring they have trained a unit that is capable of mission accomplishment. Dealing with the new generation of recruit, the future 'strategic corporals', members of the Nexus generation will test the Commanding Officer. Innovative methods will have to be taken to ensure that training provides a challenge in an ethical framework and a reduced funding envelope. In the end, Commanding Officers prepare their units for missions as directed by the government. It is only through the deliberate and positive actions of Commanding Officers that Canada will have the combat power required to

ensure our national security. As a result, Commanding Officers will continue to have a significant impact at both the tactical and strategic level for some time to come.

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- ¹ Ken Eyre. "Serious Soldiering: A Preliminary Investigation into the Environment of War at the Dawn of the New Millennium" Contemporary Issues in Officership: A Canadian Perspective, Toronto: Canadian Institute of Strategic Studies, 2000, 235-236.
- ² General Charles Krulak first introduced the concept of the Strategic Corporal when he was the Commandant of the United States Marine Corps. See Charles C Krulak. "The Strategic Corporal: Leadership in the Three Block War" Marine Corps Gazette, January 1999. General Krulak introduces two concepts in his paper. The first is the 'Three Block War'. This concept envisages future conflict involving the full range of military operations including humanitarian support, peacekeeping and combat operations all taking place within several city blocks. The second concept is that of the 'Strategic Corporal'. This concept sees decisions taken by junior members of a force influencing the strategic level.
- ³ Patrick Mileham and Lee Willett. Military Ethics for the Expeditionary Era, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2001.
- ⁴ Department of National Defence. Canada's Army: We Stand on Guard for Thee, CFP B-GL 300-000 FP-000, 1998, 2.
- ⁵ Department of National Defence. Command CFP B-GL 300-003 FP-000, 1996, 1-3.
- ⁶ Department of National Defence. Strategic Assessment 2002, Ottawa, 2002, 17.
- ⁷ Exercise Strategic Bridge, Canadian Forces College, National Security Studies Course 5, 28 February 2003.
- ⁸ Canada's Army, 5.
- ⁹ Department of National Defence. Army Strategy, Ottawa, 2002, 4.
- ¹⁰ Army Strategy, 1.
- ¹¹ Ibid, 6.
- ¹² Chief of the Land Staff Briefing. A Way Ahead for Canada's Army. 20 January 2003.
- ¹³ Army Strategy, 12.
- ¹⁴ As cited in Command, 1-4.
- ¹⁵ Command, 1-7 – 1-8.
- ¹⁶ Department of National Defence. Canadian Officership in the 21st Century (Officership 2020), Ottawa: 2001, 10.
- ¹⁷ The Honourable M. Douglas Young, P.C., M.P., Minister of National Defence and Veterans Affairs. Report to the Prime Minister, "Leadership and Management of the Canadian Forces", 25 March 1997, 15-17. Notable academics as Jack Granatstein and David Bercuson contributed to the report of Minister Young and supported this recommendation.
- ¹⁸ Bernd Horn, ed. Contemporary Issues in Officership: A Canadian Perspective, Toronto: Canadian Institute of Strategic Studies, 2000, 3.
- ¹⁹ Noel Iverson. Leadership from a Sociological Perspective, CDA Institute for Security and Defence Studies, XIII Annual Seminar, Military Leadership and Change in the 1990's, January, 1997, 6.
- ²⁰ Stuart Beare. Operational Leadership Experience in Officer Professional Development: A Pillar in Peril, Canadian Forces College, Advanced Military Studies Course 3, 2000, 17.
- ²¹ Morgan W. McCall Jr. High Flyers: Developing the Next Generation of Leaders, Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1998, xii.
- ²² J.W. Hammond. First Things First: Improving Canadian Leadership Doctrine, Toronto: Canadian Forces College, 1996, 12.
- ²³ Bernard M. Bass. Transformational Leadership: Industry, Military, and Educational Impact, Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1998, 4.
- ²⁴ Bass, 43-44.
- ²⁵ Boas Shamir and Eyal Ben-Ari. Challenges of Military Leadership in Changing Armies, Journal of Political and Military Sociology, 2000 Vol. 28, No. 1, (Summer), 54.
- ²⁶ Peter G. Northouse. Leadership: Theory and Practice, 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2001, 146-148.
- ²⁷ Hammond, 8.
- ²⁸ Charles C. Moskos, and Frank R. Wood. The Military: More Than Just a Job?, Toronto: Pergamon-Brassey, 1988, 287.
- ²⁹ Anthony Kellett. Combat Motivation: The Behavior of Soldiers in Battle. Hingham: Kluwer, 1982, 46.
- ³⁰ Canada's Army, 51.
- ³¹ David Miller. Commanding Officers, London: John Murray, 2001, 239.
- ³² Iverson, 2.

³³ Canada's Army, 34-37.

³⁴ Ernest B. Beno. Training to Fight and Win: Training in the Canadian Army. 2nd ed. Kingston: May 2001, 5.

³⁵ David Miller. Commanding Officers. London: John Murray, 2001, 1-12.

³⁶ This perspective is based on the author's experience as both a unit commanding officer and Task Force Commander in Bosnia.

³⁷ Beno, 8-9.

³⁸ Shamir, 51.

³⁹ Rick Hillier. "Leadership in the Canadian Army in the 21st Century" Canadian Army Leadership in the 21st Century: Report of the Army Future Seminar – Leadership, 6-7 February 2002. Kingston: Chief of the Land Staff, 2002, 44.

⁴⁰ Miller, 239.

⁴¹ Miller, 211.

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