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**THE CANADIAN REGIMENTAL SYSTEM - ANCHOR IN THE PAST OR GRAPPLE  
TO THE FUTURE?**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper briefly examines the Canadian regimental system, its role and its utility as an organizational model for operations and as a human resources model for the future. Little effort is expended arguing past successes, accepting as given that the regimental system has served Canada well in our previous wars. However, the paper does challenge the notion that the regimental system, in its current form, is a desirable model for an army in transition, in a dramatically changing world, as we are experiencing today.

Through a number of lens that are commonly invoked to support the continuation of the regimental system, the paper attempts to establish that the supportive conventional wisdom is frequently anecdotal and situational at best. The paper suggests that there is little clear evidence that the Canadian regimental system actually produces a level of combat cohesion and effectiveness superior to other organizational model used in other armies. In fact, the evidence suggest that the parochial and introverted nature of regimental culture has in the past and could again could pose a significant impediment to much needed transformation and innovative thought.

The paper concludes with an old but recurring idea for army organization, which is based on a corps model for each combat arm with numbered units within the corps. This though is only an interim solution. As the distinctions between arms and corps blur, it is unlikely that individual corps as we know them will be sustainable.

Finally, the paper closes with a warning that we should not artificially limit our ideas and effectiveness through blind acceptance of old assumptions. If the assumptions can be quantified or made somehow tangible, we might still find need for our regimental system. However, the challenges of budgets, demographics, technology, the new security environment and the transformation needed to meet them, demand more intellectual rigor that relying on assumptions, no matter how deeply ingrained.

*“The bottom line for leaders is that if they do not become conscious of the culture in which they are embedded, those cultures will manage them. Cultural understanding is desirable for all of us, but it is essential to leaders if they are to lead.”* (Schein, p.15)

## INTRODUCTION

On the surface, the Canadian regimental system<sup>1</sup> appears to be of little significance from a strategic perspective. How the various regiments, branches and specialist corps of the Canadian army administer and organize themselves for the purposes of morale, dress, ceremonial and career development, should not significantly impact how Canada secures its borders, protects its interests and projects its values abroad. However, this paper will attempt in the first instance to establish that the culture inculcated in our regimental system has significant potential to negatively affect strategic defence decision-making and therefore defence outcomes. The regimental system, despite its strengths and official (but qualified) endorsement as the foundation of our army<sup>2</sup>, has significant limitations that have in the past and could in the future inhibit transformation and lead to poor defence and security choices. Technology, Canadian demographic trends and the new security environment demand unprecedented flexibility and new ideas in defence and security.<sup>3</sup> Charitably viewed, the regimental system might

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<sup>1</sup> The primary focus of this paper will be the largest group of adherents to the regimental system – the infantry. However, the logic applies equally to the other combat arms and increasingly to the other branches of the army, all of whom to some extent or another have adopted a regimental style system. These include honorary colonels, branch advisors responsible for career development and command selection.

<sup>2</sup> Strengths acknowledged in Canadian Army Doctrine see CFP 300 *Canada's Army*. p. 44. While the army's capstone doctrine manual lauds the cohesion and ethos building aspects of the regimental system describing it as being of “critical importance”, it is also quick to underline the system's deficiencies – “Regimental considerations must never be allowed to impinge on professional or operational requirements; nor should the regimental system be embraced in a way which might fragment or weaken the army's need for institutional cohesion.” That warning would seem oddly out of place unless institutional cohesion is deemed to be an issue of concern. Obviously it is.

<sup>3</sup> See Colonel Mike Capstick's article in *The Maple Leaf*, 24 July 2002, in his capacity as the Project Director Land Personnel Strategy, and presumably therefore stating the official Army position. Tying the significance of the regimental system to “seismic shifts in the past decade”... “in the nature of warfare

not be up to task: less charitably, the regimental system might be a significant impediment to transformation.

Stripped of the passion<sup>4</sup> that surrounds it, the Canadian regimental system is at its heart, an organizational and human resource management tool. Derived from an agrarian, class-oriented, industrial-age culture, it draws its strength from regional identity and strong family connections. It tends to function best in racially and regionally homogenous groups drawing strength from commonalities vice diversity. It is based first upon societal bonding (the county or the city) vice the cohesion that derives from adversity, although diversity certainly reinforces the bonding foundation created by the social linkages.<sup>5</sup> However, there is an important cultural<sup>6</sup> dimension that threads through the organizational and the human resource management planes. Together, the organizational, human resource management and cultural dimensions define how Canadians organize themselves to conduct land combat.<sup>7</sup> This paper will attempt to unravel the relevance of the Canadian regimental system as an organizational model for the future and as vehicle for transformation.

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*and the military profession*", Capstick claims that "Because the regimental system is so fundamental to the way that the Canadian Army operates, and is the foundation of our very identity as soldiers, failure to scrutinize it would be an abrogation of our professional responsibilities to the Army and to Canada." p.12

<sup>4</sup> Loomis, p. 1. Also, Hellyer, p. 160.

<sup>5</sup> Loomis, p.3-4.

<sup>6</sup> See Breslin, p.1. "Culture plays a crucial role in how an army thinks about and prepares for war." One could conclude that armies that think as regiments think not as a unified and integrated combat system but rather as a group of competing entities.

<sup>7</sup> "Combat" as distinct from "operations", based upon the notion that effectiveness in combat vice a peace support operation is the ultimate test.

This paper will not attempt to rediscover the roots of the Canadian regimental system or the British system from which it grew.<sup>8</sup> This has been well documented in a variety of works and the regimental system's effectiveness in war to this juncture is not in dispute. What is disputable is the future utility of the system.<sup>9</sup> This then begs the question - What has changed to render the previously successful Canadian regimental system a poor choice for a modern organizational and HR model? There is also another dimension that warrants investigation, that being to identify which is the causal dimension for cohesion and which the effect. That is, does cohesion in combat come from strong regimental tradition or does strong regimental tradition come from the shared adversity of combat? How can one explain the exceptionally strong cohesion and war record of the First Canadian Parachute Battalion during World War II, a unit with no prior war record or traditions, if the traditions of the regimental system are so fundamental to our effectiveness?<sup>10</sup>

Largely of necessity, the evidence presented in favour of and against the Canadian regimental system is anecdotal and the anecdotal aspect is important to recognize at the outset. While the author acknowledges the intellectual fragility of drawing overarching conclusions from isolated snapshots, one senses that the counter arguments are equally selective. This then produces a major and important deduction – that there is little real data from which to draw conclusions. At the risk of inflicting yet another survey upon

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<sup>8</sup> See Loomis, Strachan or a host of other materials.

<sup>9</sup> Although, much respected military historians like Dr. Jack English argued its continued utility, especially in an Anglo, Australian-Canadian context as an influential military chip to counter to US dominance. See *National Policy and The Americanization of the Canadian Military* and a similar view from Blaxland. From the British perspective, see Stanhope, p.322, “*The regimental system has worked well in fortifying soldiers under constant strain, and there is no overwhelming argument for changing it again.*”

the CF, we must first ensure that the regimental system is meeting our needs if we are to wed ourselves to it in the dark days that international terrorism promise for the future. The central question comes down to whether or not the regimental system best positions the Canadian Forces to maximize the opportunities presented within the strategic, demographic and technological challenges of the future. Alternatively, does it represent a mindset and a set of assumptions that threaten to limit or impede our transformation to a 21<sup>st</sup> century organization? A false step in this regard could paralyse force development just when we need innovation and clear thinking unbridled by assumptions and old ideas. On the ground, in combat, such an approach could contribute to unnecessary Canadian deaths or worse, the failure of our units on operations. The army's senior leadership seems to have these concerns and believes that they warrant close examination.<sup>11</sup>

The debate has two camps. On one hand, strong proponents of the regimental system tend to be risk averse and draw upon experience, prior success and the psychological dimension as substantiation for retaining it. They claim correctly that it is a proven military organizational model and a means of connecting Canadians with their military. They are inclined to believe that human nature and combat are constants and that immutable but intangible forces guide their interactions.<sup>12</sup> Others<sup>13</sup> tend to draw upon the historical lessons that suggest that fundamental change does occur and look to

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<sup>10</sup> Also, Joint Task Force 2. A new unit without a regimental tradition, shrouded in operational secrecy but which many CF personnel aspire to join (although few are actually successful and thus the allure perhaps).

<sup>11</sup> Capstick, The Maple Leaf, 24 July 2002 p.24 A study has been undertaken.

<sup>12</sup> Kellett, Regimental Organization, "*Thus while military organization has tended to be guided by operational requirements from unit to the formation levels in some armies, administrative and – to some degree – psychological factors have generally played a more significant role in Canadian and British army organization than have more purely tactical ones*". P. 56 That said, there is no evidence that the British/Canadian system is somehow superior – just different.

<sup>13</sup> The author included.

examples like the utility of horse-mounted cavalry with the advent of the machine gun and mechanization. This camp tends to be more accepting of risk and more open to immature and unproven but promising technologies, concepts and ideas<sup>14</sup>. The latter are also perhaps more comfortable with the notion that intergenerational attitudes and demographics are changing and that our system needs to accommodate these changes as our youth become increasingly urban, mobile, ethnically diverse and with a more urgent and compelling desire to satisfy personal goals and expectations.

The discussion could also be de-layered to a certain extent, separating the small group combat cohesion aspect from the more global organizational esprit de corps and cultural perspective. This paper is concerned with the wider strategic implications of regimental esprit de corps and how to harness it to facilitate transformation. However, the mythology of the regiment's role in individual motivation and small group cohesion is also addressed as these arguments are frequently conjured up as one of the most important reasons for retaining the regimental system.

With these thoughts in mind, this paper will briefly examine the utility and effectiveness of the Canadian regimental system from five perspectives, drawing occasional comparisons from other countries, mostly commonwealth, that are currently using or have consciously abandoned similar models. These perspectives are not comprehensive but they are areas that are frequently cited as being strengths of the regimental system:

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<sup>14</sup> Stanhope p. 322. He acknowledges that the regimental system encourages soldiers to be parochial and that some view it as wasteful in administrative and training costs.



- Recruitment and Retention
- Human Resource Management
- Operations
- Territorial Affiliations (Connecting with Canadians)
- Honorary Appointments

## DISCUSSION

### Recruitment and Retention

Knowledgeable commentators like Dr. Linda Duxbury and Dr. (Capt (N)) Al Okros, and Dr. Donna Winslow have warned that the demographics and the expectations of our nation are indeed changing. They also note that the recruiting base for the next generation of soldiers and leaders is particularly complex and will place new and challenging demands on the CF and how it thinks about recruitment and retention.<sup>15</sup> Our army, and specifically our regimental system, founded on rural, territorial and static, uni-career, Anglo-Saxon and class<sup>16</sup> notions, probably holds little allure for our increasingly

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<sup>15</sup> See articles by Okros and Winslow/Dandeker in *Backbone of the Army: Non-Commissioned officers in the Future Army*, Edited by Douglas Bland. Both articles warn of unprecedented change in attitudes and social expectations. Although not expressed explicitly as a source of concern, the implication within this particular volume is that the NCO and by extension, the organisation (regimental system) will likely have to change significantly to keep pace. An example being “*Women are pursuing careers in the military and career paths will have to take into account the female life cycle, allowing breaks for pregnancy while still ensuring career development after a return to work.*” Winslow/Dandeker p 59. While pregnancy is a convenient and overused example, the desire for personal fulfilment is increasingly becoming an expectation and according to authorities like Linda Duxbury, the CF will have to become much more flexible in this regard if we are to retain trained personnel for a full military career.

<sup>16</sup> “Class” defined in the military by our system of messes, which is fundamental to the regimental system. See Loomis, p. 23 “The linchpin of this Canadian system is the horizontal organization of Messes...” While Loomis describes messes as horizontal organizations (which they are for the mess membership), they

urban, mobile, multi-career, non-Anglo-Saxon and egalitarian youth. The regimental system supporters would likely argue that it has been ever thus and that youth are always a mystery. However, the demographers and the anthropologists appear to be arguing that western societies are undergoing fundamental change to which employers must respond proactively if they hope to compete successfully for talented and committed workers.

An enduring notion in the Canadian regimental system that does not stand up well to close scrutiny is the theory that young people, especially modern young people, enter the CF with a strong desire to join a particular regiment because it represents “their” geographic identity. Examples of such decisions are probably available, but as noted in one important study, *“The evidence that there is a relationship between geographic loyalties and regimental identification tends to be anecdotal rather than systematic.”*<sup>17</sup> One commonly but incorrectly hears that The R22eR recruit in Quebec, while the PPCLI recruits in the west and The RCR in the Maritimes and Ontario. The fact is that the regiments themselves do not recruit anywhere as this is now and has been for many years the responsibility of the CF’s centralized recruiting system (aside from their reserve battalions who do so locally on the militia recruiting model). One might therefore conclude that the regional dimension of recruiting is more about young people wanting to be garrisoned close to family and friends than it is about desiring a particular regiment, but perhaps the exception proves the rules. An unfortunate but illustrative example is the four PPCLI soldiers killed in 2002 in the friendly fire incident in Afghanistan.

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are also vertical in that they separate officers, senior and junior non-commissioned members. Stanhope also speaks of another “*complex caste structure*” between regiments of the British Army (i.e. Guards being socially superior to county regiments – fortunately our system seems largely free of this obstacle. p. 322.

<sup>17</sup> Kellett, *The Role of Territorial Affiliations*, p.43.

Ostensibly, the PPCLI is a western regiment but two of these soldiers were from Ontario and two were from Nova Scotia. In fact, these four young Patricia's home provinces suggest, albeit anecdotally, that

recent studies by the army have suggested moving armouries to the suburbs in order to attract suburban youth who are disinclined to travel into city centres for reserve service.<sup>21</sup> More likely then, the selection will be made based on practicalities like armouries location, bus routes, where a buddy is<sup>22</sup> or perhaps at the vocational level, our recruit might join the QOR specifically with the parachute role in mind. There is no evidence to suggest that modern youth seek out the Toronto Scottish because of that regiment's traditions or war record. These Toronto units could as easily be "Canadian Infantry Battalions 13, 14, 15 and 16" and the important discriminating criteria (proximity and friends) would likely remain the same.

Another key recruitment and retention discriminator is the value that the individual places upon the process of selection for membership in a particular regiment. Logically, when the entrance requirements, standards and opportunities within all regiments are the same, the distinction between the regiments is almost immaterial. The vocationally motivated soldier craves the distinction and acceptance of tough standards. Members of the Canadian Airborne Regiment (and the current parachute companies within the three light battalions) tend to identify themselves as paratroopers ahead of being members of their regiment or their battalion.<sup>23</sup> The specialized training, fitness standards and individual professionalism make acceptance into this group more valuable to the member's individual identity than the larger regimental family. Within the airborne community, individual specialties like the patrol pathfinders, mountain

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<sup>21</sup> MGen Ed Fitch, Program Manager, PMO, Land Force Reserve Restructure, covered this during CBC TV Ottawa interview in December 2002 but the Auditor General was concerned about it in 1992. See <http://www.oag-bvg.gc.ca/domino/reports.nsf/html/ch9218e.html#0.2.L39QK2.V0OCQD.S74YFE.KJ>

<sup>22</sup> Kellett, *Esprit de Corps*, p.56

operations instructors, parachute instructors and freefall parachutists, each with arduous or exacting courses and standards, have their own internal fraternity that outsiders aspire to enter. The standards are tough, many fail and the successful have truly achieved acceptance within a fraternity. Modern, professional soldiers seeking personal challenge, fulfilment and professional respect tend to gravitate towards modern tougher standards rather than past glory.<sup>24</sup>

Even the reserve force is facing an increasing trend towards mobility, which in turn has much reduced their territorial base (more on this in a subsequent section). Suffice to note that reserve soldiers no longer remain on the farm or in the local factory but rather follow educational and civilian job opportunities outside of their hometowns. It is common to see reservist either parade with another regiment in their new location or change regiments entirely. The current regimental system does not facilitate this sort of inter-regimental mobility.

The ethnicity of our society particularly in the larger urban areas is also rendering the Anglo-Saxon affinity for United Kingdom affiliations less useful. Canada, has about 18 different Scottish or highland regiments – significantly more than Scotland does. It is a quaint reminder of the original settlement patterns of our country but logically, there is no reason to conclude that artificial ethnicity would resonate with a culturally diverse society. Further study might reveal that young Canadians of Asian or Caribbean

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<sup>23</sup> See any of Horn's work regarding "the airborne mystique".

<sup>24</sup> Strachan, p. 224. Referring to the Parachute Regiment outliving its declared function as a force solely for vertical envelopment operations, "*The combination of red berets and toughness has ensured a public profile high enough to sustain its place on the Army List*".

extraction are in fact quite keen to join a highland regiment but it would seem to be an illogical conclusion.

Even those who have bought into the idea of the regiment present dichotomies in their logic. On the surface, one could easily conclude that things regimental are incredibly important to soldiers today. *“Cotton found strong support for regimental symbols and traditions, with 76% of all respondents to this question agreeing that they should be kept at all costs, and only 10% arguing that they have no place in a modern force.”* However, and most importantly, *“Cotton was quick to point out that the link between vocational values and support for regimental symbols and traditions is one of association rather than causality – one cannot infer from his data that regiments are the cause of an institutional role identity.”*<sup>25</sup> The author’s own recent experiences in regimental museum fundraising supports the idea that the regiment’s membership wholeheartedly supports the concept of any such regimental activities provided that someone else does it and that there is no personal cost involved.<sup>26</sup> Citing his impression of an amalgamation of British Army attitudinal assessments, Kellett sums it up nicely – *“unit identification is fairly widespread in combat arms units, albeit episodic and situational and tending to be displaced by more immediate concerns.”*<sup>27</sup>

In summary, the regimental system does not appear to be particularly well formulated to meet the career aspirations of the next generation of Canadians. The

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<sup>25</sup> Kellett, *Esprit de Corps*, p132 para 254.

<sup>26</sup> Not unlike many Canadians who expect better health care, education and municipal services along with a healthy tax cut.

<sup>27</sup> Kellett, *Esprit de Corps*, p. 145.

obverse side of that coin is that by failing to encourage recruitment and retention, neither is it well formulated to meet the needs of the CF. The regimental system has served us reasonably well in the past but there are no guarantees for the future. It might be time to move on, at least as an experiment. If it fails, Canada's relatively secure borders should allow us time to revert to the regimental system

### **Human Resource Management**

Another key role of the regiment is the management of human resources in areas like postings, advanced training and recommendations for key appointments like Commanding Officer and RSM. It is essentially the job of managing our talent and extracting as much potential as possible from each individual. This has traditionally been largely under regimental control however, much of that control diminished dramatically after the Somalia Inquiry. During the course of the inquiry, the commissioners perceived that the regimental system had become a dark force that had not worked in the national interest. Instead of being open and accountable for their actions, the regiments had sought to establish self-serving influence and tried to conceal mistakes in order to protect the regiment's reputation.

While CF and Army initiatives since the Somalia Inquiry have much reduced the authority of the regiments in this regard, the regiment remains influential in some areas. Whereas the chain of command writes the performance evaluation and recommends advanced training, the regiment provides a longer-term view of the individual's strengths

and weaknesses. Within a battalion, for the junior ranks (below sergeant), the chain of command and “the regiment” are essentially the same people – company commanders and the commanding officer advised by their senior non-commissioned officers. However, for senior non-commissioned ranks (Sergeants and above) and trained officers (captains and above), the regiment system has a senior officer, usually a colonel<sup>28</sup> and a senior Chief Warrant Officer to ensure that there is oversight and continuity. This is especially important in the infantry wherein there are not only three battalions to coordinate but also many people on Extra-Regimental Employment (“ERE”).<sup>29</sup> It is the “Regimental” Colonel’s job to ensure that there is a healthy flow between the line battalions and ERE, both to ensure that individuals have the opportunity for developmental training and employment and so that there is a constant cross-pollination between operational field experience/command and our headquarters/staff and training establishments.

Despite its effectiveness, like any system of human resource management, the regimental system produces a degree of dissatisfaction. The number of desirable appointments and advanced training opportunities are few and the number of quality aspirants many. By definition, the process of selecting personnel for limited opportunities creates a larger group of people who were not selected and are thus dissatisfied. Efforts have been made to standardize and quantify the process across regiments but the decisions still come down to personal assessments (vice personnel

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<sup>28</sup> The author served in this capacity for The RCR for over three years, during which time most of the new army level initiatives were introduced.

<sup>29</sup> ERE postings include, any appointment outside of a battalion of the parent regiment including headquarters staff, any training establishment, any reserve regiment support function, etc.



assessments and recommendations). Since the Somalia Inquiry, a number of CF/Army level initiatives, including command selection boards have gone a long way to providing the oversight and continuity of the regimental system but widespread dissatisfaction remains. Those who are left behind in these selections tend to view the regiment as showing favouritism for those who are selected. Thus, although the system appears to the practitioners and to the successful aspirants to work well and to be fair, the larger target audience is becoming less and less convinced.

It is significant that the credibility of the regimental human resource management system is viewed with such scepticism. Although the system is fair and increasingly transparent, the subjective element involved in choosing one excellent individual over another in fact or in perception cannot be dismissed. Over time, people tend to blame their regimental “mafia” for the individual’s limited career advancement and develop quite negative attitudes regarding the regiment. This also leads to job dissatisfaction, redresses and frequently early release for our trained mid-career officers and senior NCOs.

An army wide human resource management approach (that is an approach that is divorced from the regiment’s control or influence) would produce the exact same numbers of “winners” and “losers”. However, the perception that the regiment can no longer interfere with and manipulate conditions so that only “favoured sons” advance, would contribute greatly to the overall state of morale for our trained personnel. In this regard, one of the key strengths of the regimental system, intimate knowledge of

individual strengths, weaknesses and potential, has become a significant limitation. In a society where individual rights have primacy, the regiment's corporate approach, aimed at what is best for the regiment, can legitimately be viewed as being biased against some individuals.

## **Operations**

Unless there is something quite unique about the Canadian soldier amongst his fellows world wide, there is no evidence to suggest that he and his regimental system are clearly superior in war. It has proven to be a good system overall but other systems have been as successful.<sup>30</sup> Despite passing assertions that The Canadian way of warfare and our regimental system are inextricably linked there is no real evidence to suggest that Canadians are actually wedded to the notion that each soldier must belong to a regiment based on regional, ethnic (i.e. Scottish Highland) or historical peculiarities (Guards, Rifle, or Fusilier). The First Canadian Parachute Battalion fought well without these considerations (aside from being specialist parachutists) and speaking with the veterans,<sup>31</sup> they tend to associate themselves very closely with the British 3rd Airborne Brigade of 6 Airborne Division with whom they fought throughout the war, as opposed to the rest of the Canadian Army that fought in Canadian formations.

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<sup>30</sup> For example, Israeli Forces tend to identify on a brigade basis. The French Foreign Legion, US Army Rangers and the US Marine Corps tend towards a broader identity as Legionnaires, Rangers and Marines respectively. Airborne soldiers worldwide tend to self-identify across international boundaries and regard themselves as paratroopers with a closer affinity to other airborne units than to non-airborne units in their own armies (See Horn Bastard Sons)..

<sup>31</sup> Which the author has had the occasion to do over many years.

The whole notion of operating as combined arms battle groups also brings the regimental factor into question. A modern Light Armoured Vehicle equipped battalion established at about 680 personnel is organized into three “rifle” companies, an integral combat support company and an administrative company which is probably about 80% “cap-badged” in that regiment. The other 20% are specialists who wear logistic, maintenance, medical and signals cap badges. On operations, a reconnaissance squadron, an engineer squadron and the typical 15-20% reserve augmentation will reduce the proportion of soldiers regimentally badged in that battle group to closer to 50 or 60%. Thus on operations, the battle group is only marginally representative of “The Regiment”.

The technological and doctrinal impacts also undermine the utility of a regimental structure. *“At what point does an armoured personnel carrier, particularly if it mounts a gun, become a tank? The former is an infantry vehicle, the latter not. When does a tank become a self-propelled gun? The first is the responsibility of an armoured regiment, the second of the Royal Artillery.”*<sup>32</sup> “ This has “... meant that the (British) army’s fighting structures have been put at odds with the army’s peacetime administrative organization”.<sup>33</sup> As the Canadian army grapples with the difficult issues surrounding the integration of technology, organization and doctrine, we do not need the distraction of artificial imperatives like the regimental structure. As we look to a future of weapons platforms responding automatically to electronic input from unmanned sensors with indirect fire or an as yet unimagined terminal effect, the lines between attack helicopters, tanks, artillery and perhaps electronic warfare, start to blur significantly. The “infantry

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<sup>32</sup> Strachan, p. 224

<sup>33</sup> Strachan, p. 224

man's" job blurs too – with robotic reconnaissance, volumetric munitions and Special Forces corporals capable of directing 500-pound bombs onto meter-sized targets. The notion of an infantry battalion, an armoured regiment and an artillery regiment almost fade to insignificance in this sort of future. That is unless clinging to these ideas as organizational structures impedes the progress to that most effective mix of technology, organization and doctrine.

To wit, those who look back to history to support the Regimental system would do well to consider the 1922 amalgamations of British cavalry. Rather than abandon the regimental system in favour of the general staff's requirement for "*... a set number of cavalry squadrons: entire regiments of three squadrons were neither administratively nor tactically necessary.*"<sup>34</sup>, the Army elected to amalgamate existing regiments as a compromise, rather than fight the political battle to achieve the organizational and doctrinal changes that it required. "*The general staff's loss of nerve created an inbuilt roadblock to mechanization. The British Army responded to technical innovation by adapting existing regiments raised for different and increasingly obsolete tactical roles, not by creating fresh regiments to meet new tasks. Thus, rather than expand the Royal Tank Corps early in the 1920s, it kept the tank corps small, and spent much of the inter-war period locking horns with cavalry regiments as to when they were to lose their horses and be given tanks. Even when cavalry regiments were mechanized, they persisted*

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<sup>34</sup> Strachan, p 211

*in seeing tank tactics in terms adapted from the cavalry, not as having characteristics peculiar to the new weapons system.*”<sup>35</sup>

Finally, there is combat. The evidence does not support the notion that a regimental tradition is the *sine qua non* of combat effectiveness nor of unit cohesion. The ‘cap badge’ has undoubtedly played an important role from time to time and anecdotally one can conjure up images of men fighting and dying for “the regiment”, although a certain amount of that might also be attributable to regimental histories, which like most family lore, tend towards positive enhancement when the truth is less colourful or less palatable. There is credible evidence to suggest that “the regiment” is key to cohesion and combat effectiveness only in as much as soldiers fight for themselves (survival) and for their buddies. However, the notion of regimental history being at the forefront of a soldier’s mind during close quarters combat is suspect. The evidence is that no matter how an army chooses to organize its establishment, the real constant in combat cohesion and effectiveness is the bonding with the soldier’s immediate comrades with whom he and they will entrust each other’s lives.<sup>36</sup> That can occur inside a two-man sniper team, a battalion, a regiment, a brigade or a division.<sup>37</sup> The important distinction is that the regimental system, especially the Canadian regimental system is not essential to cohesion

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<sup>35</sup> Strachan p.211. It is also interesting to note Montgomery’s penchant during the desert campaign for wearing a Royal Tank Regiment cap badge next to his general officer’s cap badge. He was an infantryman, not a tankerman or a cavalryman but he understood and wished to communicate that he understood and believed in the new way of warfare called mechanization. It was perhaps a sign of his times that he felt it necessary to do such an odd thing. Strachan also cites the Army Air Corp’s attack helicopters as a modern example - the RAF and Armoured Corp felt threatened and stalled a proven war-winning concept.

<sup>36</sup> See SLA Marshall, *Men Against Fire* p. 42, “I hold it to be one of the simplest truths of war that the thing which enables an infantry soldier to keep going with his weapon is the near presence or the presumed presence of a comrade”. More recently and more poignantly “I joined to serve my country but I was fighting to protect my friends.” Sgt Charles Horgan (3ID) wounded at Nasirya quoted at a press conference 27 March 2003.

and operational effectiveness. It has worked in the past but we do not need to “wed” ourselves to it “to the exclusion of all others”.

### **Territorial Affiliations/Connecting with Canadians**

The significance of territorial affiliations as a recruiting/retention incentive have been covered, but the idea of regimental territorial affiliations and their usefulness in national unity and connecting Canadians to their army is also an important consideration. The reserves in particular advance the idea that they and the territorially affiliated regimental system in particular are the bedrock connecting the CF to the people it serves. The argument that reserve units being present in many communities gives Canadians a sense of local ownership is probably a valid conclusion historically but there is no conclusive evidence that this is indeed the case now as Canadian society becomes more and more mobile. Regional identity remains an important factor in the Canadian confederation but the municipal identity upon which the regimental system is based (city regiments) is suspect.<sup>38</sup> The author’s own experience with civilian friends and relatives, who because of the author’s profession, probably have more interest in matters military than most, have without exception, no idea as to the identity of their local reserve units. Once prompted, they might be able to acknowledge having heard of the unit but are universally incapable of producing the name from a standing start.

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<sup>37</sup> In the author’s experience, it occurs most frequently at the company level, which is about the maximum breadth of the combat soldier’s ability to see the battle and to witness leadership and personal bravery. This idea is also supported by Kellett *Esprit de Corps*, p. 71.

<sup>38</sup> Kellett, *Territorial Affiliation*, p. 43. “The evidence that there is a relationship between geographic loyalties and regimental identification tends to be anecdotal rather than systematic.” The caution implied herein is that we should no longer assume the importance of geography in assigning unit designations. It might well be worth retaining but there is no clear evidence that its value remains.

Importantly too, it is illogical to assume that modern Canadians would accept the idea of another Beaumont Hamel, Dieppe or Hong Kong.<sup>39</sup> Casualties on such a large scale are probably unlikely under modern circumstances but we should not rule out the idea of tens of fatalities and other casualties in a single operation.<sup>40</sup> Spread across Canada, these fatalities might be acceptable. From a single city or region, they would be devastating. Although the likelihood that locally raised reserve units will ever face such a trial in the future is debatable, but clearly, if it were to happen, there would be merit in the notion of raising pan-Canadian units and letting the members bond through training rather than through their home communities.<sup>41</sup>

A strong territorial argument in favour of retaining the regimental system is its importance in anchoring the francophone identity within the Canadian Army and indeed the CF. It could be argued that Le Royal Vingt-deuxième Régiment in particular, is the bedrock upon which the francophone military identity is built. Abandoning the regimental system could be viewed as jeopardizing the hard-earned place of influence that francophones have earned in the CF by disbanding long-established Quebecois units. Again though, this argument presupposes strong francophone support for specific regiments that is perhaps only an illusion. One could argue that interest in the military, especially as a federal institution is in fact lower in Quebec than the rest of Canada and

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<sup>39</sup> Battles in World War 1 and 2 in which regionally recruited Canadian units were all but obliterated and the entire male youth of several communities with them.

<sup>40</sup> The Pakistanis lost 25 in one ambush and the Americans 18 in Mogadishu, Somalia alone.

<sup>41</sup> Again, the First Canadian Parachute Battalion serves as a model. The First Special Service Force, a very successful WW 2 joint American/Canadian brigade equipped with US arms, uniforms and equipment, also shows, albeit exceptionally, what can be achieved.

that the affinity for specific regiments is also low. From the Quebec nationalist perspective too, abandonment of the regimental system or its restriction to one regiment (a corps model) would provide an excellent opportunity to gracefully abandon the “Royal” prefixes of many regiments which appear to be considerably less popular in Quebec than elsewhere in Canada. The abandonment of the “Royal” prefix for the Air Force and the Navy when the CF unified provides clear evidence that it can be done (politically that is). In that sort of context, one has to wonder if francophones might not warm to the idea of numbered infantry battalions, just as they have accepted numbered artillery, armoured and engineer regiments. Perhaps the sanctity of the R22eR as a source of Quebecois identity is not as firmly entrenched as we might at first glance think.

Instead of trying to repair a locally based system that appears to resonate no longer with Canadians and which is operationally undesirable, perhaps a more global connection with Canadians would serve the nation, the reserves and the army better. Most Canadians can in their military ignorance associate the local armoures with the national institution called “the army”. Perhaps it is enough for most Canadians to know that “the army” is in the armouries and in their community. Some in the local community might enjoy the idea that the local unit bears the municipality’s name but there is little if any evidence that this would be widely viewed as significant in a modern context. Thus, on closer examination territorial affiliations, one of the cornerstones of our regimental structure, actually appear to be of minor importance to Canadians in times of peace and are potentially counter-productive in times of war.



## Honorary Appointments<sup>42</sup>

There is a tradition of Canadian regiments having honorary appointments, specifically honorary colonels. The role of honorary colonels and by extension regimental associations is to promote the history, values and ethos of the regiment. Officially, they have no authority in operational matters, however, in some instances they do have influence on operational decisions, due largely to their local political connections<sup>43</sup>. The Toronto-centric “Reserves 2000” group in particular appears to have had considerable influence in recent years with Ministers of National Defence who originate from Toronto ridings. One need look no further than the Land Force Reserve Restructure Program which has progressed little since its inception despite dramatic budgetary imperatives and an unprecedented shift in the world affairs that demand a restructuring of our reserve forces. Political intervention by honorary colonels in favour of their regiments is common in Canadian history but it is not necessarily a desirable element in transforming a military into an effective national institution, especially when resource constraints demand a broader vision than parochial unit concerns. Looking at it from the other direction, one needs to ask what accountability structures are missing from our chain of command, in reserve units in particular, that honorary colonels need speak to politicians about them. There is no evidence that any other country, including Britain

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<sup>42</sup> Specifically the role of honorary colonels – retired senior officers or increasingly commonly, influential civilians without military experience, who act as “*the guardian of regimental tradition*” and whose “*duties and functions are largely representational and advisory*” but do not extend to “*the military operation of the regiment*”. See Kellett, *Honorary Appointments*, p. 4.

<sup>43</sup> By which is meant politicians at the federal, provincial and local levels from that municipality or area.

places this much emphasis on an appointment that was conceived to be a combination of grandfather and cheerleader.<sup>44</sup>

Thus, regimental colonels are by definition and design, parochially oriented, charged as they are with the welfare of their particular regiment. In an army level climate that demands cooperation, consensus and flexibility, the combination of parochial interests, political influence and the absence of an accountability structure makes for a potent blend that can disrupt defence outcomes as envisaged by the properly constituted chain of command. In effect the regiment is a culture within a culture, and becomes “... *more important than anything else, including the army, where constructive criticism is rejected because it comes from outsiders, where units do not work together because they are from a different regimental families, etc*”.<sup>45</sup> More broadly, and more *importantly* “... *part of the problem is not that (the army) cannot lobby, but that the regimental system has meant that it is lobbying against itself, and that that suits its political masters only too well.*”<sup>46</sup>

Thus, it is operationally significant that honorary colonels, who are not in the chain of command, who are not elected officials and who are probably not professionally qualified given the part-time nature of their military careers, can have influence over army and CF transformation. They are undoubtedly interested and genuinely interested Canadians but that does not qualify them to delay or impede Land Force Restructure, especially when the concerns are parochial. Whatever the political motivators, it is clear

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<sup>44</sup> Kellett, Honorary Appointments.

<sup>45</sup> Winslow, p 80.

from Mr. Hellyer's observations that the reserve regimental lobby is a force with which politicians should not lightly trifle.<sup>47</sup> Technology, financial constraints, demographic considerations and terrorism might yet cause this arcane and dated system of influence to evaporate but for now, it is a significant political impediment to transformation because it is given direct and frequent access to political decision makers that the official chain of command does not necessarily enjoy.

## **IDEAS FOR THE FUTURE**

The Canadian regimental system need not disappear in its entirety, at least in the medium term. So long as there is distinguishable and tangible difference between functions, it might serve our purposes to perpetuate the notion of infantrymen vice artillerymen etc. However, the distinction between infantrymen, one from the other, or one group of armoured troopers from another, especially in an army as small as ours, is becoming less and less useful, as a combat motivator and as a human resource management tool. Even our Commonwealth allies seem to recognize the limitations.

The Australians adopted a single regiment for their regular force and appear to be steadfastly unenthusiastic regarding reserve unit antecedents, despite having a more reserve-oriented military tradition than Canada.<sup>48</sup> Having established an army wide

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<sup>46</sup> Strachan, p 233. A British example but equally applicable to the Canadian system.

<sup>47</sup> Hellyer, p.161. Exchange between LGen Moncel and Mr. Hellyer in 1963, wherein Moncel, an infantryman proposed a single infantry regiment with numbered battalions for the Canadian Army.

<sup>48</sup> Grey, p 196, the creation of the Australian Regiment of three battalions in 1948 was in fact the first time in Australian history that the nation had a regular force infantry establishment. Interestingly, they did not create three separate regiments of battalion strength – perhaps recognizing that their small army could not sustain such a system of organization.

identity as “diggers” and ANZACs, they appear to be content that their internal and international reputation is solid without the regimental focus deemed so necessary in our system.<sup>49</sup> The New Zealanders are much the same, having an almost identical experience as the Australians.

The British Army, the spiritual home of the regimental system has years of experience amalgamating and disbanding regiments of long lineage and much fame. The process has always been painful and rife with politics but in the end, the demands of the operational and budgetary situation have carried the day. Surely if Regiments as senior as the Royal Scots, The First Regiment of Foot can be disbanded or amalgamated, the Canadian establishment could stand some hard scrutiny. Britain is appropriately illustrative because its parliamentary and military traditions gave birth to and in many ways mirror our own. Yet, the politics of aligning tradition as a subordinate consideration to operational effectiveness seem somehow more achievable in the UK than in Canada. Given Canadian society’s alleged disinterest in things military, the reluctance of our politicians to rock the regimental boat (even Paul Hellyer stood clear) is surprising and illogical.

So long as there are clear distinctions between infantry, artillery, engineers and armour, there might be utility in maintaining a corps affiliation with numbered battalions within that corps - essentially the existing artillery and engineer model.<sup>50</sup> This is not a

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<sup>49</sup> Blaxland, p. 49.

<sup>50</sup> Although they too struggle with their anomalies - like Horse Artillery versus “other” artillery including 1 Air Defence Regiment a.k.a. The Lanark and Renfrew Scottish Regiment. Among the field engineer field squadrons is the Perth Regiment (formerly infantry). An unhelpful jumble.

new idea but it is one to which we as an army periodically return and discard, not because it is an impractical solution to our defence organizational challenges but because we lack the will to change. More than ever before in our history, we need a fresh and logical approach to meet genuinely new circumstances. Clearly, there is potential for new divisive group cultures to emerge, perhaps based upon the numbered battalions themselves, but there is also a greater opportunity to finally focus Canadian soldiers on a more corporate identity that encourages cooperation, flexibility and a curiosity about new ideas that the current regimental system has a tendency to stifle. The old system served us well in the past but does not appear to be the most productive model for future force development.

## CONCLUSION

In the final instance, it is impossible to assess whether the Canadian regimental system is an anchor in the past or a grapple with which to climb the mountain that is transformation. However, the indications are not positive. There will be challenges enough ahead as we learn to think in terms of security as a nation. As the Australian Federal Police learned in their transformation to a less hierarchical, devolved force, *“Conquering the problems associated with devolution in these new structures means changing the entrenched culture of independence and separateness to one of corporate unity, consultation and cohesion.”*<sup>51</sup> The onus is upon our generation as military professionals, to finally start to overcome the internecine friction between services that have so restrained defence in the past. The army is perhaps best positioned to set the

example by thinking less in terms of regiments and indeed corps and branches and more in terms of how best to achieve the desired effects on the battlefield at the best possible value for Canadians. The Army's study of the Regimental system will no doubt reveal arguments in favour of and against. Like most change, there are opportunities and there are pitfalls. The continued survival of the Canadian Regimental system might indeed prove to be beneficial and even essential to Army transformation but let us not blindly assume that it is so. Now is the time to challenge existing and long-held assumptions. Canadians and especially our soldiers have to be far-sighted enough to think about new ideas and brave enough to embrace them before failure makes the necessary changes obvious.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Penrose, *Human Problems in Organizational Behaviour*, p. 159.

<sup>52</sup> Capstick, *The Army's regimental system: building on the past, not living in it*. The Maple Leaf, 24 July 2002, p 12.

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