

CHAPTER NINE: THE CANADIAN MILITARY: PRESENT AND FUTURE

The Canadian military has experienced a tumultuous history in the twentieth century. In 1910, Canada could hardly be considered a military power, yet in the next three decades it would be heavily involved in two major wars. During that time Canada would mobilize, demobilize, and then mobilize again. By 1945, Canada's military forces ranked fourth among the world powers.

During World War I, Canadians earned an outstanding reputation as combat troops and pilots. Raw materials from Canada fueled British and French war industries, and Canadian agriculture provided vast amounts of foodstuffs for its European allies. At the conclusion of the Great War however, the Canadian government quickly demobilized the army and navy. It embarked upon a policy of isolation based on the assumption that Canadian independence meant distancing itself from international issues, while the League of Nations would deal with any crisis. Yet Canadian participation in the League did little to ensure a stable postwar environment through collective security.

The Canadian contribution to the allied war effort in World War II was far more comprehensive. Canadian industry was transformed, and Canada provided manufactured *matériel* in addition to raw materials for allied war industries. The Royal Canadian Navy and the Royal Canadian Air Force made enormous contributions in the allied campaigns, and the

Canadian Army continued to distinguish itself in allied operations from 1943 to 1945.

In the aftermath of World War II, the Canadian government appeared to be more willing to involve itself in the international community. However, while the Department of External Affairs was involved with establishing a reliable mechanism for collective security, the Defence Department had taken measures to radically reduce the armed forces by 90%. It appeared that Canada favoured collective security but was not prepared to make a significant contribution to its enforcement.

The Korean conflict forced Canada to back up its rhetoric with action, and it was during this time that plans were made to expand and upgrade the armed forces. But as the superpowers increased their nuclear arsenals, the value of conventional forces in any future confrontation appeared to diminish. Canadian troops began to assume the more limited role of peacekeepers, and it appeared that the Canadian government was prepared to rely upon America's nuclear umbrella and formidable armed forces for its own security. Consequently, the Canadian armed forces were allowed to deteriorate.

The consensus among many historians is that Canadians are not a "military" people. While this may be true, many of the defining moments in Canadian history have been military events. Canada became a part of the British

Empire after the fall of Quebec in 1759. This event not only introduced British political institutions into Canada but also created the foundations for a multicultural society. The War of 1812 represented the rejection of American values, and the emerging strength of a Canadian identity that was essentially a French-English amalgam whose sum was far greater than its parts. Canada became a “nation” on the slopes of Vimy Ridge, and the “aerodrome of democracy” in World War II.

For a “non-military” people, the achievements of Canadians on the battlefield, at sea and in the air are truly astonishing. But perhaps the very fact that Canadians are not a military people is the underlying reason for their success in warfare. Unlike other nations, Canada did not enter the wars with any preconceived notions about how they should be fought. The lack of a strong military tradition meant that Canadians were not bound by rigid strategic and tactical dogma. The qualities that Canadians possessed, innovation, rugged individualism, self-reliance and cautious confidence, had their genesis in the building of a nation.

Courageous voyageurs blazing new trails, fishermen challenging the cruel and unforgiving seas, homesteaders carving out an existence in a strange and hostile land and immigrant workers from a score of nations tirelessly working to lay a ribbon of steel across the vast Canadian expanse all contributed to the qualities that make Canadians unique. In many ways, the experience of war acted as a catalyst in the forging of a Canadian identity.

Perhaps of equal importance is the fact the Canadians who fought in two world wars and the Korean conflict were volunteers. The soldiers, sailors and airmen had not been

compelled to serve in the military; they had made the conscious choice to do so. While conscription was introduced in 1917 and 1944, it ultimately had little effect upon the composition of the Canadian armed forces. The Americans have belatedly discovered what Canadians instinctively knew, that a volunteer force is inherently superior to a conscripted one. The improved quality of the American armed forces, so evident in the Gulf War, was due in great part to the abandonment of selective service (the “draft”).

It is also important to recognize the effect of the military experience upon the individual. The majority of ex-servicemen have become major assets to their communities and Canadian society as a whole. The military culture produces individuals who recognize that society offers citizens almost limitless opportunities, and who develop self-discipline and confidence in their own abilities. For many, the military experience creates the attitude that they have the capability to succeed in any endeavour. To borrow an American recruiting phrase to “be all that you can be.”

The Military and the Maintenance of Civil Order

The Canadian precedent for the use of military force to maintain civil order has its roots in Canada’s colonial past. In New France, the military enforced law and order among the *Canadiens*, and the British army continued to serve in that capacity. The rebellions in Upper and Lower Canada were suppressed by British troops in 1837. The North West Mounted Police was a paramilitary force whose duties included not only the maintenance of law and

order but also the establishment of Canadian sovereignty in the Northwest.

The red tunics of the force were indicative of the military heritage as the term “redcoats” traditionally referred to British troops. The use of the Army to quell the 1885 rebellion was simply a continuation of a policy long established, and the participation of the N.W.M.P. confirmed their military role in the policing of the Northwest.

Prior to World War I, Canadian troops had been used to control or even intimidate protesting workers. Labour unrest subsided during the war years, but the government did not hesitate to use the army to deal with the Winnipeg General Strike in 1919. The “Red Scare” of the early twenties and its international implications caused the government to perceive any labour action as potentially subversive, and the use of the army to preserve the stability of the state as completely justified. The 1970 “October Crisis” once again witnessed the domestic utilization of the military as the War Measures Act was invoked.

The Oka Crisis

In the summer of 1990, a dispute arose between Mohawks and Quebeckers over the proposed expansion of a golf course that would include land claimed by the Mohawk nation. Within a relatively brief period of time, a simple disagreement escalated into a serious confrontation. Masked Mohawk “Warriors” armed with automatic weapons erected barricades and began to entrench their positions. The *Sûreté de Québec* attempted to deal with the situation, but the long-standing antipathy between the natives and the provincial police force only made the situation worse. The *Sûreté de Québec* staged an ill-planned assault on the Mohawk barricades and in the ensuing

chaos an officer was killed, apparently by Mohawk gunfire.

On 7 August, Premier Robert Bourassa used the National Defence Act to call for military intervention. Meanwhile a Mohawk group at Châteaugay had blocked the Mercier Bridge that connected the south shore to the island of Montreal. The Quebec police were hard pressed to keep angry crowds of Quebeckers and natives separated at the bridge and deal with the Oka situation. The 5th Mechanized Brigade from nearby Valcartier began to move troops and armoured personnel carriers into the two areas of confrontation.

The value of the Canadian peacekeeping experience was evident almost at once. While troops cordoned off the area, they carefully avoided any acts that might be interpreted as provocation. On 27 August, Bourassa asked the army to remove the barricades. The troops cleared the Mercier Bridge with a cautious blend of negotiation and the subtle application of force. Once the bridge had been cleared, the same methods were applied at Oka. The defensive perimeter of the Mohawk Warriors was steadily eroded until a peaceful end to the confrontation had been affected.

Throughout the operation, Canadian troops were subjected to considerable verbal abuse and provocative posturing. Television crews captured the events, and the consummate professionalism of the Canadian soldiers was obvious. Years of peacekeeping experience allowed the troops to contain the situation and prevent it from escalating into a tragic confrontation. The army successfully diffused the potentially dangerous state of affairs with the skills acquired in many UN missions overseas.

Many Canadians were disturbed by the nature of the confrontation at Oka. The heavily armed masked warriors conjured up images of IRA and Palestinian terrorists, and the explicit threat of violence had a negative effect upon the Canadian public's traditional concerns for native grievances. The actions of the Warriors at Oka were in stark contrast to the subdued yet powerful and persuasive methods of Bernard Omniyak and the Lubicons. In addition, Canadians have always been intensely proud of the peaceful nature of Canadian society in comparison with its neighbour south of the 49th parallel.

But the domestic use of the Canadian Armed Forces has not been limited to potentially violent situations. Units have been deployed to aid citizens coping with natural disasters, from the widespread flooding in southern Manitoba to the devastating ice storms in Ontario and Quebec. Canadian troops have also been sent abroad to deliver aid and support for the victims of earthquakes and other natural calamities.

Canadian Defence: Present and Future

The Canadian view of the military has been decidedly inconsistent over the course of the twentieth century. It has altered over time, from intense pride in immediate postwar periods to detached indifference during the lengthy years of peace and prosperity. It would be an error, however, to imagine that the time has passed when the military has ceased to have any importance in contemporary society. The world today is far less stable and secure than it was in the past. The idea that "history repeats itself" is a dangerous one, for it

assumes that events will unfold in a predictable pattern. The developments of the last century vividly illustrate just how unpredictable the world has become.

In 1910, the European states dominated the global scene. It appeared that they were entering a golden era. Industrialization had created prosperity and democratization had allowed citizens to begin to share in the benefits of the nation's economy. Science had made great strides in the treatment and prevention of disease, and countless new discoveries promised the dawn of a new age. Britain and France possessed far-flung empires that encompassed the entire world. True, there were some areas for potential conflict, but at the time most people were confident that the Great Powers would arrive at mutually acceptable solutions.

Any suggestion that within four decades the supremacy of Europe would end and the global empires would be on the verge of dissolution would have been met with disbelief and ridicule. It would have been even more ludicrous to suggest that the politically undeveloped and industrially backward Russian state would achieve superpower status in the next thirty years. The prediction that Britain's stalwart ally in Asia, Japan, would challenge the West in a bloody struggle for dominance in Asia would have been considered the product of an unbalanced mind. Yet all these developments came to pass.

If the events of history are difficult, if not impossible to anticipate with any degree of accuracy, the lessons of history are clearly evident. The instability of Europe in the interwar period was primarily due to the unwillingness of the western democracies to apply military force to achieve collective security. Somehow the western democracies

were unable to appreciate that the military power of the state must be maintained, not to prepare for war, but to ensure peace. The isolationist policies of America and Canada discounted the growing interdependence of nations, and did not recognize that international events would eventually have profound effects upon the North American states.

After World War II, both America and Canada took a much more active role in international affairs that included substantial economic aid for the reconstruction of Europe and the defeated nations. The ideological polarization of the world led to the Cold War, but also to a willingness on the part of western nations to take a proactive role in collective security within the contexts of NATO and the United Nations.

While few people anticipated the eclipse of European power in the first half of the twentieth century, even fewer anticipated the rapid collapse of the Soviet Union. The end of the Cold War, however, has not created a more stable global environment. If anything, it has become far more difficult to predict the future with any level of certainty. While the security and sovereignty of Canada presently appear to be assured, it is by no means inevitable that this condition will continue.

Many economists have predicted that by the middle of the twenty-first century, Canada will possess the world's largest petroleum reserves. By that time, the oilfields of the Middle East will have been exhausted. With Canada assuming an economic role of global importance, it is not impossible to imagine that there will be significant changes in the relationship between Canada and the major economic powers. The western nations reacted strongly to the threat posed by Iraq to their major

source of petroleum. The Americans, British and French, who had in the past been very reluctant to react to international crises in Rwanda and Yugoslavia, were quick to support a massive UN military operation to secure their continued access to Middle Eastern oil reserves.

There are obviously serious implications for Canada. It is not beyond the realm of possibility that the United States could well take advantage of Canada's domestic problems. If, for instance, Canada appeared to be on the brink of dissolution, perhaps precipitated by a separatist movement in Quebec or western Canada, the Americans could use this to justify direct intervention in Canadian affairs in order to secure the resources vital to its own interests. It is not possible to predict exactly what form this intervention would take, but the prospect of occupation or annexation cannot be dismissed.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union also has the potential to seriously destabilize the industrialized world. Currently, Russia is in the throes of an economic crisis, with millions of Russians frustrated by the government's apparent inability to solve their problems. The Russian military forces are also a source of concern as the status and prestige they traditionally enjoyed in the Soviet state has been eroded. At the same time nationalist sentiments have led to open hostilities. The situation is similar to the one that existed in Weimar Germany before the Nazi seizure of power. All the essential elements are present for the emergence of a new authoritarian regime in Russia: economic chaos, aggressive nationalism and a dissatisfied military establishment. Such a development is by no means inevitable, but nor is it improbable.

There are some obvious conclusions that can be drawn from the lessons of history in the twentieth century. Nations have been unable to maintain their sovereignty primarily due to military considerations. These considerations not only increase the size of the armed forces but also the formulation of operational doctrines that serve the national interests of security. As events in 1940 illustrated, the possession of armoured forces by the French and British meant nothing without a coherent policy for their application. Contrary to some of the more popular misconceptions about the military, tactical and strategic planning require considerable intellectual abilities.

It should be noted that neutral countries such as Sweden and Switzerland realize that their continued sovereignty depends upon security, and both nations maintain strong military forces. The Canadian armed forces in the future must be in a position to fulfill whatever role Canadian interests dictate. If the current trend in the world continues, the outbreak of more localized conflicts will lead to much greater demands being made upon Canada's role as a peacekeeper. The Canadian armed forces necessarily must have the men and equipment to ensure continued success in that role. As the position of Canada in the international community changes, Canadians must also be prepared to actively pursue collective security in order to guarantee their sovereignty. The existence of a strong military establishment is essential to preserve the security of Canada and other nations in the international community.

Currently, steps have been taken to upgrade the air and naval forces while the same attention has not been paid to the ground forces. The government is acting on the assumption that any future military commitments will be

made overseas. In the past, both the United States and Canada have been geographically removed from the main theatres of war, and this allowed both nations valuable time to put their economies on a war footing. The populations of both countries were spared the horrors of total war. This may not necessarily be the case in the future.

In conclusion, it is essential to note that no nation has ever lost its sovereignty or independence because it maintained a strong military establishment. On the other hand, the majority of nations that have fallen prey to aggression invariably failed to maintain armed forces sufficient to protect their security. It would be wise to heed the words of Sun Tzu, the author of the ancient Chinese work "The Art of War," who affirmed that a nation that is prepared to fight rarely has to do so.¹ ■

¹ This is a loose paraphrasing of ideas contained within his work on the inter-relationship of war, politics, diplomacy, economics and geography.

Chapter Review

Evaluating an Opinion:

“War is a matter of vital importance to the state; a matter of life or death; the road either to survival or to ruin. Hence, it is imperative that it be studied thoroughly.”

- Sun Tzu, circa 500 B.C.

Comment on the validity of the above statement in relation to

- a. the history of the twentieth century**
- b. the history of Canada**
- c. military history as a topic of study**