

## Managing the Capability Gap

By Nic Boisvert

What is the biggest challenge confronting Canada's plainspoken Chief of Defence Staff, General Rick Hillier? Certainly not keeping defence issues to the public fore. In that he has had some unexpected but nonetheless welcome assistance from independent Member of Parliament Carolyn Parrish. Her return for what must be the 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> installment in a continuing series was great news for those of us concerned with security and defence issues, not for her intellectual contribution, but because her torquing of General Hillier's very realistic assessment of terrorists (and I paraphrase) as "scumbags that need to be killed" turned what was surely a slow news day item into an object of continuing media attention. Ironically enough, her intervention opened the forum for a vigorous debate about the role of armed forces in our society. Quite possibly, we have turned the psychological corner in our national willingness to address security and defence issues frankly.

Nor is General Hillier's challenge any longer gaining government commitment to the revitalization of the Canadian Forces. That was addressed in the last federal budget, when Prime Minister Martin committed to long-term funding for the transformation of the Canadian Forces, amounting to nearly \$13 billion over the next five years – admittedly still just a promise, subject to the whims of any number of political expediencies, but still a promise in writing to which he can be held accountable. The subsequent International Policy Statement laid out the general geostrategic conceptual framework within which the military transformation is to unfold, and more specifically the Defence section of the Statement laid down a number of significant markers by which to score its progress.

No, Hillier's challenge is getting to that promised period of renewal. The larger idea to which Ms Parrish speaks – and obviously believed by too many Canadians, judging by the op-ed columns and letters to the editor in support of her views – is that Canada does not need armed forces capable of engaging our enemies, either because we don't really have any enemies, or because it's not the sort of thing Canadians do. Unhappily as it might be to some, engaging in combat, and even killing others if necessary to achieve our ends, is indeed what the Canadian Forces exist to do. Every sovereign state requires some entity to manage the employment of violence on its behalf. If combat capable Canadian Forces did not exist, we would have to invent them.

If only it were as simple as that. Just last year, the Conference of Defence Associations Institute in collaboration with Queen's University produced a landmark study addressing the notion of *Canada Without Armed Forces*. The premise was pooh-poohed by the Department of National Defence, although the military side of the Canadian Forces noticeably refrained from comment, a sure sign of agreement. Some day some enterprising graduate student will tie that report to Paul Martin's epiphany on defence issues. Sadly, it came too late, because the evidence is in – the predicted collapse of the Forces has arrived.

How else can one style the desperate straits of a military that could even consider using our fleet of Sea King helicopters – those aging airframes that cannot be kept flying with assurance in their designed-for at-sea conditions – to support Army operations in the high altitude desert conditions of Afghanistan? How else to characterize the state of our submarine fleet, that three out of the four *Victoria* class boats have been taken out of the water – not that there is anything wrong with them (except for poor *Chicoutimi*, heavily damaged in the tragic fire last fall), other than the Navy's deferment of planned maintenance it could not afford has finally caught up with them? How else to explain the Air Force's quiet retirement without replacement of nearly a third of the oldest Hercules transports, so they can afford to keep a handful of the rest of the fleet flying at any time? How else could our Army ask us straight-faced to swallow the fact that its largest sustainable field force is a company-sized element, cleverly re-cast by the euphemism "task force" into the appearance of being something more?

The list goes on of aging equipments that require urgent replacement: destroyers for the Navy, next-generation fighters for the Air Force, a robust networked command and control system for the Army. True, our technicians and operators have become experts at wringing continued service through innovative use of legacy systems, but that can only last so long. There are two dimensions to any capability: the required degree of both quality and quantity is commonly referred to as capacity. General Hillier is confronted with the fact that the decades-long battle the Canadian Forces have been waging against diminishing capacity has hit the wall on his watch, just as our government has wakened from its lethargy to pursue an activist foreign policy.

It will be at least five years before we can see any effect from the big money that is to flow into the military budget. To listen to the military, they couldn't use the money if it arrived earlier. "Big Honking Ships" (as Hillier has called the expeditionary support ships that are a cornerstone of his vision) do not just materialize at the snap of a finger, nor do the people needed to crew them and the troops to fill them.

There is no silver bullet to put an end to this quandary. General Hillier has taken bold steps in cutting through the fictions of our military preparedness. He has enjoyed unprecedented success in gaining government commitment to renewal of the Canadian Forces. But his biggest challenge will be keeping our men and women reasonably well equipped to face their very own challenges they will encounter on operations. Managing the capability gap by minimizing its duration is the issue that will define his command.

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