

The Canadian Forces in the 21st Century: A Sentimental Military

By Nic Boisvert

Canadians have developed a deeply sentimental attachment to their military. The outpouring of approval for the dispatch of DART, the Disaster Assistance Response Team, to tsunami-struck Sri Lanka is matched by nodding agreement for calls by politicians and now also foreign policy think tanks to establish a Canadian peacekeeping brigade.

Both those examples prove our attachment is sentimental in the purest sense of the word – based upon emotion rather than reason. Like Turkey Catholics who go to church only at Christmas because it seems the thing to do, we cry to “Send in the military” whenever crises arise or disaster strikes. We have little idea what they should do, other than a sense that disciplined troops are the only ones who can accomplish something useful. When the crisis is over, we blissfully repress any thoughts as to the continuing costs of their upkeep. The reality is that a decade of decline has left us with a military that has little capability to contribute to a crisis requiring real military force, either at home or abroad. But it still makes us feel good about ourselves, and that’s what is important.

Our governments sense this, and have found the Canadian Forces a soft target for penny pinching. Worse, we have let them get away with doing the very least – or in the case of the recent tsunami relief, less than the very least. To a certain extent DART deserves the fawning attention for all the good work accomplished by its 200 members, but it is an embarrassment in comparison to the larger international relief effort. When it finally arrived three weeks after the event, the US Marines were leaving because the initial disaster assistance response was completed and the relief effort was settling into coping with the long-term structural problems of a third-world country afflicted by endemic poverty. That is aid agency work, not a military task, and we don’t have to go overseas to do it. DART could set up in the emergency ward of any major Canadian hospital and be just as gainfully employed. Think of what a blessing its water purification equipment would have been to the citizens of Walkerton, or for too many of our native reservations.

The answer is not, as suggested in government press leaks, to expand DART to include also elements of CIDA, DFAIT and the RCMP. A bigger bowl of alphabet soup will not result in a better military tool, just more layers of unwieldy bureaucracy requiring more hired Antonovs to transport it. What it will improve is the unit’s ability to drain precious funds from real military capability. It might be progress if it pushes the government to take action on the strategic airlift file it has been ignoring for the last half-dozen years. Or better yet, to consider the acquisition of a dedicated, purpose-built amphibious support vessel (that is, don’t try to cram it into the Navy’s Joint Support Ship project, as the anticipated demand will guarantee those ships not being available for the Navy’s vital role of at-sea replenishment).

What we really need if we are to return our Forces to military credibility is to suspend our sentiment and focus on appearing more and more capable. A Canadian brigade, self-deployable with integrated sea and air elements giving it real punch, could make a truly independent

contribution to any number of real and projected scenarios. The 5000 troops identified for the proposed peacekeeping brigade equate to roughly the number of bodies required to flesh out our 4000 infantry in their existing under-strength battalions. But this talk comes just as the Army has abandoned the brigade as a fighting formation because it is so far behind in real military hardware. Candid assessments by the military admit it will take at least five years and probably \$4 billion to rebuild, which incidentally look very much like the figures cited by Senator Colin Kenny's defence committee a couple of years ago. Some scoffed at it then, but what does the government offer now? Pre-budget leaks suggest the military will get about that amount of new funding, but stretched over 10 years.

A 10-year phased-in renewal with only modest funding is proof that our government is simply not serious about military renewal. Continued skimping on that scale means we are headed for the worst of all possible worlds. The need to replace so many obsolete types of fighting vehicles, ships and aircraft is so immediate that we are entering a decade that will make the rust-out of the 1980s look like a warm-up act. Our sentimental attachment to the Army means it will suck most of the available funding from the other services, and even then we will still be unable to send abroad brigade-level forces worthy of an independent command. Our Navy has enjoyed great recent success in commanding Coalition forces abroad, but instead of sending off the task group that earned us those commands, we might be able to send a single frigate to do the bidding of US commanders, along with all of the other fourth or fifth tier naval forces that prefer at present to look to Canada for leadership. The Air Force's already marginal capacity to patrol our own skies will erode further, so that those Canadian cities fortunate enough to be located near the border will have to seek security from the nearby string of United States Air Force bases. For those not so unfortunate, there will always be the annual visit of the Snowbirds, their ancient but cute Tudor jets not getting any cheaper to maintain.

It is getting a little tedious repeating the obvious, but it is clear that the message has not sunk in past Canadians' surface level of sentiment. As Finance Minister, Paul Martin presided over the gutting of the Canadian Forces to wrestle the federal budget under control. Now, as an activist Prime Minister in good times with massive surpluses, he has an obligation to re-invest in the expeditious return of the Canadian Forces to fighting form. Sentiment might fool the home constituencies, but it doesn't cut it before an international audience, who are looking to the CF as the necessary centerpiece for Canada's return to relevance in the world.

That return to the glory days of Canadian diplomacy is increasingly doubtful. More likely we will have something equally familiar to be sentimental about – Paul Martin's replay of the Trudeau rust-out.

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(Nic Boisvert is a former public servant with an interest in defence. He writes on behalf of the Council for Canadian Security in the 21st Century. Free use may be made of this piece so long as reference is made to CCS21 and its Web site – www.ccs21.org.)