

# The Military and the Media in Canada since 1992

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Among the significant western military powers, Canada has the most open practices in the dealings of its armed forces with news gathering organizations. This is the result of a deliberate policy of openness, which is not only unique among military organizations, but also within the Canadian government itself. Indeed, the Canadian Forces is the only Canadian federal agency with written authorisation for its employees, uniformed as well as civilian, to talk to the media about what they do.

These new procedures were put in place to restore public confidence in the Canadian military after a series of public relations disasters in the mid-1990s, the most damaging of which was an enquiry into the behaviour of Canadian troops during a UN deployment to Somalia in 1992-3.

The new policy, which took effect March 1, 1998 was important among a number of positive developments which raised public support for the military from an all time low of about 42 per cent in 1996, to 67 per cent in 1998.

This paper will examine:

- i) The place of military institutions in Canada and how that bears upon relations with the media;
- ii) The Somalia incident;
- iii) The inquiry;
- iv) The consequences for military public affairs of the inquiry into the Somalia incident;
- v) Implications of the new policy for the military and the media.

## **The Military in Canada**

Despite the formidable accomplishments of its armed services over the past 100 years, in the Boer war, the First and Second World Wars, Korea and more than 40

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peacekeeping deployments under the United Nations flag since 1946, Canada does not consider itself a militaristic society.

Although parts of the eastern provinces have been settled for more than 250 years, and Canada became a self-governing member of the British Empire in 1867, no full-time regular force army units were established until 1887 and it was 1910 before the Canadian Parliament agreed to establish its own navy. Even then, it did so grudgingly, Conservative opposition leader Robert Borden dismissing the idea as “hazardous and costly.”<sup>1</sup>

True, Canada’s military traditions extend back into the eighteenth century, when colonial militias assisted British forces in various small conflicts and in 1812, the not-so-small war with the United States of America. Militia forces also supplemented a British regiment to suppress an 1870 Metis rebellion in what is now Manitoba and dealt unaided with a later one in 1885, in Saskatchewan. The practice of maintaining a trained reserve of citizen soldiers continues to be well rooted, with a network of 18 armories distributed among all major cities across the country. In 1914, this tradition was an enormous accelerant to Canada’s amazing mobilisation for the First World War.

But part-time militia forces are not the same thing as full-time regular forces and it is the Canadian way, it seems, for successive emergencies to be dealt with by huge expansions and followed by equally savage cuts.

By 1918, for instance, this country of slightly less than 8 million souls had mobilised 620,000 men, of whom nearly a tenth were killed.

As soon as the war ended, however, the military establishment was placed on care and maintenance, or in the cases of the navy and air force, life support. From such low starting points, decline continued. By 1930, the navy, with 1,000 men could send to sea two small destroyers and four minesweepers. The army was down to 3,000, though the militia was kept at 46,000 in case of civil unrest during the depression. The air force had just 18 warplanes and a handful of civilian types. Establishment was less than 750.

The pattern was repeated in 1939. From a population of 13 million, 800,000 men and women enlisted. When the war ended, Canada had the world’s third largest navy and fourth largest air force. But a year later, the ships were mostly laid up, the aircraft parked and demobilisation had reduced enlistment to 51,000 plus reserves.

The Korean War and the Cold War each caused a reluctant build up of forces but when the Soviet Union collapsed in 1989, the Canadian government was quick to seize the so-called “peace dividend.” Many were openly skeptical; as one newspaper

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<sup>1</sup> Borden told the House of Commons in 1912, “Is there really any need that we should undertake the hazardous and costly experiment of building up a naval organization especially restricted to this Dominion when upon just and self-respecting terms we can take such part as we desire in naval defence through the existing naval organization of the Empire?” Quoted by Milner, *Canada’s Navy, the First 100 Years*. 1998

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editorialist remarked that year, “Canada has been taking the peace dividend all along, even before there was peace.”<sup>2</sup>

Total enlistment of 87,000 regulars in 1989 has been slashed: Today, the establishment for all three services is about 60,000, with primary reserves of around 22,000, the majority of which are army. Neither regular forces nor reserves are up to strength.

There are at least four reasons for Canada’s equivocal stance on defence and security matters.

1) It has been to some extent an inevitable result of Canada’s dependence for its external security for more than 200 years upon first the British Empire and more recently the United States of America. It is hard to conceive of an independent military creed developing under such capacious umbrellas. The mentality of allowing the duty superpower to take care of things, is deeply ingrained.

2) Neither does a comprehensive defence doctrine develop easily of its own accord in a country which is at once hard to attack and impossible to defend. Geography is a factor in another way too; it means Canadians do not see much of their armed forces. For one thing, most Canadian soldiering these days is done overseas, either as part of the NATO contribution or U.N. peacekeeping deployments. But even within Canada, military equipment is not much in evidence. Not only is there not much of it, but the east and west coasts are separated by 3,500 miles of land, so many citizens will go for decades without seeing a warship. The country’s few air bases are located away from major population centres as are tank-training areas.

3) Making it even less likely is the pattern of immigration that followed the predominantly British influx of the late nineteenth century. Many immigrants arrived from countries where they had suffered at the hands of military hierarchies; they were in no hurry to recreate what they had so recently left behind.

This may be the reason why many Canadians do not define their sense of national identity with military symbolism. While the American national anthem, for instance, speaks about the heroic defence of Fort McHenry, the Canadian national song speaks of commanding “true patriot love.” The song’s modest reference to standing on guard for the true north, has proved to be of little inspiration to people or government and one reference to it was dropped from the verse several years ago to make way for a phrase applauding the country’s diverse ethnic origins.

4) More recently, successive Canadian governments have viewed the military, with its inherited British traditions, as slightly un-Canadian, “more Royal than Canadian,” in the case of the Royal Canadian Navy as historian Dr. Marc Milner told a recent conference in Calgary. And one prime minister, Pierre Trudeau, simply had no use for the armed forces

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<sup>2</sup> Alberni Valley Times, Port Alberni, Slings and Arrows, February 1990.

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at all. During his tenure of office, they were starved of new equipment and morale was at a post-war low.

In short, while many nations see military forces as a grim necessity—or more commonly yet, as repositories of national pride—Canada has, for want of suitable enemies or a military ethic, regarded standing military forces as expensive anachronisms.

What all of this means is that unlike the U.S. or Great Britain, the military in Canada does not have much of a constituency. This makes it highly vulnerable to an uncaring or openly hostile government, if it falls into disrepute, as it did around the time of the aforementioned Somalia enquiry.

The Canadian military has therefore learned that it cannot afford to ignore public opinion; this in turn has had implications for how it has come to deal with the news media.

Given the wide and genuine respect paid to veterans at Remembrance Day, it might seem odd to question the level of public support for the Canadian Forces, as the three discreet services are now known.

Support is indeed a mile wide. Unfortunately, it is also only an inch deep and no government has been elected—or lost an election—on a defence issue since 1917, when the conscription issue was central. Canadians care about defence, but in peacetime, not much.

The other possible lobby that could affect the military's fortunes is industry. Canada does have a defence industry, but it does not have the proportionate clout carried by the U.S. military-industrial complex. There is some government incentive to support the struggling shipbuilding industry in a few marginal ridings in Quebec and New Brunswick, which may work to the navy's advantage as it touts new fleet replenishment vessels with a logistics capability built in for peacekeeping ops.

Canada has been out of the warplane business since the Diefenbaker government scrapped the Avro Arrow in 1959 and while General Motors does manufacture military vehicles in London, Ont., the business is very much a sideline to civilian work.

Perhaps this is a healthy state of affairs, a peaceable kingdom capable of rising up in righteous anger when necessary to humble kings and tyrants, then judiciously beating its swords into ploughshares. The trouble is that military skills once lost are hard to regain quickly when needed and as Canada's history shows, Canadians tend to get involved in what comes along. The country has been involved in every major conflict this century except Vietnam.

While senior Canadian military officers are as capable as any other bureaucracy of perpetuating an institution for its own sake, they are also keenly aware that the country that today undervalues them, could as easily require a miracle tomorrow. Their challenge is to keep as professional a force in being as budget and mandate will permit. What they

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have accomplished within those constraints is indeed a miracle itself. They came perilously close to losing it all in 1993, however, when public confidence in the Canadian Forces dropped to an all-time low.

Only a total rethink on how the forces did business saved them. Fundamental was how they presented themselves to the Canadian public.

### The Somalia incident

In August 1992, the Canadian government accepted a U.N. request to provide 750 men for a mission to Somalia. The central government had collapsed and the country was in the grip of vicious fighting between rival warlords. The Canadian Airborne Regiment was assigned and began training for a traditional peacekeeping operation intended to permit relief agencies to do their work.

Days before the regiment was to depart, the mission was changed. Televised reports of starvation in Somalia and the clear identification of the war lords as the obstacle to bringing relief, meant that the new mission (Operation Deliverance) would be making peace, rather than merely keeping it. As University of Calgary professor David Bercuson put it "The basic aim of Operation Deliverance was to disarm and suppress the military forces of the Somali warlords . . . but such an objective could only be achieved by intervening massively in Somali politics. The UN would have to become the biggest warlord in the country to do that successfully! It was not prepared to take on that role."<sup>3</sup>

It was a dangerous, volatile environment. While some Somalis welcomed the UN intervention and the hoped-for restoration of orderly government, others were violently opposed. And for many opportunistic young Somali males, the UN forces represented an alien entity from which it would be good sport to challenge, flout and loot.

Into this mess, came the Canadian Airborne Regiment. Even among elite attack units, they were a rough lot. It is beyond the scope of this paper to examine their history, but it should be recognized that by the time the regiment deployed to Somalia, many of the most unfortunate consequences of post war neglect of the military by the Canadian government had found expression in the Airborne. While their fighting spirit was not at issue, it had been notorious for several years as a haven for soldiers with nonconformist attitudes. Undisciplined, wild behaviour had been a problem and successive commanding officers had not reined in the worst offenders.

To make matters worse, the new operation was very different from the original one and the rules of engagement had not been devised at the time of departure. UNITAF, as the Somalia intervention force was now known, began arriving in Somalia at the end of 1992. Conditions were deplorable, hot, dusty and unsanitary but the mission began the process of disarming the warlords with some success.

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<sup>3</sup> 'Significant Incident,' David Bercuson, McLelland and Stewart, 1996.

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One of the biggest irritations, however, was the practice of local youths infiltrating UN camps and stealing whatever they could carry away. Perhaps irritation is too mild a word; vital equipment was stolen and of course, infiltrators were a security hazard. By the beginning of March, the problem was endemic. It was by no means confined to the Canadian base, but of all the regiments to try it with, the aggressive Airborne was, from the point of view of the thieves, the worst possible choice.

Two definitive incidents took place in early March:

The first, on March 4, involved the shooting of a Somali man who had penetrated the camp. The troop involved claimed that he had been shot running away; a medical doctor who examined the corpse raised the possibility later that the man had been shot on the ground—executed, in other words.

On March 16, another Somali died. The major in charge of No 2 Commando gave orders for a snatch team to catch a prisoner and make an example of him. “Abuse him” was the exact wording. A youth was indeed apprehended that night and died in the custody of two members of the Airborne Regiment. He was kicked and beaten to death.

The chain of consequences that has led to radical changes in the Canadian Forces approach to Public Affairs, leads back to these two incidents.

### The Inquiry

There is some truth to the aphorism that those who love the law and sausages should not watch either being made. One might say much the same about the armies of democracy going off to war in a good cause.

Clearly, the death of the second Somali youth was gratuitous and indefensible, possibly that of the first, too. But it is also true that such things have happened before and only fortuitous circumstances have permitted the culprits to escape censure.

What made this case different is that first, Canadians have high—even unrealistic—expectations of their police and military personnel, who are expected to exhibit the highest standards of restraint and professionalism, no matter what the provocation. There is also very little sense of what peacekeeping involves in difficult situations; at the time of the Somalia intervention, like in Kuwait two years before, there were plenty of public figures completely at odds with reality who were urging non-violent solutions upon those involved.

Second, whatever might have been got away with in earlier times, these days public institutions are (rightly) subjected to much greater scrutiny than ever before. As the scandal unfolded, home videos taken during brutal Airborne hazing rituals found their way into the public domain, exposing a sensitive public to a side of military life which some soldiers may privately defend as necessary for group cohesion, but which are impossible to defend before a hostile audience. The videos were bad enough. When

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trophy pictures taken by the perpetrators of the “abuse” of the second youth found their way into the press, the public was outraged.

The thought that Canadian troops could have been involved in an atrocity thus affronted this protected and idealistic society to a degree that might surprise more hardened populations—including the Somalis, no doubt. The youth’s parents would have been satisfied with 100 camels.

A story in the Calgary Herald for May 20, 1993—the story took a while to get out—gives some flavour of the sentiment:

OTTAWA - For the first time in Canada’s 46-year peacekeeping history, soldiers have been charged with torturing and murdering a civilian. . . . ‘These are the most serious charges ever laid in Canadian military operations with the UN,’ said Brig.-Gen. Pierre Boutet, Judge Advocate General for the Canadian Armed Forces.

What followed was a scramble to avoid culpability. Not surprisingly, the people on the spot received prison terms.

Still, while not diminishing their personal culpability, as mentioned earlier, the state of the Canadian Airborne Regiment was the product of a wider malaise in the Canadian Forces. In 1995, the federal government established an enquiry into the conduct of the mission.

The commissioners reported in July 1997; in sum, they found that Canadian troops did the best job they could but were let down by poor leadership in the senior ranks.

Specifically, the three commissioners also concluded that officials at Defence headquarters in Ottawa and in Somalia were involved in an attempt to cover up the first (i.e. March 4) killing of a Somali man by Canadian soldiers. Their thoughts on whether there was an attempt to cover up the beating death remains unknown; the government shut down the inquiry just before the commissioners got to that.

As it was, the report, titled “Dishonoured Legacy,” ran to 2,000 pages and followed 183 days of hearings with 121 witnesses and 37,500 pages of testimony. There were another 100 volumes of documentary evidence.

The commissioners were brutal in their assessment of the CF leadership. The Canadian Forces position was that all blame should attach to a few ‘bad apples’, but the inquiry thought otherwise.

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“The sorry sequence of events in Somalia was not the work of a ‘few bad apples’ among our soldiers, as some senior officers and DND officials would have it, but the result of systemic, organizational and leadership failures,” the report read in part.

It found fault with some of Canada’s top military leaders including former chiefs of the defence staff generals (army) John De Chastelain and (air force) Jean Boyle, (who resigned his position after 9 grueling days on the witness stand) and alleged that several officers lied to the inquiry. (It did not name them but urged the government to review all testimony and discipline those thought to have lied.). It also commented upon the collective amnesia that seemed to have afflicted the upper echelons. Anecdotally, one of the enduring recollections of daily reports from the inquiry was listening to officers say they had forgotten events.

In particular, the commissioners criticized the acting chief of defence staff at the time their report was released, Vice-Admiral Larry Murray. He had been high in the chain of command during the Somalia mission. He was faulted for waiting at least five weeks before ordering military police to investigate the suspicious first killing. One commissioner, decorated Second World War combat veteran Robert Rutherford bluntly said, “As a soldier I have a feeling there are real problems at the top today. I’m of the opinion (Murray) is not the best man for the job.”<sup>4</sup>

To be scrupulously fair, the government rejected many of the inquiry’s findings; Defence Minister Art Eggleton denied there has been any cover-up and attacked the overly critical tenor of the inquiry’s report.

It didn’t really matter however. Between the videos, the nature of the incidents and the unedifying posture of senior officers at the inquiry, huge damage was done to the reputation of the Canadian Forces.

An opinion poll conducted in 1996 by Angus Reid for Southam News showed that barely half of Canadians still had faith in the country’s military. As the Somalia Inquiry continued to hear testimony, it got worse.<sup>5</sup>

A similar poll in 1997 by the same company revealed that 54 per cent of Canadians surveyed believed, as did the Somalia inquiry, that the recent troubles in the military were “evidence of widespread, fundamental problems in the whole structure of Canada’s Armed Forces.” The number who believed that these were isolated incidents had fallen to 42 per cent.<sup>6</sup>

It was not only Southam News that was polling. Defence Minister Doug Young had requested a variety of polling information in October 1996, shortly after his appointment to the portfolio. Toronto-based Pollara confirmed the findings of the 1996

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<sup>4</sup> Calgary Herald, July 3, 1997. Somalia: Military blasted in final report: Officials in Ottawa and Somalia tried to cover up murder. Page A1 (Front).

<sup>5</sup> Calgary Herald, August 3, 1996. Slim majority keep faith in armed forces. Page A3.

<sup>6</sup> Calgary Herald, February 1, 1997. Many Canadians say Forces in trouble. Page A10.

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Southam study in October of that year, advising the minister that between 1994 and 1996, there had been “a dramatic decline in confidence levels.”<sup>7</sup>

For an organisation without a powerful constituency to protect it in tough times, these were devastating numbers. As Martin Shadwick, a professor of defence studies at Toronto’s York University commented to Southam News at the time, “There’s a heck of a lot of work to be done here.”<sup>8</sup>

He spoke more truly, perhaps than he knew. According to somebody at the centre of things, the Canadian Forces narrowly missed being reduced to little more than it had been a hundred years before.

### The consequences for Military Public Affairs

That somebody was a fixer by the name of Larry Gordon, who was hired in 1996 to be Chief of Public Affairs for the Department of National Defense, by Chief of Defence Staff Vice-Admiral Larry Murray. The position of Chief of Public Affairs was created for Gordon by Murray, to whom Gordon reported directly. The pre-existing post of Director-General, Public Affairs, which was a civilian position reporting to the deputy minister, was left unfilled for the two year duration of Gordon’s appointment.

Gordon describes himself as “an agent of change,” that is, somebody who assists large organizations to negotiate traumatic events, such as downsizing or restructuring, both of which applied in the Canadian Forces. Prior to his appointment with National Defence, he had conducted a similar exercise at Revenue Canada.

With his ponytail and iconoclastic ideas, Gordon may have appeared at first to be an unlikely person for a brass-button admiral to choose, a supposition he freely admits.<sup>9</sup> Yet under his guidance, the Canadian Forces adopted a radically different approach to public affairs and now accords it unprecedented significance. As one public affairs major in 41 Brigade, which is basically the Alberta militia units, describes things: “My job used to be done by a junior lieutenant, on a part time basis. It was the first to be cut if there was a problem. Now it would be one of the last.”<sup>10</sup>

The new approach is contained in a 29-page document called simply “Public Affairs Policy,” issued effective March 1, 1998.

The overall mandate of the CF and DND, in the words of the policy document, is to “inform the public of its policies, programs, services, activities, operations and initiatives in a manner that is accurate, complete, objective, timely, relevant, understandable and open and transparent within the law.”

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<sup>7</sup> Calgary Herald, May 23, 1997. Abridged probe leaves public in doubt - poll. Page A23.

<sup>8</sup> As for 6) above.

<sup>9</sup> Interview: April 13/2001

<sup>10</sup> Interview: Captain Mark Giles, Public Affairs Officer, 41 Canadian Brigade Group Headquarters, Calgary. Interview: April 11/2001.

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This ambitious vision breaks down to three guiding principles, each of which represents a significant departure from past practice.

### *1) Transparency, openness, accessibility and crisis management*

Policy: The Canadian Forces and DND shall “*establish procedures for proactive management of issues and crises, placing priority on identifying problems, promptly implementing solutions and promptly informing the public in a complete and accurate manner of what the CF and/or DND are doing to address the issues and why.*”

This transparency, openness and accessibility stops at the point that operational effectiveness may be compromised. Canada does still believe in the concept of military secrets.

However, the underlying purpose as Gordon explains it, is that it is much better to confess one's faults and tell people what is being done about them, than to allow them to be discovered through access-to-information legislation by an enterprising reporter. In the latter case, one is automatically on the defensive, admitting and conceding facts, a posture from which it is difficult to project authority.

### *2) Broad permission to comment*

Policy: “*is designed to establish and articulate PA operating principles. . . for CF members and DND employees at all levels to help them build, nurture and maintain a strong relationship with the public.*”

*The policy seeks to achieve these objectives by establishing a modern, progressive and professional approach to PA that actively encourages openness and transparency, integrates PA into CF and DND operations at all levels, delegates authority and empowers CF members and DND employees to speak more openly to Canadians about what they do and how they make a difference to Canada and the international community.”*

What this means in practice is that members of the armed forces, no matter how low their rank, are allowed to discuss what they do, with the public and with the media and are supposed to be instructed on how to do this. (The rule of thumb is that they can talk about what they do but not about what other members do; they may not discuss or criticize government policy.)

As stated at the outset, it is singular among government departments that they have this in writing.

This is all radically different from the administration of public affairs under the previous order, Policy Directive P/95 and its antecedents. Like large civilian entities, information was channelled through designated spokesmen, who would be responsible to the commander of a large unit, for instance the commander of a base, ship or regiment. Small units simply didn't have spokesmen and would refer enquiries on.

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### 3) Embedding Public Affairs

Policy: The CF and DND shall “*embed the principles of transparency, openness and accessibility into the day-to-day operations of the CF and DND.*”

In other words, Public Affairs has to be on the checklist for “*policy development, program design, service delivery and military doctrine and operations.*”

The obvious question is whether it is working for the armed forces, the measure for which is survival.

Larry Gordon commented in a recent interview that the future of Canada's military was very much in the balance at the time of the Somalia Inquiry. “The military has to have a constituency of support. Within the Liberal government, there was very little political will to do the things necessary to sustain a combat capable force, to hand out the pay raises or to buy new equipment.”

At the time, several expensive procurements were pending, including new helicopters for search-and-rescue and anti-submarine warfare roles, the four used Upholder-class submarines from the Royal Navy and the Leopard Life Extension program for the army's tanks.

“This was a time when the federal government was trying to bring in a balanced budget and there were all these expensive options out there. Meanwhile the headlines were getting worse and worse, with the murders in Somalia and then the coverup by senior officers, the missing stickies and the document tampering and so on. Public support for them was dropping away. I think the question in cabinet was “Do we really need a military and if so, what do we want it to do? Some people were arguing that it should be reduced to a coastguard and a militia.”

It was at this point that Murray hired Gordon to try to re-launch the military's image to the public.

“The DND had to rely on the media. The national newspapers were very caustic, looking for conflict all the time. The country newspapers weren't so bad but there was this bunker mentality in DND after all that they had been through. We decided on the openness policy, that we would get out and talk directly to Canadians and let them hear directly from the armed forces.”

Both figuratively and literally, the military started to open the gates. As Gordon describes it, the military used every possibility to show servicemen in a positive light, getting young corporals in front of TV cameras as they boarded planes for a UN peacekeeping deployment or sailors talking about the new patrol frigates. Even Mother Nature co-operated by providing two natural disasters, the flooding of the Red River and an ice storm in Quebec. In both situations, the military was called out to render assistance to the civil authority and reaped a huge PR harvest.

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“This was all good,” said Gordon. “Canadians got to see the military in a new light, sometimes face to face which they didn’t often do because they’re often abroad. There was dialogue.”

National Defence also reconstructed its Web site. In line with the reasoning that it is better to tell than have to explain, there is now a massive amount of documentation available including things like reports and studies on sensitive matters like morale, which would once have required an access-to-information request.

Also some less sensitive matters; internal polls reveal that women serving in the armed forces do not favour the so-called combat bra, custom-engineered for fighting women at a cost of \$1 million. They also show that on ships with mixed-gender crews, sex occasionally takes place.

It should be recognized, incidentally, that the navy is rather better at Public Affairs than the air force or the army. This seems to be a historic advantage, born perhaps of learning the value of good PR earlier than its companion services, because of its virtually continuous struggle to exist at all.

Vice-Admiral Ron Buck, present commander of Maritime Forces Pacific, operates very much along the Larry Gordon prescription. He is an earnest proponent of teaching the Canadian public the relevance of the navy; he is on record as saying that if he could, he would get every Canadian aboard a Canadian warship.<sup>11</sup> Obviously that isn’t likely to happen but last year, 30,000 Canadians did either go to sea on west coast ships or tour the Esquimalt base, and naval personnel are left in no doubt about their ambassadorial role.

The navy has also, in a flash of the blindingly obvious, decided to name its ships for Canadian towns and cities. It is much more relevant to the 950,000 residents of Calgary, for instance, to know that HMCS Calgary is operating with an American carrier battle group, than to know that a Canadian ship named after a river or Indian tribe is doing exactly the same thing.

How the U.S. Navy manages to keep up the tempo with destroyers named after dead congressmen would be a subject for another presentation. It seems to work for them. The navy is a consistent winner in the capital projects crapshoot. At a time when the air force is mothballing almost half the aircraft it has on charge, the navy got the submarines.

The army got the tank upgrades, by the way, and in March 1999, the military got its first raises in 8 years, 14.4 percent to privates and a 7.28 percent raise to non-commissioned officers.

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<sup>11</sup> Interview: March 2, 2001.

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As for public perceptions, the polls seem to vindicate the new approach. On December 28, 1998, a Pollara/Southam poll showed a massive turnaround in public support.

For instance, the Calgary Herald reported the next day, “Expect Defence Minister Art Eggleton to use the results of a new Southam poll as ammunition for increased defence spending. The poll, published Monday, shows a complete about-face in public opinion. Although defence has traditionally been rated by Canadians as their lowest spending priority, two-thirds now believe the Defence Department’s budget should be increased to replace dangerously aging equipment and improve the quality of life for military personnel.”

Canadians also remain highly committed to peacekeeping operations, according to a July 1998 poll by a University of Chicago study, which polled citizens of 22 countries on what they valued in their countries. Canadians were ranked fifth in pride in their armed forces.<sup>12</sup>

That is not a result which could have been foreseen three years previously. It would be inaccurate to ascribe it all to judicious management of the media; without the military cleaning up some of its problem areas, no amount of openness would have restored public confidence.

The Canadian Armed Forces have effectively conveyed those good stories it had to tell. The caustic national media has diluted its vitriol and the public having been reassured, its inch deep support has once more flooded the landscape. But because it is only inch deep, the enhanced role of Public Affairs is likely to be here to stay.

### The consequences for the military and the media

The polls do not tell the whole story unfortunately.

In one sense, the new policy is working for senior military officers who don’t want to be associated with controversy. Certainly, they are no longer in the headlines every day, defending some egregious situation.

Whether the policy is working for the media or the larger interests of the military is another matter altogether. To be blunt, if there are still problems in the Canadian Forces and the new policy becomes just another tool for information management so that the public doesn’t know and therefore doesn’t put pressure on politicians to make improvements, the military is dealt a gross disservice. And of course, if the media can’t find out, the public won’t know.

Sadly, it wouldn’t be hard to build a case that the Canadian Forces still have some serious issues. The Leopard tanks are obsolescent. The ASW frigates cannot perform their role without helicopters, which at this point, still have not been selected,

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<sup>12</sup> Calgary Herald, July 1, 1998. Canadians proudest of democracy. Page A22.

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never mind ordered. The air force is obliged to sell nearly half its fighters to pay for refurbishing the rest. A whole truck fleet is laid up because of mechanical deterioration and the unavailability of spare parts. (The vehicles are 18 years old.) A destroyer recently refitted for \$250 million is tied up alongside at Esquimalt because she can't be manned.

This points to an ongoing difficulty with recruitment and retention, which in turn points to morale issues. Is manpower allocated properly? There seems to be no shortage of bodies in Ottawa but a ship lies idle.

The establishment is 60,000 for all three arms of the service; the DND admits to 57,000 men and women on strength but it is doubtful whether more than 52,000 are available for duty, the rest being off duty for one reason or another. Some personnel are working back-to-back deployments on peacekeeping missions, with consequent burnout.

And peacekeeping is all very well and part of the national objective but nobody pretends that it contributes anything to the prime military purpose, to be tuned up for combat.

This is not an exhaustive list but it is sufficient to indicate that although the negative headlines have become less frequent—to some degree because military problems have lost some of their shock value—causes for justifiable public concern remain. The openness policy notwithstanding, enquiry into them is no more welcome now than it has ever been.

After all, National Defense is still a government department. There is still a minister who doesn't want to be embarrassed and civil servants and senior officers with careers to protect.

Scott Taylor, publisher of *Esprit de Corps* magazine comments, "Ask a question on something mundane and yes, the answers are readily available. If it's something sensitive, there's a chain of release leading all the way back up to the minister, depending upon how sensitive it is. The old tricks still work. Access to information is not free and the first response to a delicate request may be an excessive cost estimate. Or there's the old needle in the haystack trick: Here's a box of paper. The sheet you want is in there somewhere."

"If an enquiry is identified as coming from the media, there has to be a media response drafted; if it's touchy, the Judge Advocate General's office gets involved and one seldom sees an officer of flag rank on a public occasion unaccompanied by a Public Affairs officer."<sup>13</sup>

And of course, openness or not, the minister still controls the timing of the release of information.

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<sup>13</sup> Interview: 18 April, 2001.

## The Military and the Media in Canada

These are some of the head office problems. Further down the line, the diligent reporter may meet resistance despite the policy of openness. An officer doesn't have to disobey an order or ignore a policy to blunt its effectiveness.

As Sharon Hobson, Canadian correspondent for *Jane's Defence Weekly* says, "The problem is not so much with the policy—in theory, it should work well—it's with the attitude. Basically, if the guy at the top of the food chain does not like the media, no one below him is going to talk to us. Oh sure, we might get an interview (although even that is doubtful), but the guy won't really talk. Why should he? His boss has made it clear that he doesn't care about the new 'openness' policy, the media are not to be trusted and he wants nothing to do with them. So the thrust of my argument is that it's not new policy we need, it's a new attitude."<sup>14</sup>

There's something to that. If generals only feel safe talking to the media when they have experts at their side, one can hardly blame a junior officer or enlisted man for being circumspect.

So how is this really playing out? It would be churlish to deny that the Canadian Forces have addressed some of the difficulties that brought them so low in public esteem a few years ago, and my own opinion is that the new public affairs policy was brought in with praiseworthy intentions. It could not, however, on its own alter the traditional cat and dog relationship between bureaucracies holding information and the press that wants access to it.

At the end of the day, if the public thinks everything is ok when it's not, that's bad. It's the media's job to tell the public how things are and while those of us in the business took some encouragement from the new policy directive, we have no reason to think that our job is going to get any easier.

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<sup>14</sup> Correspondence: 17 April, 2001.

### Appendix

Context statement for 1998 Public Affairs Policy

Together, the CF and the DND is a unique Canadian institution. They bring together Canadians from all regions of the country and all ethnic backgrounds, through military and public service, in pursuit of the common mission of defending Canada and Canadian interests and values while contributing to international peace and security.

In fulfilling this mission, the role of Public Affairs (PA) is to promote understanding and awareness among Canadians of the role, mandate and activities of the CF and DND, and of the contributions that the CF and DND make to Canadian society and the international community.

Canadians expect and deserve to know what the men and women of the CF and DND do on their behalf. Public support for the CF and DND follows from public understanding of how the CF and DND make a difference at home and abroad. Public confidence, in turn, is enhanced by the ability of the CF and DND to achieve its mandate in a manner that is open, transparent, and consistent with Canadian values and expectations.

In short, public support and confidence follow from the ability of the CF and DND to both deliver and inform.

The intent of the PA policy is to ensure that Canadians are well informed and aware of the role, mandate, operations and contributions of the CF and DND. The policy is designed to establish and articulate PA operating principles, authorities, accountabilities, responsibilities, requirements and guidelines for CF members and DND employees at all levels to help them build, nurture and maintain a strong relationship with the public.

The policy seeks to achieve these objectives by establishing a modern, progressive and professional approach to PA that actively encourages openness and transparency, integrates PA into CF and DND operations at all levels, delegates authority and empowers CF members and DND employees to speak more openly to Canadians about what they do and how they make a difference to Canada and the international community.