

# Moving Forward

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by Gary Levy

*In recent years the Canadian Forces have undergone dramatic changes. Bases have been closed, headquarters consolidated and the forces radically downsized. Budget cuts, problems with leadership and poor living conditions have left many wondering whether the Forces can maintain their commitment to the profession of arms. For over a year the House of Commons Standing Committee on National Defence and Veterans Affairs held hearings that focused on issues that affect the daily well being of individual men and women in the Canadian Forces. This article summarizes the findings of the Committee Report entitled "Moving Forward: A Strategic Plan for Quality of Life Improvements in the Canadian Forces" tabled by the Chairman of the Committee, Pat O'Brien in October 1998.*

**D**uring the 1990s most government departments had to cope with program cuts. National Defence was not the only department to have been downsized but the Committee came to the conclusion that service men and women have borne more than their fair share of the burden. As a consequence of rapid downsizing, during a period of intense operational tempo Canada's military. Personnel have been confronted with:

- economic hardship;
- inadequate housing;
- an increase in high-risk operations with equipment that was old and ill-suited to the task at hand;
- career stagnation;
- increased time away from home;
- multiple moves on short notice; and
- a perceived lack of public recognition for their efforts.<sup>1</sup>

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## The Committee Process

At the outset the committee was confronted with considerable cynicism, on the part of Canadian Forces personnel, with respect to what could be accomplished on their behalf. As a parliamentary committee it had only advisory powers. It cannot insist, it can only recommend. At the same time, the mere fact that the Committee was asked to undertake a wide ranging study suggested that the authorities to whom it addressed the recommendations would listen carefully and act upon them.

The study marked the first time in the history of the Canadian Forces, that serving personnel were encouraged to address their concerns in a public forum, and to do so without fear of recrimination. The Chief of Defence Staff even issued a letter reaffirming that Canadian Forces personnel could freely and openly communicate their views to the Committee which also spoke privately with service men and women on numerous occasions. Hearings were held at major bases in Canada and at Canadian locations in Bosnia and Germany. While the main concern was with the non-commissioned ranks, the committee also heard of the frustrations among officers who were forced to make hard choices that could never prove popular.<sup>2</sup>

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The Committee found a degree of frustration and desperation expressed by countless witnesses. Often the stories proved heart wrenching, making one wonder how things could have gone so obviously wrong. They heard of soldiers wounded in action whose families had not been looked after in a proper and timely manner. They were told of sailors who had to live onboard ship because they could not afford local rents for even the most basic accommodation. They heard of military personnel who had to go to food banks in order to be able to feed their young families. Some military personnel have had to endure housing that would be condemned if it were made available to the civilian population.

### **Fundamental Principles**

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Torture and murder in Somalia, inappropriate behaviour in the former Yugoslavia, and sexual harassment on bases here at home have come to reflect badly on Canada's military. Even though these have been the acts of only a few, many feel they have had to share in paying the price. At the same time, many also expressed the view that, when wrongdoing was punished or investigated, a double standard was invariably applied – one for the officers and one for the other ranks. The perception of such a double standard does little to instil confidence in the military's leadership and the Committee went on record that there should be no double standard, nor perception thereof, when dealing with wrongdoing in the Canadian Forces.

Another theme to emerge from the testimony was the feeling among military personnel that they had somehow been forgotten by the nation they had sworn to serve. They suffer from a sense of abandonment and a belief that the only thing of interest to the public is the next scandal. For example, there was little mention in the media in 1993 about what Canadian soldiers experienced during the heavy fighting in the Medak Pocket operation. Indeed, there was little public knowledge of the incidents until an article appeared in October 1996 in the *Ottawa Citizen*. The story had been reported by a Canadian military public affairs officer who made it available to the media. European newspapers carried the story, but the Canadian media did not. It took three years before the public was properly apprised of what Canadian peacekeepers had to endure – witnessing the atrocities of ethnic cleansing, artillery barrages, fire fights, wounded comrades, and the effects of post-traumatic stress.

Throughout the hearings the Committee learned that military personnel – particularly at the lower rank levels – feel themselves to have been let down by their governments, their leadership, and the public at large. If Canada is to maintain an effective military it must re-establish, on

a firm foundation, the trust between our military personnel and those to whom they look for leadership and recognition. The Committee concluded that "As Parliamentarians, we need to recognize that members of the Canadian Forces are constituents of us all and that all Parliamentarians share responsibility for their well-being."<sup>3</sup>

During the hearings it was suggested that the unwritten "social contract" which has traditionally existed between the military and government, and by extension, with the public at large needs to be made specific. Unfortunately, attempts to articulate exactly what should be entailed in such a specific statement of intent are not easy. Tacit understandings do not easily lend themselves to articulation. The Committee concluded that national commitment – in essence a moral commitment – to the Canadian Forces must be based on the following concrete principles:

That the members of the Canadian Forces are fairly and equitably compensated for the services they perform and the skills they exercise in performance of their many duties. And, that such compensation properly take into account the unique nature of military service.

That all members and their families are provided with ready access to suitable and affordable accommodation. Accommodation provided must conform to modern standards and the reasonable expectations of those living in today's society.

That military personnel and their families be provided with access to a full and adequate range of support services, offered in both official languages, that will ensure their financial, physical and spiritual well-being.

That suitable recognition, care and compensation be provided to veterans and those injured in the service of Canada. Here, the guiding principle must always be compassion.

That members be assured reasonable career progression and that in their service they be treated with dignity and respect. In addition, they must be provided with the appropriate equipment and kit commensurate with their tasking.<sup>4</sup>

### **Recommendations**

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It is a general rule that compensation should be based on the principle of fair pay for work performed. Canadian Forces members told the Committee that they believe this principle is no longer being applied to them. In the civilian workforce, equitable compensation is largely determined by market factors and collective agreements negotiated between employer and employees. These mechanisms are not available to the military. Military pay levels should be set by Government, subject to credible and real oversight by parliamentary committee.

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The Committee made twenty recommendations relating to pay and allowances dealing with issues of basic pay, annual increments, cost-of-living allowances, overtime, annual leave, acting pay, pay review procedures and so on. The ultimate goal of the recommendations was to ensure that serving members retained more in the way of disposable income. According to the Chairman:

A major complaint was that allowances are not adequate and the benefits are often taxed back. We determined that it was important to provide compensation that will enable personnel of the same rank to enjoy a similar standard of living no matter where they serve. Personnel have asked for a simple and comprehensive entitlement that would allow them to predict exactly what their disposable income will be.<sup>5</sup>

The Committee recognized that certain of these recommendations would require change in the manner in which Treasury Board and Revenue Canada operate. "However, our military has had to adapt itself to new realities and challenges and it is important that we not sacrifice the well-being of our military personnel to bureaucratic inertia."<sup>6</sup>

It also became clear from the study that the Canadian military is facing a housing crisis. The Committee made another twenty recommendations, on issues such as the poor condition of permanent married quarters, the role of the Canadian Forces Housing Agency, the cost of rental accommodation, moving allowances and so on. The goal of these recommendations was to ensure that all Canadian Forces personnel have access to modern affordable housing no matter where they live; whether on base or off, whether renter or home owner and regardless of the area of the country where they are stationed.

The next section of the report, seventeen recommendations in all, tried to address problems relating to bureaucratic inertia in cases involving injured personnel. "Nothing is more important for the morale and effectiveness of a military force than the quality of care given to the injured and the support provided to families of persons killed or injured while on duty."<sup>7</sup>

Most members of the military will escape injury during their careers, but they want to be reassured that if something happens, they and their families will get help. Whether they leave the Forces after a full career or prematurely after a severe injury, they also expect to be treated well as veterans and retirees. These expectations are part of the bargain they make when they volunteer to serve in the military.

The Committee looked at how care and information are provided to injured soldiers and their families. It suggested procedures that could be improved. The Department of Defense has begun to put remedial programs in place and the recommendations, if implemented, would

ensure that military personnel will never again suffer the indignity of an uncaring bureaucracy.

The report also looked at the family network in the military. It made more than a dozen recommendations relating to child care, education, spousal employment, second language training and access to services in both official languages.

The final section of the report, "Transitions" dealt with a variety of issues but essentially was concerned with how to recruit, maintain and upgrade personnel in the modern military. It concluded that in order to provide a framework for addressing the various problems and changes faced by the Canadian Forces there must be put in place a comprehensive human resources policy. This policy must:

- always ensure that operational requirements are met;
- incorporate what is best in current practice;
- provide jobs that are rewarding and challenging;
- allow the Canadian Forces to recruit, retain and motivate quality people by offering them a fair and equitable pay and benefits package which recognizes the demands of military life;
- enable individuals to realize their potential and provide them with equal opportunity irrespective of race or gender;
- assist members to prepare for second careers;
- take individual and family needs and aspirations into account when determining postings and in the development of policies.<sup>8</sup>

In an effort to ensure that all its ideas were given serious consideration the Committee recommended:

That the Chief of the Defence Staff table with the House of Commons Standing Committee on National Defense and Veterans' Affairs an interim report within one year and a comprehensive report within two years on the progress made with respect to quality of life issues in the Canadian Forces.

That the House of Commons Standing Committee on National Defense and Veterans' Affairs be empowered, when it deems it appropriate, to visit selective bases to enquire into the effectiveness of reforms made with respect to quality of life issues in the Canadian Forces.<sup>9</sup>

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### Dissenting Opinion of the Official Opposition

The eighty-nine recommendations in the report reflected a good deal of consensus among the sixteen-person Committee which included members of both the Liberal Majority and the four Opposition parties. However, in the end Reform Party members decided to issue a dissenting opinion entitled "Real Commitment". By agree-

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ment of the Committee this twelve page document was appended to the report. Their fifteen recommendations called for "fundamental systemic change within Department of National Defence and the Canadian Forces" Among other things they objected to "social experimentation policies" which impair combat readiness.

The bottom line is that Canada needs strong, combat-ready and combat-capable Armed Forces. This must be the primary guiding principle behind any government or Department of National Defence Policy. Political correctness and its cousins: hiring quotas and social engineering, must be removed from the realm of the military. Those who advocate these choices should fight their battles in civil society and be thankful that their ability to do so is protected by the military.<sup>10</sup>

### Conclusion

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In reflecting upon its work over many months and the volumes of testimony it heard the majority report concludes:

There is no doubt in our minds that the Canadian Forces are an institution with special needs and enormous challenges. There is no equivalent occupation in civil society... Yet, we also recognize that good intentions without adequate resources upon which to build can only lead to further frustration and impotence. We have reached the bottom line. Can the Forces make do with less? No they cannot. If we are going to protect our national interests and participate in missions that promote the values of international peace and democracy - for which all Canadians stand - then our present commitment to the men and women of the Canadian Forces is barely adequate. Indeed, we would not be remiss in suggesting that it has ceased to be adequate. This is a reality with which not only we as Parliamentarians and legislators must come to terms, it is a fact that must be recognized by all Canadians. Our

Forces are there to serve, not simply to be used. When called upon they have taken to their tasks with enthusiasm, skill and a sense of professionalism. They are more than willing to serve, but they are tired of being used. True commitment is rarely one sided. If we are to ask our Forces to commit to the tasks we set for them in pursuit of our national interests, then they have every right to expect us to honour our side of the bargain.<sup>11</sup>

The conclusion of the Report is that ultimate responsibility to ensure that Canada's military personnel are well equipped, properly cared for and equitably compensated belongs to Parliament and to public opinion not just to the government of the day.

### Notes

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1. House of Commons, *Moving Forward: A Strategic Plan for Quality of Life Improvements in the Canadian Forces*, Report of the Standing Committee on National Defense and Veterans' Affairs, October 1998, p. 1
2. *Ibid.* See pages 89-107 for a list of witnesses and persons consulted. The actual transcripts are available on the Parliamentary Internet at <http://www.parl.gc.ca/InfoComDoc/NDVA/Studies/Reports/ndvarp03-e.htm>
3. *Ibid.*, p. 5
4. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
5. See Pat O'Brien, MP, "Forces' Quality of Life Needs Urgent Upgrade", *London Free Press*, November 9, 1998, p. A9.
6. *Moving Forward op. cit.*, p. 21.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 41.
8. *Ibid.*, pp 85-86.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 88.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 122.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 87.

**Postscript:** Since this article was written the Minister of Finance has announced, in his budget of February 16, 1999, an increase totalling \$175 million in compensation and benefits for members of the Armed Forces.