

Staying Terrific: Ensuring a Relevant Royal Regiment in the Post-Afghanistan Era

By Colonel P.J. Williams

Background

Currently, the profile and reputation of the Royal Regiment of Canadian Artillery (RCA) is arguably higher than since the British Field Marshal Montgomery proclaimed at the end of World War 2, that, “I think all the other arms have done very well too. But the artillery has been terrific and I want to give due weight to its contribution to the victory in this campaign.”¹ Our position as a valued member of the combined arms team, has come (or more correctly has been *reaffirmed*) largely due to the performance of Gunners in Afghanistan, where in many cases employing new capabilities, we have once again demonstrated our ability to provide decisive, battle-winning support to the other arms, including those of our Allies. Our Colours carry the badges of infantry regiments we have supported in Afghanistan, an honour we have not been awarded since the Korean War, and which is perhaps the most visible manifestation of the esteem in which we are held by other members of the combined arms team.

The Government of Canada (GoC) has stated that our current military mandate in Afghanistan will expire in 2014. The Commander, Canadian Army (Comd CA) has also stated the Army has “reloaded: and is preparing to face future contingencies. As to possible future theatres and Gunner involvement therein, that remains a GoC decision, though our recent commitment to Libya, in which the CF conducted kinetic strikes, demonstrates that competencies regarding targeting and the employment of joint fires remain core competencies for Canada’s military. In addition, as part of continuing Army Transformation initiatives, the Comd CA is committed to ensuring the RCA is part of that change agenda by enhancing the capabilities of the Field (Fd), Locating (Loc) and Air Defence (AD) artillery disciplines. More specifically, the Director of Artillery (DArty) has received Comd CA approval to proceed with Artillery Force Structure plans which will see among other things, the Royal Regiment acquiring rockets.

Great news all around and no cause for concern, right? However, lest we rest on our laurels, we also need to be aware of wider contextual issues, namely, the DND Strategic Review (SR), and the fiscal reality (ie fewer financial resources) that we’ll face by 2014. The implications of these two processes will be discussed later in the essay.

Finally, there is the Canadian population. While the CF, and the Army in particular has enjoyed unrivalled public support in recent years, to what extent will this vital support still be present post-Afghanistan, when our population may be experiencing a degree of war fatigue, with the accompanying expectation of a form of post-Afghanistan “dividend”, to be diverted toward other pressures.² Indeed, polling in recent years indicates that 50% of Canadians wish to see the CF assume only a “peacekeeping role.”³

Therefore, given, these considerations, how can we best ensure that the reputation the RCA currently enjoys is maintained in future and that the lessons we have learned are not forgotten? Throughout this essay it must be stressed that this is not a case of the RCA attempting to justify its future existence for its own sake, or of Gunners trying to subvert or supplant ongoing CF/Army transformation efforts, but to ensure a vibrant RCA for the good of the Army and the CF. Indeed throughout this essay, to

a great extent, the term “RCA” could be removed and the name of any other Regiment, Corps or Branch of our Army be inserted in its place.

Aim

The aim of this essay is to recommend how the RCA may best ensure its continued relevance for the benefit of both the Army the CF and Canada in the post-Afghanistan environment.

The Future Environment

What might this environment look like? According to the GoC, among other things we can expect:

Ethnic and border conflicts, fragile states, resurgent nationalism and global criminal networks...the proliferation of advanced weapons and the potential emergence of new, nuclear-capable regimes...unequal access to resources and uneven economic distribution...(O)n the home front...events such as floods, forest fires, hurricanes and earthquakes...possible terrorist attacks, human and drug trafficking, foreign encroachments on Canada’s natural resources and potential outbreaks of infectious disease...In Canada’s Arctic region, changing weather patterns are altering the environment, making it more accessible to sea traffic and economic activity...⁴

In such an environment, we can expect that a GoC response to a crisis would consist of a Whole of Government (WoG) effort, in which the CF could be expected to play a role, working in concert with (and normally in support of) local and national agencies in the case of a domestic event and alongside Allied, coalition and indigenous forces, and in close cooperation with other Canadian government departments, in the case of expeditionary operations. In the latter case, this is not to state that the counterinsurgency (COIN) environment Afghanistan is necessarily “*the* model” for future operations-it is “*a* model.”

Commitments

In order to meet the challenges posed by this future environment, the CF is tasked to provide certain capabilities, which are further detailed in the Canada First Defence Strategy, which states that the CF must have the capacity to:

- Conduct daily domestic and continental operations including the Arctic and through NORAD;
- Support a major international event in Canada such as the 2010 Olympics;
- Respond to a major terrorist attack;
- Support civilian authorities during a crisis in Canada such as a natural disaster;
- Lead and/or conduct a major international operation for an extended period; and
- Deploy forces in response to crises elsewhere in the world for shorter periods.⁵

Looking at the fifth task listed above, the implication is that the CF will need deployable capabilities

and expertise at the higher tactical/operational levels, as was the case in our past command of NATO's Regional Command (South) in Afghanistan, where Canada demonstrated leadership at the 2 star level. As we shall see later, this potential contingency for the future has manifested itself in the re-establishment of HQ 1st Canadian Division (HQ 1 Cdn Div), with an existing, though somewhat modest, joint fires cell, as part of future CF transformation initiatives.

Drilling down into more details, it is also useful to review two key Lines of Operation (LOOs) which form the basis of the Army Managed Readiness Plan:

- 3rd Line of Operation : International Sustained. This task calls for the capability to conduct full spectrum operations, and includes a Brigade HQ, with mission specific enablers and a Battle Group, with integral fires support capability. This task would call for the provision of AD and STA capabilities; and
- 4th Line of Operation: International Surge. This task calls for limited spectrum operations in a semi-permissive environment. Though the full range of fire support and AD might not be required for this task, some form of STA would likely be included.

Thus, given the above one can conclude that within the RCA there is a requirement to maintain competencies in all our three disciplines, firstly, beyond the brigade level to support HQ 1 Cdn Div, also at regimental level to support LOO 3 and finally at battery level and below to support both LOOs 3 and 4. Given that these tasks must be sustainable, we also need the institutional training and force generation capacities as reside in the Artillery School and in our Reserves. Ideally we would also have the physical assets to flesh out these capabilities, and though it is unlikely we will ever see "Divisional Artillery" created, the maintenance of a project to acquire rockets, though it has been pushed out to Horizon 2, and not taken off the books entirely, is somewhat comforting.

And herein lies the rub, and the nub of the issue this essay: given that these are our future tasks, how do we ensure that these tasks are understood, so that the RCA has the necessary resources to carry them out?

Resources

Resources which will enable the Army, and by extension the Royal Regiment, to conduct its tasks are allocated at the strategic level. In the short term there are two realities which will impact what form these allocations will take: the Strategic Review (SR) and the future fiscal environment. The SR is a Government wide process whereby all departments (are required) to conduct a 100% review of program spending with a view to identifying at least 5% for potential reallocation to advance government priorities. The implications of this are obvious: at worst the Army may have some programmes, projects or capabilities divested; at best, some programmes may be shifted to the right.

The implications of the future fiscal environment are equally hard to predict. Certainly the current government appears to be a fan of Defence, and after the conclusion of Op MOBILE, our contribution to

NATO and international efforts in Libya, took the somewhat unprecedented step of a major ceremonial event in Ottawa

There are several implications for the Royal Regiment as a result of these realities, not the least of which is , what role might Gunners play within the various “Coordination Centres (Fires, Effects, Airspace, Surveillance and Target Acquisition (STA), etc), which will likely be required as part of the DJHQ. In any case, it behoves all Gunners to ensure that we optimize all our expertise and capabilities to ensure the success of DFSR, for the wider benefit of the CF and the Army. We need to communicate.

Communicating the Need

In communicating the need, the first group we will need to convince is ourselves. While this may not appear immediately intuitive as the RCA is currently carrying out many of these roles in Afghanistan, but as we look to the post Afghanistan period, it is worthwhile to remember a time, not that long ago, when at the height of our Bosnia commitments, that many Gunner batteries were re-rolling as infantry companies. And quite happily so- in those days in-role artillery deployments were not as common as today and taking on the infantry task was seen as a way of getting Gunners into the fight. For some the logic behind this was that in this way we could justify our existence, as it were in the face of ostensible threats to cut the Guns. Others counselled against this, warning that abandoning our primary combat function would not serve the Army in the long run. And perhaps they were right, for had we done so, would we have been able to produce the effects we are delivering right now in Afghanistan? Perhaps not, and for this reason, we must guard against any future attempts *by ourselves* to forget what the Army needs us to do as Gunners.

In this regard, the experience of our colleagues in the United States Marine Corps (USMC) artillery is instructive: describing the Marine Gunners contribution to the fight in Iraq in 2003, one author notes that the “Cannon Cockers” of the 11th Marine Regiment (in effect a field artillery brigade supporting a division), performed the classic field artillery mission as, “...the only all-weather-capable fire support available to the maneuver (sic) units in contact with the enemy.”⁶ The author goes on to describe the same theatre five years later, and an artillery force, having been assigned a multitude of out-of-role tasks and non-standard missions, as having, “...faded to the point of operational oblivion.”⁷ In short, to avoid being relegated into such insignificance, we need to keep the faith as Gunners.

In convincing ourselves, we will also need to remind the rest of the Army-this should not be as difficult, as the next generation of Army leaders, who are conducting the fight in theatre right now, are seeing the effects of our sterling work every day in theatre. In this respect the work of LCol (Ret'd) Brian Reid to write a history of the Gunners in Afghanistan is highly welcomed. But again, a word of caution is warranted. On many occasions in the past Gunners have been accused at worshipping at the temple of the “Black Box”, with others not understanding the ostensibly arcane science of Gunnery. In the same way we should ensure that as we write the history of the RCA in Afghanistan, that our infantry and armour comrades contribute to it as well, as indeed *it will be their views on what we did* which really matter in the end. Indeed, LCol Reid’s work, entitled, “With a Few Guns” must not just become a limited edition book for Gunners only. Perhaps, in order to reach a wider audience, consideration could be given to publishing extracts in the CFs own *Maple Leaf* weekly newspaper or other similar fora.

There is also a wider Canadian audience to whom the RCA will need to get the word out. Any Army in a democratic society must not only draw from its own citizens, but also reflect their values to some degree. Thus, this is an audience which cannot be ignored. However, by 2014, if not already, we should expect a degree of war-weariness on the part of the Canadian public. The Government has been strong messaging for some time that our “combat mission” in Afghanistan ended in summer 2011, and so Canadians will come to expect some sort of “dividend” from the blood and treasure that has been expended to that point, a similar expectation which, we should remember, existed at the end of the Cold War. Somewhat ironically CF recruiting does not appear to have suffered during the war in Afghanistan, but post 2011, and at a time when the economy may be experiencing an upswing, will the CF still be such an employer of choice?

To assist in keeping the RCA in the public eye, our Reserves have a great role to play, particularly through the network of Honorary Colonels and Honorary Lieutenant-Colonels. Currently many of our Honoraries are made up of many sterling folk who have given much to the RCA in terms of time and interest. However, given some of the factors referred to above are these necessarily the right people to reach out to the public at large? In attempting to answer this question it may be worthwhile to look at the experiences of our sister services in this regard. For its part, the Navy has made Jim Balsillie, co-Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of Research in Motion (RIM), inventors of the Blackberry device, as an Honorary Captain in the Navy, and affiliating him with Director-General Maritime Force Development.⁸ Indeed, if you can believe what you read in the papers, there is a Facebook movement trying to have William Shatner, “Captain Kirk” of Star Trek fame, appointed to a similar honorary post.⁹ Not to be outdone, the Air Force has appointed several well-known Canadians to Honorary Colonel (HCol) posts including former Montreal Canadiens hockey star Guy Lafleur, and rock band Barenaked Ladies member Ed Robertson, the latter as HCol 424 Transport and Rescue Squadron¹⁰.

There are several lessons that can be learned from our Navy and Air Force colleagues in how they’ve approached outreach. First that in selecting Honoraries, we must ensure that those selected for this appointment have sufficient reach and influence to advance the interests of the organizations they represent. Secondly, capitalizing of events of national scope: the year 2010 the Centennial of the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN), who are also seeking to keep their service in the public eye through a series of “Great Lakes Deployments” to make Canadians more aware of the “Senior Service. The same year also represented the 100th anniversary of flight in Canada, a major event for the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF). We would do well to study the lessons of the other services and the degree to which they have been successful in Connecting with Canadians, through these activities, as we develop our own communications plans. In the Gunners we recently commemorated the 140th anniversary of the Permanent Force (an event in which the RCA played a signal role), with an enhanced Gunner presence at the Ottawa “Fortissimo” concert series in Summer 2011. Statistics gathered by RHQ RCA showed after the event that the number of hits on the RCA website in the period following Fortissimo 2011 increased dramatically.

Future Required Competencies and Capabilities

One of our great strengths as Gunners has been our ability to act across all three of our disciplines (field, air defence and STA) all under one cap badge. This not only serves ourselves well in terms of the breadth of our professional development, but also provides a one-stop shop for all matters related to Gunner business. All three disciplines will be required in future, whether to provide long range, all-weather precision strike; optimising use of our airspace while protecting our own forces from air threats, and contributing to the never-ending Sense function. In this regard it is interesting to note that the US Army appears to be following the example of many Commonwealth Gunners in combining both its Field and Air Defence Artillery Schools into a Fires Centre of Excellence (CoE)¹¹.

“Effects” is very much a loaded word these days, and mention of this term engenders great debate in messes and various gathering across the Army and the CF. While the pros and cons of an effects-based approach to operations can be argued *ad infinitum*, what cannot be ignored is that the types of conflicts we are encountering in Afghanistan and observing around the world are characterised by the need for both kinetic and non-kinetic capabilities, to be applied against various threats. The key, of course, is in knowing when to use the proper capability against the correct target. As Gunners we have long mastered the art of coordinating kinetic assets such as our own Guns, attack helicopters and Close Air Support (CAS). Canadian Gunners in Afghanistan have also been deeply involved in orchestrating non-kinetic assets referred to above. The experience of our allies in Afghanistan has mirrored this.¹² Thus, we as Gunners should endeavour to seek proponentcy for the coordination of full spectrum effects, so as to give the commander a single point of contact for these issues.

The future operational environment will also include the presence of civilians, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), as well as the media. As we are seeing in Afghanistan and in other contemporary operations, there will be increasingly less and less tolerance for collateral damage to civilian or infrastructure. While much progress has been made in the realm of precision munitions, the fact remains that, whether precision guided or not, a 155mm projectile will deliver essentially the same effects (radius of damage, size of crater, etc) against a given target. Need this remain so?

As a former Assistant Instructor in Gunnery (AIG) told one of our courses many year ago, “Once you fire the round its gone and you can’t call it back.” Fair, enough, but, should the situation change in the vicinity of the target after we’ve fired, why can’t there be a way of having it “wait somewhere” over the target while we decide how to continue with the attack, or indeed to “turn down the volume” so that the round functions with somewhat less destructive power than the maximum normally delivered by the type of ammunition in use. Simply, put we need to look at the potential offered by loitering munitions and rounds with adjustable effects, so that we can deliver the intended results where and when needed, in the increasing complex environment we’ll face.

Finally, all of this will likely have to be accomplished with fewer and fewer personnel. As the so-called Baby Boomer generation reaches retirement age, with increasing concern over health care and pensions, and with a CF which may not appear as attractive a career option in the post-Afghanistan and post-economic crisis world, the ranks of the CF will very likely thin from its current numbers. Thus, we

must also seek to exploit the potential of more autonomous systems, while never forgetting the need for human involvement in the decision making loop.

Conclusion

While the RCA currently enjoys an excellent reputation across the Army and the CF, we must be careful that the wider audiences we wish to reach with our messages do not suffer from “Artillery Blindness”¹³, particularly in the post-Afghanistan era. Given the nature of conflicts we’ll face in future, and our innate strengths across a wide range of disciplines, the RCA definitely has a place in our future at several echelons. That said, first and foremost we’ll need to communicate our role in terms that a wide variety of audiences can understand, using perhaps a wide variety of “human delivery systems” than we have in the past. In addition, we’ll need to ensure that future force developmental efforts is made fully cognizant of the need to deliver our effects, be they kinetic or otherwise, with increasing precision, and indeed with fewer people. While we may not have the need of Gunners in the wars of the 20th century to concentrate fires on a massive scale across a wide area, we can still remain “terrific” in our own way.

Recommendations

It is recommended that the RCA:

- stress the need to maintain expertise at battery, regimental and higher levels, across all three disciplines, notwithstanding eventual CF and Army force structure decisions;
- develop and implement an aggressive Communications Plan explaining our role across the spectrum of conflict to a wide variety of military and civilian audiences. Within this plan we must pay particular attention to the role of Honoraries and how we may learn from the experience of other services in Connecting with Canadians;
- seek proponentcy for the coordination of the full spectrum of effects available to support the Commander; and
- pursue the potential offered by loitering munitions, munitions with scalable effects and autonomous systems.

¹ Peter Mead, Gunners at War 1939-1945 (London: Ian Allen, 1982), p. 127.

² An EKOS Poll in early July 2009 indicated that 54% of Canadians oppose Canada’s military participation in Afghanistan. <http://www.cbc.ca/canada/story/2009/07/15/ekos-afghanistan-mission-support015.html>

³ <http://www.cbc.ca/canada/ottawa/story/2009/09/20/canada-poll-soldiers.html>

⁴ Canada First Defence Strategy, p. 6

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 3.

⁶ Major Michael D. Grice, USMC, “Resuscitating the King”, USMC Gazette, Vol. 92, No. 10, October 2008, p. 21.

⁷ Ibid., p. 22.

⁸ Darlene Blakeley, “Jim Balsillie Joins the Navy”, *The Maple Leaf*, Vol. 12, No 26, 29 July 2009, p. 11.

⁹ “Navy Captain Shatner? Aye, Aye Fan Group Says”, *The Ottawa Citizen*, 29 August 2009.

¹⁰ Tom Philip, “Ed Robertson Named Honorary Colonel”, *The Maple Leaf*, Vol. 12, No 13 May 2009, p. 12.

¹¹ Major General David C. Ralston, “Modularity Update: Transforming the Field Artillery (FA)”, *The Field Artillery Journal*, March-April, 2006, p. 3.

¹² See, Major Jackson Docherty, RA, “Fires and Influence in Counterinsurgency Operations”, *The Journal of the Royal Artillery*, Vol. CXXXVI, No. 1, Spring 2009, pp. 25-28; and Major Mark E. Brock, “The FA is Alive and Well”, *The Field Artillery Journal*, July-August 2006, pp. 18-21. Both articles describe how the UK and US Army’s field artillery communities have taken on the role of coordinating the full spectrum of effects available in contemporary operations.

¹³ See, Captain (N) Malcolm Farrow, RN, “Sea Blindness”, *The Naval Review*, Vol. 97, No 2, May 2009, pp. 142-145. In this article the author advances the concept of sea blindness, a condition which is felt to exist in the United Kingdom. In the authors view, despite the UK being a maritime nation, the Navy is often invisible in the eyes of many, due, in the author’s words, “... to a shameful lack of attention by successive generations of national leaders over many years.”