

Officer Retention at the Tactical Level:  
Developing a Steadfast and Competent Officer Corps  
Y Battery, 2 RHCA

As with every component within the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF), the Royal Regiment of Canadian Artillery (RCA) is facing a shortage of members. While there are numerous factors affecting the staffing of ranks within the CAF – and therefore the RCA, including attraction and recruitment – this essay will focus on analyzing the inherent retention issues faced by the RCA's officer cadre beyond their Operationally Functional Point (OFP). Within the RCA and the CAF as a whole, officers are faced with the expectation of skill mastery despite training limitations, as well as the pressure of upward progression. This is often paired with limited opportunities and institutional support to progress laterally and develop their skillsets in regards to all aspects of fires, impeding the development of a sound experiential foundation. While it is critical to ensure that strategic capability requirements within the Canadian Army are filled, it is equally as important to ensure they are filled with competent subject-matter experts who have both qualifications and experience. The RCA must place its focus upon the development and retention of a competent officer cadre comprised of both generalists and specialists, each with requisite trade expertise to reinforce the excellence and relevance of the Artillery in operations.

The CAF, in its own right, has a tendency to equate qualification to mastery. Within the RCA, the effects of a qualified member who possesses little experience can be detrimental to supported arms operations, in turn bringing the relevance of the Artillery into question. While the Royal Regiment of Canadian Artillery School (RCAS) aims to develop world-class Artillery

Officers and conducts the requisite training, a recent DP 1.2 graduate has not mastered the skills they were taught – they have simply met the threshold that will enable them to operate within a Regiment as a Troop Leader or Troop Commander. In this vein, qualification cannot be seen as equivalent to mastery. It is through this lens that all of an officer's courses must be viewed. For example, to graduate from the Forward Observation Officer (FOO) course does not mean an individual has mastered observation skills, and to treat them as masters of the craft is a failure of the institution. It is not uncommon to see a junior officer return from their FOO course, participate in one or two Regimental exercises and only occupy the role of a FOO for a year. Employment as a FOO for more than a year is, frankly, considered fortunate and uncommon. This is not only a disservice to the member's ability to hone their skills as an observer, it is also a disservice to the NCOs and NCMs with whom they serve. Junior members should look to their officer as a leader and a master of their craft (within limits, as officers must be accountable to honing their mastery through constant learning and development); sacrificing critical skill development time in any role for the capability-filling requirements of the institution fails the member, their subordinates, and the greater defence team as a whole. Further, limiting development time hinders a member's ability to understand and advise on fire support as they progress in their career, an issue that is not limited only to time in the specific position.

In order to develop the skills of qualified members, the RCA should seek to employ competence-based training rather than training centered on the attainment of qualifications; this type of training would allow for enhanced experiential development for all members of the training audience. The current framework of the Canadian Forces Professional Development System (CFPDS) cites its pillars as: education; the provision of a base knowledge and skill set, training;

the provision of skills required to perform specific duties, employment experience; in the application and continued development of the aforementioned pillars, and self-development as self-initiated learning.<sup>1</sup> By the time a member reaches the unit, the training pillar becomes critical. Primary Combat Function (PCF) courses enable a member to receive the education and basic toolset for the job they perform, but challenging training at the unit develops the experience required for members of all ranks to become proficient, competent soldiers. This rings especially true in the officer corps, where the challenges faced in training enable an individual to better handle stressors in operation and perform their duties to the highest possible standard. Additionally, the more hard-earned experience an Officer possesses, the more experience they can bring to the table and the better they will be able to fill critical roles as they progress through their career.

The benefit of optimizing training for experience is twofold: soldiers and officers of the RCA gain invaluable expertise in their roles and the relevance of the Artillery is reinforced in the eyes of supported arms units. Where possible, the Royal Regiment should seek to maximize the value of each bullet fired – planning ammunition allocation per fiscal year to enable interoperability training in addition to the qualification of its members. The continuous issue of ammunition is currently characterized and precipitated primarily by two factors – the lack of available 155mm ammunition within the supply system and limited planning beyond the current fiscal year. Current ammunition planning looks to Battle Task Standard (BTS) requirements within the fiscal year as a baseline for ammunition allocation without taking into account training outside of BTS, fastball courses and possible training opportunities with supported arms units.<sup>2</sup> A potential

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<sup>1</sup> Chief of Military Personnel, “DAOD 5031-8, Canadian Forces Professional Development”, Defence Administrative Orders and Directives, DMPSC and CDA, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> LCol B.M.V Giroux, Maj R.A.H. Nicholson, Capt C.T. Cutting, Annual Artillery Ammunition Requirement, Briefing Note to the Director of Artillery, 2016.

solution to the ammunition planning cycle is a holistic bottom-up approach that would allow Regiments to coordinate with integral Operations and Training cells alongside their supported arms in advance in order to better predict ammunition expenditure for each fiscal year. For example, a Regiment may plan to conduct its BTS exercises, PCF courses which require ammunition, experientially-focused exercises, and confirmation exercises with supported arms units within a fiscal year. Rather than higher staff allocating ammunition solely for requisite boxes to be checked, the Regiment would be able to conduct training that benefits each aspect of its fires capability. Separate from the current production and acquisition issues, enabling increased ammunition allocation while training with supported arms units would in turn reinforce the relevance of the Artillery as a whole, rather than imaginary rounds landing with a promise of accuracy in real-time.

There is an inherent and inescapable necessity for members to progress upwards in order to fill critical roles within the CAF, a facet of the military business model that places constraints on its members' development at the tactical level. A great deal of time is required for a member to develop their basic skillsets into mastery, and to progress laterally – to broaden their knowledge of fires capabilities. The current command model sees sub-unit, unit, and higher commanders occupying their roles for two years of the three-year Managed Readiness Plan (MRP). A three-year command model as opposed to a two-year model may prove more successful in enabling commanders to develop their junior officers for succession, as well as to maintain continuity throughout the three phases of the MRP and potential deployments. With the current model, a Brigade Commander, Commanding Officer or Battery Commander (BC) may complete the Build and Contingency phases of the cycle with their respective unit or sub-unit, before a new

commander is posted in at the beginning of the Committed phase. In the case of the BC, this essentially negates the relationships and development conducted within the cohort of Battery officers before the MRP is completed. Each officer under the BC possesses a unique skillset, outlook, and background which must be managed closely, but which is ultimately compromised when the Change of Command occurs. This is yet another disadvantageous, built-in failing of the two-year command cycle. A three-year command cycle would enable the BC to gain critical experience as a commander and mentor before moving on to the Joint Command and Staff Programme (JCSP) or alternate positions. It would also see the BC able to develop their junior officers and enable their lateral progression before their own upward progression.

With upwards progression within the officer ranks comes an increase in duties and responsibilities. It is inarguable that an officer who has had sufficient time to progress laterally will be more successful in managing the added difficulties in upwards progression. Simply put, enabling officers to develop in the early years of their career would establish a strong foundation for the remainder of their career. The officer would see the evolution of not only skillsets and competence, but the development of effective coping mechanisms for the added stressors inherent to appended responsibilities. A psychological consequence of the inability to effectively manage and cope with job-related stressors has been shown to have a direct correlation to decreased job satisfaction and organizational commitment.<sup>3</sup> To put it bluntly, the RCA has been noted as unhealthy in its officer ranks, with a delta of 60 positions at the Lieutenant and Captain ranks and 31 positions at the rank of Major.<sup>4</sup> Retention at the aforementioned rank levels is critical, and

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<sup>3</sup> Monica M. Singh, Mohammad Amiri, Sherry Sabbarwal, "Role of Job Stress on Job Satisfaction", *International Journal of Management Studies*, Volume 1 Issue 4, 2019, 57-60.

<sup>4</sup> Maj Jordan Beatty, email correspondence to Officers of the RCA, 23 Feb 2022.

enabling adequate time to develop the foundation for success will only result in increased job satisfaction and organizational commitment that will benefit the officer and the soldiers in their charge. Not every officer will become a General Officer, and treating the early stages of an officer's development as if they must become a General places undue strain on skill development and therefore retention.

Job satisfaction is a critical piece of the retention puzzle – a facet of recruiting that is well-understood by organizational behavioural theorists. Job satisfaction can be best described as the attitude an employee has towards their institution which influences recruiting and retention, turnover, and employee motivation. A 2010 Research in Organizational Behavior study noted that employees found greater levels of fulfillment when they are empowered to fill roles and execute meaningful tasks directly related to their training and trade skillset.<sup>5</sup> While there are inherently a variety of secondary tasks which an officer of the RCA must be prepared to undertake and execute, the focus must be on training and developing an officer's primary skillset to bolster job satisfaction, engagement, and retention. In doing so, the RCA will see a cadre of competent officers capable of filling many roles, with the added benefit of providing soldiers with a leader that possesses enough experience to enhance team performance.

The above need not be seen as a reinvention of the current training system. It is a given that National Level and PCF courses take priority in order to fill and maintain army-wide staffing mandates, but where challenging and dynamic training can be afforded to qualified members the RCA must strive to do so. For example, higher-headquarters level exercises such as Exercise

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<sup>5</sup> Brent D. Rosso, Kathryn H. Dekas, Amy Wrzesniewski, "On the Meaning of Work: A Theoretical Integration and Review", Research in Organizational Behavior, Volume 30, 2010, 91-127.

Unified Resolve<sup>6</sup> (while critical for the validation of higher commanders) often see junior officers employed as Lower Control (LOCON) for the Primary Training Audience and effectively remove them from conducting their day-to-day training. The argument can be made that employing junior officers in LOCON positions develops them to operate in a position above the level of their current employment. However, this argument should only be tenable if the junior officers employed in higher level roles have adequate training and experience in their current role, and the filling of LOCON positions does not detract from the training that must be conducted at the tactical level. A possible solution sees Calian members employed as LOCON, with experienced junior officers operating in a capacity geared more towards facilitation and liaison. This in turn would enable flexibility in allowing less experienced junior officers to conduct training with their NCOs and NCMs, retaining focus on their primary tasks.

For a great many RCA officers, secondary tasks take up a significant amount of time, productivity, and bandwidth. For example – an officer could be tasked with job-related expectations such as the planning and coordination of an exercise, which benefits and broadens a member’s planning skillset; a Unit Disciplinary Investigation, a critical aspect of troop administration which must be performed to the highest standard; the drafting of Personnel Evaluation Reports, yet more critical administration; secondary tasks such as planning an officers’ mess dinner and a mixed dining-in event, both enjoyable events that benefit members of the Regiment; and a mandatory essay which seeks to somehow develop both the officer and the institution but which may end up unread on an equally busy Senior Officer’s desk. The workload added to a member’s schedule by researching, writing and editing a mandatory essay is an example

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<sup>6</sup> Army Public Affairs, Exercise UNIFIED RESOLVE 2022 Brings Greater Realism to Our Soldiers Through Simulation, Project Number 22-0007, 2022.

of a secondary task that assumes a high demand of time and resources and detracts from the conduct of primary tasks. Additionally, the potential for employee disengagement and thus decreased job satisfaction is increased by inefficiencies in communicating the holistic purpose and meaningfulness of a task.<sup>7</sup> That is not to say that all tasks must be meaningful nor directly relevant to a member's occupation, but maximizing skill development and experience garnered through relevant and challenging training naturally produces competent and confident officers, undoubtedly resulting in pride in and positive attitudes towards the institution.

In closing, the root of many of the problems addressed here are borne of a lack of intrinsic honesty about what our true competencies are as individual officers and as a professional organization. When we fail to look inwards at our skills and competencies with brutal clarity, we only perpetuate the cyclical failure of officer development and progression. When we fail to address our shortcomings in training and building experience, we see the perpetuation of roles occupied by officers with a limited breadth and depth of knowledge. When we do not allow officers time to develop primary skillsets in conjunction with the soldiers they lead, we fail not only the individual officer, but the institution. This is, in our opinion, the root of our retention crisis. It is crucial that the RCA sets its sights on honestly evaluating the way in which it trains its members. Reinforcing member engagement and motivation will ultimately enable the development of a cadre of competent, experienced officers who display the best side of the RCA.

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<sup>7</sup> Roshan Thiran, "The Importance of Getting People to Understand the 'Why'", Leaderonomics, 2019.