

Soldier Over System
An Optimistic View on the State of the RCA

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Much ado has been made in recent years about the need for more modern equipment in the Royal Regiment of Canadian Artillery (RCA). “While the M777 excels as an airborne weapon that could easily be deployed between Forward Operating Bases (FOBs) in the desert, compared to other towed and self-propelled howitzers of the modern conventional era of warfare, it not only lacks the firepower but also the ease of use that is essential for quickly engaging a peer [sic] or near-peer adversary.”¹ While it is obvious that our equipment is old and has its problems, defining the RCA as outdated is narrow-minded.

Plenty of historical precedent illustrates that armies, unprepared for war, manage to modernize quickly to face the threats of the day. More pointedly, however, history demonstrates that the most unprepared for war are unprepared for reasons besides equipment. Understaffed, underfunded, underequipped, undertrained. The outbreak of war solves the first three; the last takes more time and is thus the one we should prioritize in peacetime. This is good news; while training takes longer, it is less reliant on factors outside the CAF’s control. It does not rely on convoluted procurement processes and is relatively inexpensive, making low-level training one of the best value investments we can make.

The old cliché, “The army is always fighting the previous war,” is partially true and is a good starting point. Some things in war never change or change at such a slow pace as to be imperceptible. Mastering the unchanging basics of warfare will ensure that the areas in which we are unprepared can be solved almost overnight by the awakening of the war machine.

Situation

History gives us many examples of armies unprepared for war. France before WWII, the Austro-Hungarian Empire before WWI, and Russia before the Russo-Japanese War. These examples illustrate that unpreparedness almost guarantees defeat unless the enemy is equally unprepared, as both sides were in the US Civil War. While these examples appear to put the RCA in the same category, equipment is only one factor in preparedness.

The French defeat was a result of failures in intelligence and tactics. French intelligence had correctly guessed the German plan for the invasion of France but failed to adjust their own plans after the Mechelen Incident. They obtained confirmatory evidence of their assumptions but did not think that the Germans would change their offensive plans as a result of the incident.² Further, the French employed a policy of occupying hardened defensive positions, believing that an attacker would have to bring monumental superiority to defeat them. As a result, “(French doctrine) was not tailored for fast-paced warfare, it did not encourage officers to

¹ Schardt, McDonald, Pinto, Wery, “The Royal Canadian Artillery: Fighting Yesterday’s War Today,” *The Royal Canadian Artillery Association* (2023): 4, accessed January 21, 2024, <https://rca-arc.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/2nd-Place-The-RCA-Fighting-Yesterdays-War-Today-Jr-Officers-2-RCHA.pdf>.

² Lorris Beverelli, “Why France Lost in 1940,” *War Writers* (2020): accessed February 9, 2024, <https://warwriters.com/why-france-lost-in-1940>.

improvise, and it made the French extremely slow.”³ The Germans defeated the French using more effective tactics, speed, and aggression, rather than necessarily superior equipment.

The Austro-Hungarians lost due to incompetent leadership, “...it cannot be denied that the Austrian high command proved to be quite incompetent. The Austro-Hungarian chief of staff, Conrad, had clamoured for preventive war since 1906, but, when he received his chance in July 1914, it turned out that the Austrian army had no plans for an expeditious offensive. Similarly, after Italy entered the war on the side of the Allied Powers in May 1915, Conrad was unprepared. The fact that only after the Germans had taken command could the Russian front be stabilized did little to enhance the prestige of the Austrian government.”⁴

The Russians underestimated Japan and thought they would easily win, “There is little doubt that Russian military and political leaders significantly underestimated Japan’s ability and willingness to fight ... Russian political and military leaders were convinced that they had indisputable military and naval superiority over Japan.”⁵ This underestimation was unwarranted and contributed to Russian defeat.

In the three above examples, reasons other than technology sealed defeat. Leadership, tactics, and training are a small sampling of the many factors that lead to victory or defeat, all of which are more important than equipment and can be improved in peacetime.

Canada was unprepared for WWII, “Indeed it still seemed unlikely in 1938 that Canada would go to war at all.”⁶ Decreased military spending marked the interwar period of 1918-39 due to the idea that WWI was the “war to end all wars”.⁷ This was not the case, and Canada had to quickly rebuild its forces. We experience the luxury of geography and amicable relations with our only neighbour; we do not need to maintain a constant war footing. We can respond to situations as they arise. But we cannot start from scratch. At the start of WWII, the CAF was understaffed, but when war broke, the ranks swelled, and many brought experience gained in WWI. This experience enabled the CAF to focus on modernizing without the immediate need to train soldiers; they were already good soldiers.

Equipment is a force multiplier. But if the equipment is the sole focus, without due regard to training and tactics, it is effectively multiplying by zero. There are examples from history in which the better-equipped force lost. The Battle of Stalingrad in WWII saw the Wehrmacht, the most technically advanced army in history at that time, lose to the Red Army, “Deprived of their blitzkrieg tactics, the Germans were forced to fight in the ruined city where the Russians were

³ Beverelli, “Why France Lost in 1940.”

⁴ “Austria,” <https://www.britannica.com/place/Austria/World-War-I>.

⁵ Philip Streich and Jack S. Levy, “Information, Commitment, and the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905,” *Foreign Policy Analysis* 12 (2016): 502, accessed February 21, 2024, <https://fas-polisci.rutgers.edu/levy/articles/Streich%20%20Levy%20-%20Information,%20Commitment,%20%20Russo-Japanese%20War.pdf>.

⁶ Desmond Morton *A Military History of Canada* (Toronto: McLelland & Stewart, 1992), 178.

⁷ Morton *A Military History of Canada*, 173.

better adapted to the conditions.”⁸ The most obvious example is the Vietnam War. The Vietcong used tactics that US forces had never experienced, leading to victory in what should have been the most lopsided conflict in history, “(The Vietcong) would frustrate the Americans by simple tactics: retreating when the enemy attacked; raiding enemy camps; attacking the enemy when they were tired and pursuing the enemy when they retreated.”⁹

The soldiers using the equipment are the base upon which a technological power is built. The training of those soldiers is also a force multiplier, one that takes more time to achieve than simply buying the most advanced system. It is also less expensive. Captain Mark Staples, citing *HR 2020 Internal Assessment*, states, “The cost to train an officer to LCol has recently been calculated at over \$1,000,000 for the Infantry, Aerospace Control, Combat Engineers, and Artillery MOC’s.”¹⁰ Meanwhile, a single M777 replacement barrel costs almost the same.¹¹ The amount we spend on equipment is wasted if the equipment is placed in the hands of poorly trained operators.

Mission

Emphasis should be placed on “brilliance in the basics”¹² on mastering the skills which form the foundation of our profession. The United States Marine Corps is underfunded and understaffed, relative to the rest of the US military, but they are far from undertrained. The Marines adopt a philosophy of, “training the young Marines we had, not focusing on the ones we didn’t have.”¹³ We should be relentlessly training basic soldier skills and basic Gunner skills. We should also focus on analyzing current and past conflicts for tactical insights. Towed howitzers are not obsolete, they were effective in Afghanistan and are great for navigating difficult terrain. The RCA Family Strategy¹⁴ makes no mention of M777s, or C3s, or self-propelled vs towed howitzers. With good reason. Gunners, while dependent on equipment, are not defined by it. We need to be at peak performance as Gunners, ready to employ any artillery system, rather than be M777 Gunners or C3 Gunners.

Isaiah Berlin, in his essay *The Hedgehog and the Fox*, describes the essential differences between specialists and generalists, “For there exists a great chasm between those,

⁸ Robert M. Kaplan, “Stalingrad: The Hinge of History - How Hitler’s Hubris Led to the Defeat of the Sixth Army,” *The Journal of Military and Veterans’ Health* 31 (2023): accessed February 21, 2024, <https://jmvh.org/article/stalingrad-the-hinge-of-history-how-hitlers-hubris-led-to-the-defeat-of-the-sixth-army>.

⁹ “The Vietnam War - Edexcel,” <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/guides/z89hg82/revision/4>.

¹⁰ Mark Staples, “The Value of Experience,” *The Royal Canadian Artillery Association* (2022): 2, accessed January 21, 2024, <https://rca-arc.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/The-Value-of-Experience.pdf>.

¹¹ “Canada sending Ukraine \$9M worth of replacement barrels for artillery guns,” last modified June 15, 2022, <https://www.ctvnews.ca/politics/canada-sending-ukraine-9m-worth-of-replacement-barrels-for-artillery-guns-1.5948228>.

¹² Jim Mattis, *Call Sign Chaos* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2021), 11.

¹³ Mattis, *Call Sign Chaos*, 21.

¹⁴ “The RCA Family Strategy,” <http://rca-arc.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Family-Strategy-2015-EN.pdf>.

on one side, who relate everything to a single central vision, one system less or more coherent or articulate, in terms of which they understand...on the other side, those who pursue many ends, often unrelated and even contradictory..."¹⁵ The hedgehogs are the specialists who view everything through the lens of their expertise. The foxes, the generalists, are not experts in any one area; they have knowledge of many differing subjects. While not experts, the foxes are more adaptable and better suited to finding unique solutions in dynamic circumstances. War is just about as dynamic as circumstances get, and therefore the fox, the Gunner, who has knowledge and experience across all aspects of battle and with a wide range of weapon systems, is better able to tailor their application of force to the situation on the ground to achieve the optimal effects.

Execution

The M777 was rushed into service to meet the needs of Gunners in Afghanistan.¹⁶ It worked because the soldiers in Afghanistan were good soldiers. We could have purchased any modern system of the day and experienced similar success. If our soldiers are well trained, they will perform in any environment, any circumstances, and with any weapon system. "One week as a 105mm battery, the next as a 155mm, or 81mm mortars, it didn't matter as Gunners stepped up and did what was necessary."¹⁷

If we adopt a philosophy of training our soldiers in soldiering and our Gunners in gunnery rather than in M777-ery, we will be ready to respond to whatever new systems and tactics the next conflict requires. This means an added focus on the items of training that usually get postponed in order to facilitate more substantial training. Good training need not bring the heavy cost of heavy artillery to be effective. Much of this training costs very little; land navigation, winter survival, and basic dismounted infantry skills pay greater dividends than the modest costs required to run them. These are skills taught in basic training that get ignored in favour of trade specific training making our Gunners less malleable.

Service and Support

The CAF has programs and organizations to help create and maintain quality members. Personnel Support Programs (PSP) are integral to the physical and mental health of our soldiers, which is as important as any other type of training we do. SISIP provides financial advice to our members. Part of being a good soldier is having your affairs in order, allowing you to focus on the responsibilities of soldiering.

We need to take advantage of the experience in our Regiment. We still have serving Gunners who deployed to Afghanistan, they are an essential resource for providing insight into the things that are the same in conflicts of today. We also have resources throughout the CAF

¹⁵ Isaiah Berlin, *The Hedgehog and the Fox* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1953), 1.

¹⁶ "The War in Afghanistan 2002-14," <https://rca-arc.org/part0240-the-war-in-afghanistan-2002-14>.

¹⁷ "The Canadian Gunner," *The Royal Canadian Artillery Association* (2005): 7, accessed January 15, 2024, <https://rca-arc.org/the-canadian-gunner-2003-04>.

that provide analysis of ongoing conflicts which we can use to train our tactical approaches, test them, and improve them. Both of these require zero bullets and minimal costs. There should also be more integration between different units, especially within the combat arms, so we can learn from each other and benefit the soldiers of multiple trades simultaneously.

Coordinating Instructions

Adopting a philosophy of general training from a soldier and Gunner perspective will help fulfill the flexibility principle of war, allowing us to adapt to whatever circumstances we find ourselves in without having to shoehorn our equipment to fight in a role for which it was not designed. A healthy reserve force will help greatly in the event of large-scale conflict. Training a soldier to be prepared for war takes a large allocation of time. Emphasizing the basics at the early stages of training can reduce that allocation. Our reserve force could complete preparations for war with little more than a pre-deployment workup. "The small establishments and manning levels of regular regiments present a high risk to sustained operations or larger surge missions. Therefore, it is imperative that the capability of the reserve force to provide well-trained soldiers and detachments be maintained."¹⁸ The reserve force is exactly that: reserve. The backfill, supplementing the ranks of regular soldiers and increasing our strength by an order of magnitude.

Forces are often unprepared for war. War can occur without much notice, so preparation is crucial, "If you want the fewest big regrets when surprise strikes, you must provide, ahead of time, the doctrine and resources to respond."¹⁹ This is true for the individual soldier, they must always be ready to fight, and the resources should be provided in order to ensure that is the case. Concerning equipment, we need to maintain a doctrinally-defined, minimum immediate response capability, which can be further supplemented by new equipment tailor-purchased for the specific conflict at hand.

"In opposition, (William Lyon Mackenzie King) had attacked every unionist defence proposal. What enemy, he demanded, is the government arming against?"²⁰ This was King's attitude between the World Wars, but this attitude is prevalent today. There are ongoing conflicts from which we can learn and evaluate our current capabilities, but we are not any closer to participating in war on a large scale than we have been at any point in the last decade. A case could be made that there is little use in arming against possible threats posed by forces in current conflicts if we are not going to end up fighting them. Again, our geography allows us to see how things play out and take action once necessary. We purchased the M777 after gaining some experience in counterinsurgency operations and it was the perfect purchase for the circumstances. Who's to say we can't do the same in our next conflict?

¹⁸ "The Royal Regiment of Canadian Artillery Strategic Capabilities Assessment," April 26, 2016, <https://rca-arc.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/RCA-Strategic-Capabilities-Assessment-26-Apr-16-EN.pdf>

¹⁹ Mattis, *Call Sign Chaos*, 65.

²⁰ Morton, *A Military History of Canada*, 170.

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