

THE POST WAR ERA OF DECENTRALIZED PARACHUTE CAPABILITY, 1946-1967

The disbandment of the 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion at the end of World War II by a debt-ridden and war weary government seemingly ended the nation's foray with airborne forces. However, the country's political and military leadership quickly realized the contribution parachute troops could make to national security in the increasingly tense post war geo-political security environment.

Initially, from 1945-48, the A-35 Canadian Parachute Training Centre (CPTC) in Shilo, Manitoba, staffed with ex-members from the 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion and the First Special Service Force, maintained the national airborne expertise. Moreover, they actively maintained links with American and British airborne units that had been forged in the furnace of World War II. As a result, they ensured the Army remained current in regard to the latest tactical developments in modern warfare, specifically air-transportability. The importance of this continuing research and development prompted NDHQ, in the spring of 1947, to authorize the formation of the Joint Air School (JAS) in Rivers, Manitoba. The JAS became responsible for: research in airportability of Army personnel and equipment; user trials of equipment, especially under cold weather conditions; limited development and assessment of airborne equipment; training of paratroop volunteers; training in airportability of personnel and equipment; advanced training of glider pilots in exercises with troops; and the training in some of the uses of light aircraft.

Although the research and development mandate was important in advancing the nation's capability for modern warfare, as well as perpetuating cooperation with its closest allies, the real value of parachute forces quickly re-emerged. In 1947, the JAS proposed the formation of the

Canadian Special Air Service (SAS) Company. This sub-unit was responsible for Army, inter-service, and public duties such as Army / Air tactical research and development; demonstrations to assist with Army / Air training; Airborne Firefighting; Search and Rescue; and Aid to the Civil Power. It was not lost on politicians that the mobility and rapid reaction of an airborne force that could deploy anywhere in Canada in 10-15 hours would be invaluable "in the event of a national catastrophe." Not surprisingly, the sub-unit was authorized in January 1948.

But more importantly, the Canadian SAS Company provided the "nucleus for expansion into parachute battalions." The post-war world that emerged from the ashes of a destroyed Europe did not augur well. Canada was now wedged between two rival and ideologically diametrically opposed superpowers. The Canadian North which had historically represented solitude and an impassable barrier was now perceived by the Americans as an unprotected flank.

The threat of a Soviet invasion over the polar icecap forced the Canadian government to find a cost efficient, yet credible, response that would reassure the Americans that its ally was capable of securing the exposed 'northern flank' from enemy lodgements. This requirement was actually entrenched in the Canadian / U.S. 1946 Basic Security Plan (BSP), under which the Canadian Government was obligated, by 1 May 1949, to have a battalion combat team prepared to respond immediately to any actual enemy lodgement, with a second battalion available within two months, and an entire brigade group within four months. As a result, the government announced in 1946, that airborne training for the Active Force Brigade Group was planned with the aim of creating a peacetime Army structure based on an airborne / air-transportable formation. Two years later, on 9 August 1948, Major-General C.C. Mann, the Vice Chief of the General Staff, visited the PPCLI Battalion in Calgary and asked them to convert to airborne status. As a

result, the PPCLI became the first Active Force infantry regiment to undergo parachute and air-transportability training. In accordance with the phased plan, upon completion of the conversion of the PPCLI, the RCR, and then R22eR would begin their transformation to airborne status in 1950, and 1951 respectively. With the termination of the R22eR's conversion, the infantry component of the Canadian Army's airborne / air-transportable Brigade Group was complete. This force, in conjunction with similarly trained support arms, became known as the Mobile Striking Force (MSF). The establishment of the MSF, however, resulted in the dissolution of the Canadian SAS Company. Nonetheless, its role had been key. The SAS Company became Canada's interim measure which provided the military with a provisional response and a cadre for expansion. It became the "airborne bridge" which spanned the gap between the 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion and the airborne battalions of the Mobile Striking Force. As such, it played a critical role in ensuring the requisite parachute skills stayed alive, as well as perpetuating the indomitable airborne spirit.

By the early-fifties, the Soviets demonstrated that they had the technological expertise to produce atomic weapons and long-range bombers. As a result, the Soviet peril to the North American land mass was defined almost exclusively as an air threat by both the Americans and the Canadians. The announcement on 26 August 1957, that the Soviets had successfully launched their first Inter-Continental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) further entrenched the perception that the defence of the North necessitated air defence rather than paratroopers. As a result, in January 1958, the Mobile Striking Force was restructured and renamed the Defence of Canada Force (DCF). The reorganization entailed abandoning the airborne battalion structure and instead established parachute companies (commonly referred to as "Jump Companies") within each of

the RCR, R22eR and PPCLI infantry regiments. This much reduced decentralized parachute capability was now responsible for meeting the defence of Canada mandate, specifically the response to enemy lodgements. In essence, the new structure did not represent an operational capability but rather a framework that was capable of keeping the art and skill of military parachuting alive.