

## **THE GREAT ADVENTURE - THE CANADIAN AIRBORNE REGIMENT, 1968-1995**

With the commitment to NATO in 1949, the Army increasingly focussed its attention on large mechanized units and the “inevitable” war against the Soviets in Europe. As a result, Canada’s paratroopers were continually pushed to the margins of military importance. The lightly armed and equipped airborne soldiers were seen as an anachronism in a world dominated by heavy mechanized formations. However, by the mid-1960s, a changing global environment soon changed perspectives.

The increasing number of wars of liberation, or “brush fire wars” throughout the world caused the Americans to place an increased emphasis on strategic mobility and special operations forces to conduct counter-insurgency operations. This trend, as well as growing Canadian interest and involvement in UN missions, led Canada to follow suit. As such, the 1964 Defence White Paper set a new course for the Canadian Forces (CF) - namely, “to preserve peace by deterring war.” This was to be achieved by restructuring the military into a very mobile and global force that could meet the widest range of potential requirements in the quickest possible time, and thus, contain conflict and prevent it from escalating into a more dangerous and less manageable crisis.

In 1966, Lieutenant-General Jean Victor Allard, the new Commander of Force Mobile Command (FMC), candidly confessed, that at present, the Canadian Army was designed primarily for a total global war and that it was unsuited for the lower range of activities such as peacekeeping, counter-insurgency, guerilla and limited warfare. Importantly, strategic analysis concluded it was exactly these types of missions that the CF would be largely involved in. As such, the report declared that the Army’s organization should be based on two basic types of

formations and units. Firstly, light airborne / air-transportable forces for the Defence of Canada - U.S. Region, peacekeeping, the Allied Command Europe (ACE) Mobile Force, and small limited wars; and secondly, heavier armoured and mechanized forces to fulfil the Canadian Army's role in NATO Europe.

Allard stressed strategic mobility. Specifically, he wanted a completely air-portable unit that could deploy with all its equipment into a designated operational theatre within forty-eight hours. Therefore, on 12 May 1966, the MND publicly announced that "FMC would include the establishment of an airborne regiment whose personnel and equipment could be rapidly sent to danger zones." The regiment was designed to fill a gap in the Canadian strategy - it would provide an immediate response that could deploy immediately and provide a presence until the heavier mechanized forces, if required, arrived in theatre.

Action quickly followed. In the spring of 1966, General Allard, now the Chief of the Defence Staff (CDS), discussed the formation of the new "Airborne Commando Regiment" with Colonel Don H. Rochester. The new Regimental Commander-designate was given a year to refine the 'concept of operations,' organization, and structure. The unit was to be radically different. Except for aircraft, it was to be self-contained with infantry, armour, artillery, engineers, signals and supporting administration. Rochester stated that "all were to be volunteers and so well trained in their own arm or service that they could devote their time to specialist training."

Colonel Rochester and his planning staff quickly began to work out the details concerning organization, strength, training requirements, and unit location. However, there were some externally imposed changes in the planning process. A centrally directed manpower reduction

scaled the Regiment down from the original 1,285 positions to 898. This entailed the elimination of the proposed armoured squadron, as well as personnel cuts to the remaining units. In addition, the senior military leadership decided that the term "Commando" in the title was too "aggressive" and the word was dropped. Finally, after an exhaustive analysis and study, Edmonton was chosen as the location because of its excellent air facilities and abundant drop zones; its important strategic location from a global vantage point; proximity to training areas at Wainwright, nearness to mountains and ski areas; and particularly because the PPCLI was to move to Calgary and the accommodation they were vacating was a custom fit.

Finally, on 8 April 1968, the Canadian Airborne Regiment (Cdn AB Regt) was officially established. It consisted of an airborne headquarters and signal squadron, two infantry commandos, an airborne field battery and an airborne field squadron. By June, the Regiment began to assemble in Griesbach Barracks with the exception of 1 Commando which remained in CFB Valcartier for the interim. This delay was intended to provide time for the necessary Francophone infrastructure, such as schools, to be established in Edmonton.

The Regiment's mandate was impressive. The Cdn AB Regt was to be capable of performing a variety of tasks which included: the Defence of Canada; the UN 'stand-by' role; peacekeeping operations; missions in connection with national disaster; 'Special Air Service' (SAS) type missions; coup de main tasks in a general war setting; and responsibility for parachute training in the Canadian Forces. The respective Canadian Forces Organizational Order (CFOO) stated that "the role of the Canadian Airborne Regiment is to provide a force capable of moving quickly to meet any unexpected enemy threat or other commitment of the Canadian Armed Forces."

And so, the nation's paratroopers, who had existed on the Army's periphery for their entire existence, were now touted as Canada's "fire-brigade." They became the country's vanguard force responsible for dispatching, within two days of a request being received, the first elements of a Canadian UN peacekeeping force. The 'Guardians of the North' were now established as a national strategic force for global employment.

The Regiment had an auspicious beginning. Only experienced officers, non-commissioned officers, and soldiers were accepted. All riflemen within the commandos were required to be qualified to the rank of corporal. As a result, they were already competent and experienced in the basic drills of soldiering. This allowed the Regiment to direct its training effort towards specialized training such as mountain and pathfinder operations, patrolling courses, skiing, and unarmed combat. The Cdn AB Regt quickly forged a reputation for tough, demanding and dynamic activities. It set new standards for physical fitness and training realism.

In consonance with its status as a strategic force, the Regiment travelled throughout Canada, the United States, as well as other exotic locations such as Jamaica, to practise its lethal craft. By the early-1970s the Airborne Regiment was at its zenith of power. It had the status of a mini-formation, direct access to the Commander of the Army, and a peacetime establishment of 1,044 all ranks.

The first major organizational change occurred in June 1970. A mechanized infantry battalion, stationed in Baden-Soellingen, Germany, was added to the Canadian Airborne Regiment's Order of Battle. The unit, designated 3 Mechanized Commando, wore the maroon beret despite the fact that a large number of its members were not jump qualified, nor did the unit have a jump role. In addition, it never exercised in conjunction with the rest of the Regiment.

Nonetheless, it participated in airborne activities with European airborne units and created a Canadian airborne presence in Europe.

The Regiment's first operational test came in the Fall of 1970 during the "FLQ Crisis" in Quebec. On 15 October 1970, the Provincial Government officially solicited the assistance of the CF in aid of the civil power. The request was received in Ottawa at 1250 hours, and within forty minutes two aircraft carrying the lead elements of the Cdn AB Regt departed Namao Airfield in Edmonton to begin the Regiment's participation in Operation (OP) Essay. In sum, the Regiment assisted the municipal and provincial police forces in the conduct of sweeps, raids and other internal security missions. The Regiment returned to Edmonton on 17 November as the crisis came to an end.

The Airborne's next operational test came in April 1974 with the rotation of 1 Commando to the Mediterranean island of Cyprus, as part of the Canadian commitment to UNFICYP. A coup d'etat by the Greek Cypriot National Guard caused the Turkish government to invade the island on 20 July. A temporary lull in the fighting on the 24th, allowed for the rapid deployment of the bulk of the Cdn AB Regt who reinforced the Canadian contingent and subsequently assumed command of the mission. The Regiment performed well throughout the crisis and undertook the task of establishing and enforcing the demarcation line; providing organization and security for Prisoner of War (PoW) exchanges; and providing escorts for infrastructure repair. The Canadian troops also assisted 20,000 refugees. The paratroopers delivered tons of food and supplies, including blankets, cots and tents, prior to the arrival of the International Committee of the Red Cross and other humanitarian agencies. For their efforts, the airborne soldiers earned two Stars of Courage and six Medals of Bravery. However, a great

price was paid for these honours. It also suffered thirty casualties, including two dead.

By 1974, however, the Regiment had reached its apex. In December, the Defence Structure Review prompted General Jacques Dextraze, the CDS, to announce that "hard operational needs would determine the basic structuring of the forces." This ominous statement translated two years later into the move of the Cdn AB Regiment from Edmonton to Petawawa. Dextraze publicly explained that he decided on a peacetime establishment based on a standard brigade group in the West, a standard brigade group in the East and a force of Regimental size in the Centre, which he tentatively designated the "Special Service Force" (SSF). He elaborated that the SSF was slightly different and provided the Army with a relatively light, airborne / airportable quick reaction force in the demographic centre of the country which could be moved quickly to augment either of the flanking brigades for internal security tasks, to the Arctic, or to UN-type operations.

The move and reorganization in the summer of 1977 became a defining moment for the Cdn AB Regt. It lost its independent formation status and was now simply an integral part of the newly created SSF. It became nothing more than just another infantry unit, albeit an airborne one. It lost its special exemption from taskings and more importantly, it also lost its preferred manning. It was no longer in the envious position of receiving only experienced and mature leaders and men. In addition, the Regiment was dramatically pared. Its integral airborne engineer squadron and airborne artillery battery were removed from the Order of Battle and those requirements were filled by other brigade units who were responsible for providing airborne qualified personnel and equipment in support, when required, to the Cdn AB Regt. Also stricken from the Order of Battle was 3 Mechanized Commando. As part of the reorganization, a third

rifle commando, designated 3 Airborne Commando was authorized, but was not actually manned until June 1979.

Despite the reduction in size, the reorganization entailed two additional new tasks. The first was the requirement to provide a quick response airborne capability as part of the national rescue plan in the event of a major air disaster (MAJAID). The second, was the necessity of conducting Cyprus rotations just like any other Army unit. The latter task quickly raised concern of the Airborne's continuing suitability to act as a national strategic reserve or UN 'stand-by' force, if in fact it was committed to a lengthy six to nine month assignment. The quandary was never resolved. Multiple taskings were accepted as a necessary evil in an environment with an acknowledged 'capability / commitment gap.'

The Regiment's infantry units were now organized so that each of the three commandos had a direct affiliation with their parent infantry regiment. For example, 1, 2, and 3 Airborne Commandos were manned by officers and soldiers of the R22eR, PPCLI, and RCR, respectively. The senior Army leadership believed the initiative would solve the Regiment's chronic manpower shortages since each parent infantry regiment would be responsible to fill a quota to meet the requirements of its respective commando.

And so, the Regiment continued to focus its efforts in the 1980s and 1990s on the UN Ready Force and Defence of Canada roles and exercises were conducted in and outside of Canada to test its operational effectiveness. In the summer of 1991, at long last it seemed that the paratroopers would actually be deployed in a UN role other than a routine rotation to Cyprus. However, the hope quickly died. OP Python, the mission to the Western Sahara, was cancelled.

Significantly, concurrent with the ill-fated preparations for OP Python was an Army

headquarters directive to reduce the Cdn AB Regt from Regimental to Battalion status. The new structure took effect on 24 June 1992. The reorganization reduced the Regiment from a strength of 754 members down to 601 all ranks. However, despite the downsizing, the newly restructured 'airborne battalion' maintained their identical role and tasks, namely, to "provide rapid deployment airborne / air-transportable forces capable of responding to any emergency situation in support of national security or international peacekeeping."

And the winds of change blew hard. Although not discernable at the time, the summer of 1992 sparked a chain of events that would dramatically change the fortunes of Canada's airborne soldiers. In September, in response to a UN request for assistance for strife torn Somalia, the MND announced that Canada would deploy 750 peacekeepers as part of a classical UN peacekeeping operation mandated under Chapter VI of the UN Charter. The Canadian designation for its contribution to the UN operation was titled OP Cordon. Its tentative task was to provide security for the distribution of humanitarian relief, as well as participate in limited local humanitarian projects. The mission fell to the Cdn AB Regt.

However, bad luck seemed to plague the Regiment. The mission which was to be launched by end-September dragged well into November. By end-month events quickly unravelled. The UN Security Council adopted a new option which fundamentally changed the entire scope of the mission. The new mandate called for enforcement action under Chapter VII of the UN Charter. Almost overnight, the mission evolved from peacekeeping to peace-making. Accordingly, OP Cordon was cancelled on 4 December.

The next day, Canada's involvement in the new American led UNITAF enforcement operation, dubbed OP Deliverance by Canadians, was announced. The paratroopers were now

tasked with providing a secure environment for the distribution of humanitarian relief supplies in the Canadian Humanitarian Relief Sector (HRS), an area covering approximately 30,000 square kilometres. Tasks included: the security of airports; the protection of food convoys; the protection of food distribution centres; the rebuilding of infrastructure which included roads, bridges and schools; the re-establishment of a local police force in Belet Huen and numerous other humanitarian projects.

Unfortunately, the Cdn AB Regt experienced disciplinary problems in theatre that detracted from their actual performance. Incidents included: the mistreatment of prisoners on several occasions; the alleged unjustified shooting and resultant death of an intruder; and the torture death of an apprehended thief. These occurrences ultimately defined the Airborne's achievements in the public consciousness. Unfortunately, selective cases of poor leadership and the criminal actions of a few, in the dusty wasteland of Somalia, laid the foundation for the Regiment's eventual demise. The publicity surrounding the small number of appalling events that transpired, collectively covered the paratroopers with such notoriety that the Cdn AB Regt BG's accomplishments were completely ignored.

Objectively examined, the Regiment's actual contribution to the amelioration of the suffering in Somalia was extremely laudable. Their unremitting physical presence soon created an atmosphere of control, dominance, and security. The Airborne program was so successful that the Belet Huen HRS was declared 'secure' by UNITAF Headquarters in a period of less than three months. Its humanitarian effort was even more effective. In total the Cdn AB Regt BG's achievements included: the formation of five local committees to restore local government; the conduct of approximately 60 humanitarian convoys that provided aid to 96 villages; the

construction of four schools attended by 5,400 students at end-tour; the instruction and training of 272 school teachers; the supervision and training of local doctors and nurses; the training of 185 policemen in their HRS, the provision of potable water to local refugees; the repair of approximately 20 wells; the repair of village generators; the repair of two major hospitals; the construction of a bridge; and the repair of over 200 kilometres of road.

Nonetheless, even upon its return to Canada, the Regiment was clearly tainted by Somalia. The Regiment worked hard to redeem its reputation, but continuing courts-martial, Military Boards of Inquiry and subsequent public Commissions of Inquiry had the effect of maintaining the Regiment under close public scrutiny. Moreover, events after the actual killings transformed the issue from one of a series of criminal acts, compounded by poor leadership, to one of a national scandal. The brutality of a number of paratroopers became eclipsed by the spectre of an alleged cover-up by NDHQ. The roof finally collapsed on 15 January 1995, when the CTV television network broadcast excerpts from a homemade video depicting paratroopers in Somalia which was deemed racist in manner. Three days later, another amateur video, this time portraying a 1992 "initiation party," which included disgusting activities, embarrassed the government and the CF. It quickly became apparent that the unacceptable spectacle, although dated, alienated any remaining support for the Cdn AB Regt. The MND ordered an investigation and subsequently, on 23 January 1995, he ordered the disbandment of the Cdn AB Regt.

As a result, on the week-end of 4-5 March 1995, the elaborate and well-attended final disbandment ceremonies were conducted in CFB Petawawa. The cycle had come full circle. On 6 May 1968, during Colonel D.H. Rochester's opening address to the Regiment, he declared, "ahead lies the great adventure of this new regiment." And so it came to pass - the end of an era,

the end of the great adventure.