

BACK TO THE FUTURE: A RETURN TO DECENTRALIZED PARACHUTE CAPABILITY - 1995 TO THE PRESENT

The disbandment of the Canadian Airborne Regiment reignited a long standing and often emotional debate. Namely, did Canada actually require an airborne capability? If so, how large and for what specific purpose. Since 1940, the argument was repeatedly revisited and studied in great depth. Unquestionably, airborne soldiering, true to General Allard's original intent, provided a forum for challenging and dynamic training not available elsewhere. More importantly, it developed unrivalled individual and light infantry skills. It was a generally accepted maxim that "airborne service just makes a good soldier that much better."

With the de facto removal of the Regiment from the Army 'Order of Battle,' the requirement to redefine the structure of Canada's airborne capability became necessary. As tenuous as the continued existence of airborne forces appeared in the aftermath of disbandment, one reality remained - the nation's enormous territory, specifically the large tracts of remote, uninhabited wilderness, seemingly ensured that a niche for paratroopers would always exist. However, in the immediate aftermath of the disbandment directive no plan was announced for the fulfilment of the airborne role, in either the short or long term.

It was only during the ensuing turmoil and confusion of closing down the Regiment, literally a scant few days prior to the officially directed 5 March date, that direction was received from Army Headquarters that addressed the potential dilemma. The belated message declared that "there are some outstanding operational tasks for which an element of the Regiment must be prepared to execute." Therefore, the Army Commander directed the Commanding Officer of the Canadian Airborne Holding Unit, which was the designation given to the remaining elements of

the Canadian Airborne Regiment as of 6 March, to develop a company size group (based primarily on RCR members), not in excess of 300 personnel, with appropriate command and control, as well as elements of Airborne Service Commando, to provide contingency troops in the event of short notice operations.

Ten days later a more detailed message, which underlined the necessity of an airborne capability, was dispatched by Army Headquarters. The latest directive emphasized the fact that "Canadians will not accept the contention that we cannot put troops on the ground anywhere in this country at anytime." As a result, the fate of the Canadian paratrooper, in some form or another, was assured. A second "airborne bridge," analogous to that created by the Canadian SAS Company of the post-World War II era, was formed. 3 Commando, now re-designated 3 Commando Group, was brought back to life with an increased authorized strength of 187 paratroopers.

Individual and subunit equipment which had been cleaned and packed away was now reissued. In addition, a training plan was quickly resurrected. The establishment of 3 Commando Group, which now represented Canada's interim airborne capability, officially took effect 6 March 1995. In the span of a few short days Canada's provisional parachute force went from the brink of oblivion to a state of continual high readiness. The 3 Commando Group was on a perpetual footing that required it to be capable of deploying on operations within forty-eight hours of notification. It was specifically tasked as a vanguard to: conduct territorial and continental defence operations; conduct domestic / regional tasks; conduct surveillance and reconnaissance of the Canadian land mass to demonstrate national presence; and as an Immediate Reaction Force Vanguard for domestic operations for employment in areas where conventional

forces could not be deployed in a timely fashion. Training, which had ceased with the Defence Minister's announcement in January, now quickly returned to its former hectic pace.

The fate of the nation's paratroopers, however, was anything but certain. The *1994 White Paper* made absolutely no mention of airborne or parachute forces within the document. Nonetheless, the Army Commander explained that there was an implicit parachute requirement, "primarily in a domestic context," lodged in the provision of multi-purpose, combat capable land forces. The struggle to define how this "implied" capability would be structured was anything but clear.

On 12 April 1995, the plan for Canada's future airborne forces was announced. The Commander of the Army, revealed that the maintenance of parachute capable forces in Canada, would once again be in the form of a decentralized capability, specifically three independent Parachute Company Groups reporting to their respective Brigade Headquarters. These independent Parachute Company Groups were actually the lead elements of what eventually became three resurrected Light Infantry Battalions (LIBs), located at CFB Edmonton, Petawawa, and Valcartier, specifically 3 RCR, 3 PPCLI and 3 R22eR.

The decision was not surprising. Most had realized that the disbandment of the Cdn AB Regt signalled the hiatus of the nation's airborne forces. In regard to military parachuting, the Army had simply reverted to a maintenance of capability mode much like during the MSF / DCF era. As dispiriting as the outcome was for the airborne lobby within the Canadian Forces, there was an undisputable logic to the decision, which was captured eloquently by the SSF Commander at the time. "The present way ahead for the army's parachute capability," he wrote, "represents a 'minimum viable' approach which is seen to be consistent with both operational and financial

realities. It permits basic levels of skill and expertise to be retained, but results in an extremely limited operational capability.”

As such, the summer of 1995 marked the beginning of the end of 3 Commando Group, but also the start of the new era. The annual posting season cut a wide swath through the ranks of the old cadre taking with it the experience and corporate memory of the Cdn AB Regt. The actual end came on 1 September 1995. On this date the Canadian Airborne Holding Unit ceased to exist and its personnel were absorbed by 3 RCR upon its move from CFB Borden to CFB Petawawa. At the same time, 3 Commando Group also transformed and officially became designated the RCR Parachute Company. It was now an integral subunit of 3 RCR which in turn was one of the specified units chosen to become a LIB. Within a short period of time, the other LIBs and their respective parachute companies were also stood-up. During their short history they have acquitted themselves well and have ensured the survival of the Canadian airborne legacy. Their performance on operations, either domestically or overseas, in such locations as Bosnia, East Timor, and Afghanistan, has been laudable. Nonetheless, undeniably, the Canadian parachute capability has returned to the Mobile Striking Force / Defence of Canada Force era. As such, the Parachute Companies, within their respective Light Infantry Battalions, represent the nation's current airborne capability. Although a shadow of its former self, this capability ensures that the art, skill, and more importantly, the airborne spirit survive.