



EVEN HEROES NEED HEROES.

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Canada's military: Invisible no more

By Michael Valpy

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Why our national mythology has moved beyond the idea of peacekeeping and embraced the culture of the warrior

Sir John A. Macdonald was contemptuous of full-time soldiers. So were most Canadians in the late-19th and early-20th centuries.

The first prime minister believed "that regulars . . . had taken up soldiering because they were good at nothing else [and] were useful only for hunting, drinking and chasing women," Queen's University military historian Allan English wrote in his 2004 book *Understanding Military Culture: A Canadian Perspective*.

What the passage of years demonstrates is that cultures aren't set in concrete. They change.

Not much more than a decade ago, Canada's armed forces were all but invisible, out of sight in remote bases and discreetly dressed in civilian clothes in the cities.

Now, they march around Ottawa's streets in combat gear. They have become the heroes of middle Canada, celebrated at sporting events, remythologized as the new icons of nationalism and lionized by people such as Don Cherry, Rick Mercer and Wayne Rostad (both Mr. Mercer and Mr. Rostad have been appointed honorary colonels, along with former journalist and now senator Pamela Wallin and a clutch of some of the country's wealthiest business tycoons).



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Sir John A. would be astonished. Historians and sociologists agree that there has been a profound cultural shift, that Canadians now have reimagined themselves as a military nation, lauding their army, navy and air force as never before in the country's history. The question is, how did we get here?

At the heart of the change, says Frank Graves, president of the Ottawa-based social research firm EKOS, is the continued stranglehold that the baby boomers have on Canadian society. As the boomers now age in large numbers, Mr. Graves says, they're growing more conservative and trading in their one-time open cosmopolitanism for visions of a darker world and the need for a more secure society - a view of life very much influenced by Sept. 11, 2001. These shifting boomer attitudes have lifted defence spending up from the bottom of priorities in opinion polls and given the government a green light to re-equip the military with new hardware.

But the military has also benefited from a serendipitous chain of events that has burnished its image since the 1993 Somalia affair - dubbed "Canada's national shame" - when soldiers beat a Somali teenager to death and the armed forces hierarchy tried to cover it up.

During the 1996 Saguenay River flood - Canada's worst flood of the 20th century - the efficiency and speed with which armed forces crews rescued scores of stranded people (one woman was barely lifted up in time to give birth on a helicopter) reminded Canadians of what a cherished institution the military is. In Manitoba's 1997 Red River flood, 10,000 soldiers built dikes, rescued isolated farmers and guarded abandoned houses and villages against looters. The military came to help again during Eastern Canada's 1998 ice storm, and in the Swissair disaster off Peggys Cove., N.S., in the same year.

In the 1998 Kosovo bombing campaign that so sharply divided the country's intellectuals and politicians, General Raymond Henault, deputy chief of the defence staff, was the voice of the military - in fact, of the government - on nightly television, calmly, intelligently, respectfully explaining to Canadians what was taking place.

Then there's Afghanistan.

Canadians' support for the military mission went into decline not long after it began - in contrast to their support for the military's development work there- but the deaths of our soldiers have had a profound effect on the nation.

University of Lethbridge sociologist Trevor Harrison studies how Canadians and Americans view their armed forces and finds Canadians inching closer to their neighbours with what he calls a valorization of the military, especially at sporting events. He also says that, because of Canada's small population, the deaths of young soldiers become magnified.

"It's treated as a personal thing. Even though we're spread out, we're part of a common project and we're very attached to these losses" - an experience made more acute by the televised return of bodies.

Lastly, there has been Rick Hillier. The chief of the defence staff from 2005 to 2008 has played a key role in reshaping the mythology of the armed forces, identifying them with nationalism and punting the military into Canadians' uppermost consciousness.



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Mr. Hillier has been hugely successful in recasting the image of the armed forces into a portrait that fits Canadians' imagined community - ordinary men and women from next door carrying out dangerous work with professionalism, decency and fair play. He also has been - and remains - an indefatigable apostle of Canada's military as warriors.

Warriors were the centrepiece attraction at a black-tie dinner titled True Patriot Love held in Toronto on Nov. 10, organized by some of the city's super-wealthy with \$750-a-head tickets and an auction that raised more than \$1-million for Mr. Hillier's Military Families Fund.

Soldiers in battle dress rappelled down ropes from the ceiling. Retired captain Trevor Greene, who survived an axe blow to his head in Afghanistan, was brought to the stage. Gen. Walt Natynczyk, Canada's current top soldier, pointed out Leading Seaman Stephanie Russell in the audience, one of four women submariners: "This lady is a strong woman warrior," he said, "and I am proud of her."

Prime Minister Stephen Harper, all living former prime ministers, the provincial premiers, the national party leaders, Toronto's mayor and a notable clutch of aspiring politicians were listed on the dinner's tribute committee. Many of the city's backroom political movers and shakers were on the fundraising committee. The dinner's co-chairs were drawn from the cream of Toronto's business community, and the event had corporate sponsorship.

It was billed, a little curiously, as a defining moment in Canadian history. University of Alberta political scientist Andy Knight, who specializes in military studies, says the implied message was that if you don't support the event, you're probably not a nationalist.

"There's a bandwagon effect," adds University of British Columbia political scientist Michael Byers. "You don't want to be left behind if your peer group is getting on board. No one wants to be painted as unsupportive of our soldiers."

In a brief essay distributed with the invitation, Mr. Hillier wrote of "the next defining moments in our history being written on the world stage by the proud and courageous men and women of our armed forces.

"These are not strangers fighting and serving in some faraway land. These are real men and real women from real towns and cities across this great nation. They are the sons and daughters of your neighbours, friends and colleagues. They are extraordinary Canadians who on a daily basis walked into harm's way to protect our freedom and the rights of others."

He has been superbly successful at positioning himself as a populist leader on the side of the soldiers.

Close observers of Canada's military who will speak only for background because of the sensitivity of their own jobs say what Mr. Hillier, Gen. Natynczyk and other top officers are engaged in is information warfare to change the military culture in Canada.



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Dinners such as the True Patriot Love event are not just about raising money for military families, they are considered "teachable moments" (with junior officers in some cases ordered to attend).

The military now courts influential Canadians who may have political connections, offering plums of honorary colonelships.

Mr. Hillier has rejected suggestions that he and other officers are creating a Canadian military culture that looks increasingly American. Yet as University of Lethbridge's Prof. Harrison points out, many of them have gone to Fort Hood, Tex., for training and served with U.S. military units, inching Canada toward an integrated officer corps.

And Prof. English, a former military officer, notes a developing movement within the U.S. armed forces to promote American military culture - emphasizing truth, duty and honour - as superior to American civilian culture.

However, the Canadian military hierarchy has had difficulties overcoming Canadians' stubborn and lingering affection for the image of their military as peacekeepers, not warriors - an image eloquently put into words by one of Canada's most outstanding diplomats, Allan Gotlieb, in a private letter to Pierre Trudeau in 1967.

"To many Canadians," Mr. Gotlieb wrote, "Canada has a moral obligation to help solve the problems of the world. Our culture, our character, our geographic location, our prosperity - all these and other factors have been thought to combine to endow us with a special role in helping to bring peace and sanity to the world.

"What makes the decline of this role particularly serious for Canada is that it played an important part in forging our unity in the postwar era.

"Like the Danes who made good furniture, the French who made good wine, the Russians who made Sputnik, Canada, as a specially endowed middle power, as the reasonable man's country, as the broker or the skilled intermediary, made peace."

It is a catechism Canadians have found hard to forget, although it's fading. What interests scholars is the significance of the shift.

"We don't know how deeply entrenched this is," Prof. Harrison says.

"What we know is that Canadians are supportive of the troops, and it's a dramatic and important thing when lives are lost, and we're sympathetic and supportive. But whether or not we're supportive of further kinds of engagements like Afghanistan ... this could be one of the last of these things for a long time, and if there's no Afghan mission, what the heck does the Canadian military do?"

Michael Valpy is a writer for The Globe and Mail