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BIRDS IN HAND: THE NEED FOR A RETENTION BASED STRATEGY FOR THE CF¹

by Christopher Ankersen and Losel Tethong

The significant problems we face cannot be solved at the same level of thinking we were at when we created them.

Albert Einstein

The Canadian Forces is responding to the most critical personnel shortage in its modern history with stop-gap recruiting measures, and is failing to staunch the hemorrhaging of its highly trained professionals. Although evidence of this crisis has been growing for several years — ships unable to sail because of critical manning shortages, battalions being patched together with Militia augmentees and pilots leaving in droves — until recently the CF did not officially acknowledge the existence of a forces-wide problem. In fact, until just three years ago, trained service professionals deemed redundant were being offered lucrative packages to leave the forces. And, in a move right out of a *This Hour Has 22 Minutes* sketch, just as the situation was becoming critical, National Defence Headquarters disbanded the office monitoring personnel levels. The situation is getting worse. Contrary to stated government policy, which calls for a manning level of 60,000, the VCDS, bowing to present realities, has now set the level

at 58,500. And, even in the most wildly optimistic recruiting scenarios, this number is projected to plummet by a further 7,900 service members before it is reversed. All of this has contributed to serious reductions in operational capability. In recent months, 42 CF-18s have been grounded. The destroyer HMCS *Huron*, which was recently upgraded at a cost of \$75 million, is being permanently tied up. Other ships are also experiencing chronic manning shortages.² Even at 'optimum' manning levels of 60,000, the CF had difficulty reacting to the variety of tasks to which it was committed. What will the situation be like now? And more important, what is being done to reverse the trend?

The Canadian Forces is not alone in its current plight. However, while other armed forces recognize

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and identify the problems and their solutions, the CF is quickly plummeting past critical manning levels with no lifeline or sustainable plan in sight. As in other Western military forces, the end of the Cold War set in train a series of drastic personnel reductions for the CF. From a strength of approximately 90,000 in 1992, the CF reduced its establishment to 60,000 uniformed personnel. This target was reached in 1996 through a series of Force Reduction Programs (FRP), reduced intake and natural attrition. It has only recently come to light, however, that beyond paring down to a new target level, the CF has lost too many personnel, to the point where it now “faces a significant personnel shortfall”.³

The CF is only now beginning to even appreciate what the numbers signify. In terms of absolute numbers, it means that the 60,000-man target level is understaffed by over 4,000 people today, and these personnel deficits could climb to as much as 9,400 by the end of the year.⁴ More significantly, if trends continue, this decline could result in a trained personnel level of only 43,000 within 24 months.⁵ This will further exacerbate the pressure on serving personnel and the overall effectiveness of the CF in a number of ways.

Any further reductions, either of viable units or in personnel levels, will severely hamper the Forces’ ability to carry out existing tasks and commitments, let alone respond to unforeseen situations. In order to cope, units and commands within the CF have been forced to develop bad habits that further exacerbate the personnel crisis. Two of the worst of these habits

are the forming of ad hoc units and cannibalization — stealing people from one organization to meet the operational requirements of another. These practices, together with the reduced overall number of trained personnel, places extra strain on people who are still serving. The CF acknowledge that 38 out of 107 Regular Force military occupations are ‘stressed’; that is, performing with less than an ideal number of personnel. In the Army, this means that 8 out of 15 trades are understaffed; in the Navy it translates to 9 out of 20.⁶ Reduced team cohesion and effectiveness, not to mention increased operational tempo, are the pernicious consequences of being shorthanded. Other consequences include reduced levels of individual and collective training as more and more resources are diverted to filling in the holes caused by staffing shortages. This in turn further erodes standards and operational capability.

The CF has suddenly come to recognize that this deficit is now “one of the most serious challenges facing the CF”. They state that “much study of the situation (how we got here and where we are) is complete, and actions required to ameliorate the situation are becoming clear.”⁷ Accordingly, the CF has embarked upon a plan to increase recruitment dramatically, hoping to enroll between 7,200 and 10,000 people a year for the next three to four years.⁸

Recruiting by itself, however, is not enough to resolve the dire straits in which the CF finds itself. As the saying goes, the first step to getting out of a hole is to stop digging. Retention of trained men and women in the CF must become a real priority. A strategy that combines recruiting and retention is needed, and needed now.

This paper will discuss the reasons behind such a strategy: first, recruiting alone is incapable of meeting the targets set for it; second, recruiting focuses on quantitative deficiencies, while retention emphasizes qualitative aspects as well. Once we have addressed the ‘why’ of a retention-biased strategy, we will tackle the ‘how’. Using feedback from people who have been released from the CF, we will examine the reasons why people are leaving. This will enable us to do two things. The first is to dismiss the conventional wisdom that is circulating in Ottawa as to the root of the large number of releases. The second is to suggest a series of measures — the critical first steps required to design and implement a robust human resources strategy for the CF. By improving conditions and rectifying problems that will lead to better retention, the CF will strengthen its core competencies and achieve a much better level of operational capability overall.

WHY THE FOCUS ON RETENTION

Too much is expected of recruiting.

The targets set for the recruiting system in response to the current crisis are grossly optimistic. An examination of the numbers in Table 1 shows that bringing in the 7,200 to 10,000 recruits mentioned above

Year	Enrollees	Releases	Comments
92/93	1369	5713	CF at 90,000; reductions start
93/94	1881	5852	
94/95	2109	7458	
95/96	1931	7690	
96/97	3085	5112	CF at 60,000; reductions end
97/98	2498	4079	
98/99	2601	3942	
99/00	2300	3600	

Table 1: Annual Enrollments and Releases 1992-2000
(Source: CF Communication Strategy Document, 10 December 2000)

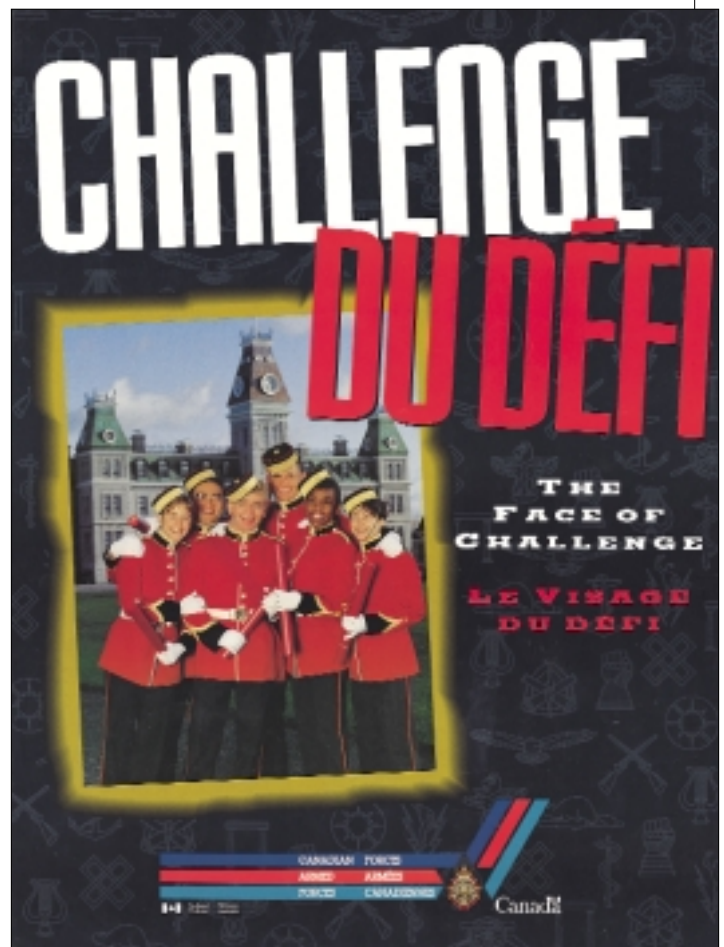
would mean an increase in enrollment by a factor of three, or even as high as four.⁹ Additionally, this extraordinary effort would need to be sustained for 36 to 48 months to compensate for the current shortage. It must be noted that these figures represent enrollment, which means that the numbers of people actually attracted would have to be far higher, perhaps as high as 14,000 to 37,600, depending on the target set.¹⁰ Finally, these recruits must become trainees and begin the long road to becoming operationally capable soldiers, sailors or airmen. With failure rates in basic training between 20 to 50 percent, and a minimum time of 10 months before these recruits are ready to join units, the numbers of people attracted and enrolled would have to be much higher than the CF has suggested.

The CF strategy to bring in numbers of this magnitude rests on two pillars. To attract this many people to the CF, recruiting officials are calling for an increase in their budget.¹¹ This money will be spent on a new advertising campaign designed to tell Canadians that “the CF has hung out a ‘help wanted’ sign”.¹² The campaign utilizes images of soldiers in the field, sailors in ships at sea and pilots sweeping across the skies — all very traditional and gung-ho aspects of the military. While this imagery may or may not attract interest in the CF, the truth of what is shown to be on offer, and the potential consequences, will be discussed later.

Quality will suffer.

The second pillar is not publicly acknowledged, but has been communicated to the ‘front lines’ — the recruiting centres. It involves a ‘re-evaluation’ of recruiting standards in an attempt to ‘convert’ more of the existing applicants into enrollees. This approach is foreshadowed in the comments by Colonel Gordon Grant, head of the new recruiting strategy. “The numbers we [the CF] are looking for are so high, its ‘Come on in!’ We’ll welcome them [applicants] with open arms . . . We’re after almost anybody.”¹³ This welcoming attitude is to be translated into, among other things, adjustments in medical standards¹⁴ and a lowering of requisite scores on aptitude tests. It has been deter-

mined, for example, that by reducing the minimum score required to pass the aptitude test by 10 percent, a further 15 percent of applicants could be enrolled,¹⁵ albeit at a lower level of quality. These measures send strong signals to everyone — from the private in the field to the junior officers leading them. They say, “We do not value the standards set for and by you, and more importantly, we do not value you as much as we value new recruits.” This shift to massive, no-holds barred recruiting will very directly and negatively affect the day-to-day work and morale of the professional core of the Canadian Forces.



The effects of increased recruiting may well be detrimental.

Putting aside the question of how the Forces will get its recruits, one must ask what the CF plans to do with them once they are signed up. Even if recruiting campaigns are successful in bringing such a large number of people into the military, it is questionable whether the CF can handle the influx. The rate-determining step in recruiting could well end up being the availability of boots, beds and bullets with which to train.¹⁶ It is instructive to note that the recent VCDS manning priorities promoted recruiting billets as Priority 2 positions, while those in training establishments remained Priority 3. These logistical hurdles would be exacerbated by a serious shortage of instructors to train the incoming recruits. The simple fact that units are already undermanned makes it increas-

ingly difficult for NCOs and officers to be spared for any surge in recruit and basic trades training. These factors will mean that any short-term gains in recruiting are likely to be offset by the waiting period that results from a shortage of instructors and materiel. And the extra training burden could very well be the final stressor for many of the Force's already over-tasked professionals.

The backbone of any modern, volunteer military force is its non-commissioned officers (corporals to warrant officers) and junior/field grade officers (captains and majors). However, when recruiting stan-

dards are lowered and the floodgates open, a number of downstream effects will directly affect this core group of experienced professionals. First of all, if the CF is serious about meeting the recruiting targets it has set, it may as well pack up most of its peacekeeping operations, tie up more ships and ground most of the aircraft still flying, because it is going to need every available sergeant, warrant officer and junior officer to man the training establishments that now simply do not exist. A relevant point from our study: most respondents stated that a lack of professional opportunities, more so than money, played a significant role in their decision to leave the CF. While most service personnel value and cherish opportunities to train others, it is and always has been seen as an ancillary duty (contrary to the bureaucratic doublespeak that makes it an overarching priority), and is never the main reason they joined the forces. Therefore, the recruiting drive that is underway now will only exacerbate the situation. Captains should forget about taking any but the most career-essential courses, and sergeants would be well advised to re-file their dog-eared memos requesting occupational transfer because the training imperative is about to supersede any personal or professional development plans. They are more likely to finish their second or third tour to the Balkans or, for their naval colleagues, tour in the Gulf, and then immediately head off to the Canadian Forces Recruit and Leadership School in St. Jean, the Combat Training Centre in Gaagetown or the Fleet Schools in either Victoria or Halifax. And, after training several classes of new recruits or slightly more advanced trainees, it will be back to the regiment, ship or squadron for yet another operational tour, with no time for family, friends or professional/personal development.

Recruits are not the same as captains.

Recruiting does nothing to address the immediate CF-wide deficiencies at the corporal, sergeant, warrant officer and junior officer levels. These professionals have been in the forces from anywhere between seven to fifteen years. They are the most up-to-date operators, tacticians and subject matter experts. They are the people commanding officers want in their regiments, crews and squadrons when they deploy. They have most likely worked on the last six or seven versions of the ship's combat system software. They took the LAV III through its operational trials. From a previous patrol, they remember the radar signature of suspicious contacts skulking along a restricted area in the Northern Arabian Gulf. These are the people with the corporate memory and the wealth of relevant leadership experience that commanding officers turn to in a tight situation. In a word, they are irreplaceable. Yet, next to nothing has been done to understand why they are leaving in unprecedented and unsustainably high numbers. In conducting our study, we were disappointed but not surprised to find that not a single person had been asked in any structured or laterally consistent way, "why are you leaving?" In fact, respondents were quite surprised to be asked the question in a survey-format. Responses ranged from disbelief, "I can't believe someone is actually asking my opinion," to gratitude, "I really enjoyed getting that off my chest."



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Feedback from junior officers released from the Regular Force indicates the following:

- **Pay is not a main reason for leaving.** People are realistic in their expectations for remuneration. They see the CF as more than 'just a job' and, therefore, worth any discount in earnings. However, when the distinctive aspects of the military way of life are stripped away — adventure, the opportunity to lead motivated and highly-trained professionals, the exercise of responsibility, etc. — military service is reduced to little more than a job. And it is at this point that people compare wages and become frustrated. Less than 5 percent of respondents claimed that pay was the main reason for leaving, and only 29 percent said it had a significant effect on their decision to leave. Furthermore, while most CF leavers do go on to better paying jobs (61 percent), it is not always the case (income after release is pretty evenly split, with 34 percent of respondents earning the same or less than they did while in the CF). Moreover, the higher salary that some people achieve indicates the relative value placed upon the average officer leaving the CF; in most fields, talented people are paid good salaries. The idea that money is not a central dissatisfier is borne out in the area of benefits, and no one listed them as a reason for getting out.
- **People want good leadership.** While this fundamental truth is taught as one of a long list of followers' wants in Canadian military leadership theory, it seems to have been poorly acknowledged in practice. Simply put, if the leadership is poor, people get out.
- **People want to do what they joined to do.** To a significant degree, this finding validates CF recruiting policy: people sign up so that they can experience all those exciting things depicted on recruiting posters. The slogan 'There's no life like it' is attractive to the kinds of people that join the armed forces. The bureaucratic realities of recent military life, on the other hand, do not motivate people to stay in. Some 65 percent of recent leavers indicated that a lack of professional opportunities and challenges were either a significant or the main reason for their departure. Junior leaders want responsibility, authority, meaningful training and opportunities for professional and personal development.

CONCLUSIONS AND CAVEATS

It is a truism to say that if the military were able to identify, understand and correct the problems that plague it, it would become a more efficient organization. This would be entirely possible if the CF were to concentrate on dealing with the issues that contribute to the departure of its trained personnel. By fixing those things that annoy people to the extent that they choose to leave the CF, the military would solve a whole host of its problems, not just personnel shortages. For example, much of the feedback in our study pointed to the fact that people want to do what they joined up to do: soldiers want to soldier, sailors want to sail, and engineers

want to do engineering. For quite a few, these activities occurred all too infrequently, or were conducted at rank levels above or below them when they left the CF.

Caveats: What can we really expect?

It would be unrealistic for the CF to expect to retain everyone who puts on a uniform. People are always going to leave for a whole host of reasons. The civilian economy will always offer opportunities that the CF cannot provide, such as the chance to make a fortune, or the thrill of owning and running a business. The military has always existed in competition with other occupations; the options that exist for CF leavers have always existed. However, this does not mean that the CF can afford to wait until the next recession before it does anything.¹⁷ The appropriate response is the development of a robust recruiting and retention program that is dynamic (in that it addresses issues as they arise), but which focuses on the long term (in that it holds certain

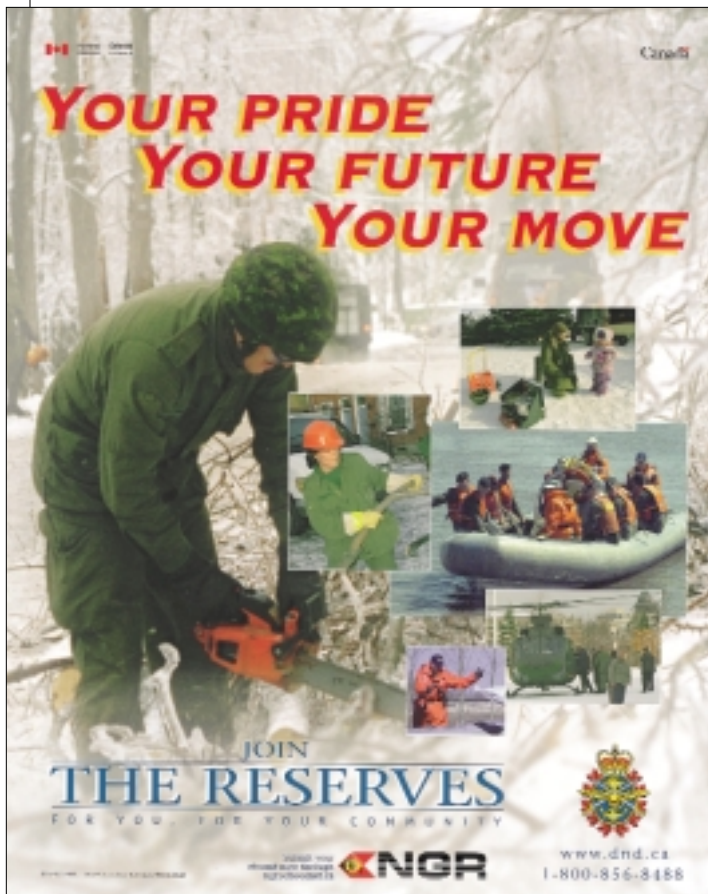
principles to be constant). The point here is that each and every talented, fully trained and experienced person that can be convinced and encouraged to remain in the CF equals ten people that need to be attracted, enrolled, and trained. Every possible effort should be made to ensure that the CF is the kind of place where this talent wants to remain.

THE WAY AHEAD

In a study of recruiting in the US forces, one American analyst recently noted, "Like most large companies,

the military faces a war for talent — that is, a battle to recruit and retain officers and enlisted personnel with the intellectual flexibility, technical abilities and communication skills needed today. If it does not fundamentally rethink the way it attracts, develops, and retains people, it will lose this war . . . The problem is retaining talented mid-level people.”¹⁹ Put in this context, it is important that the CF begin immediately to design, implement and follow a plan that will lead to success in both the short and long terms. The following recommendations indicate the necessary next steps.

- **Start working now on improving retention.** This is an area that cannot wait any longer. The idea that



the CF can fix the recruiting system first, and then concentrate on retention, is ill-conceived. The CF is missing the point by continuing to ‘force’ good people to leave, without any idea as to why they are going. Throwing good money at fixing a ‘front-door’ recruiting problem seems silly if the ‘back-door’ of retention is fundamentally broken.

- **Find out what is wrong before trying to fix it.** Without advocating a process that will delay implementation, it is vitally important that the senior leaders in the Forces understand clearly what is contributing to the personnel crisis. The voices of those inside the CF, and those who have recently left, need to be heard. Exit surveys of the men and women who take their release must be conducted, not by military psychologists or release clerks, but by people in the chain of command. And they must

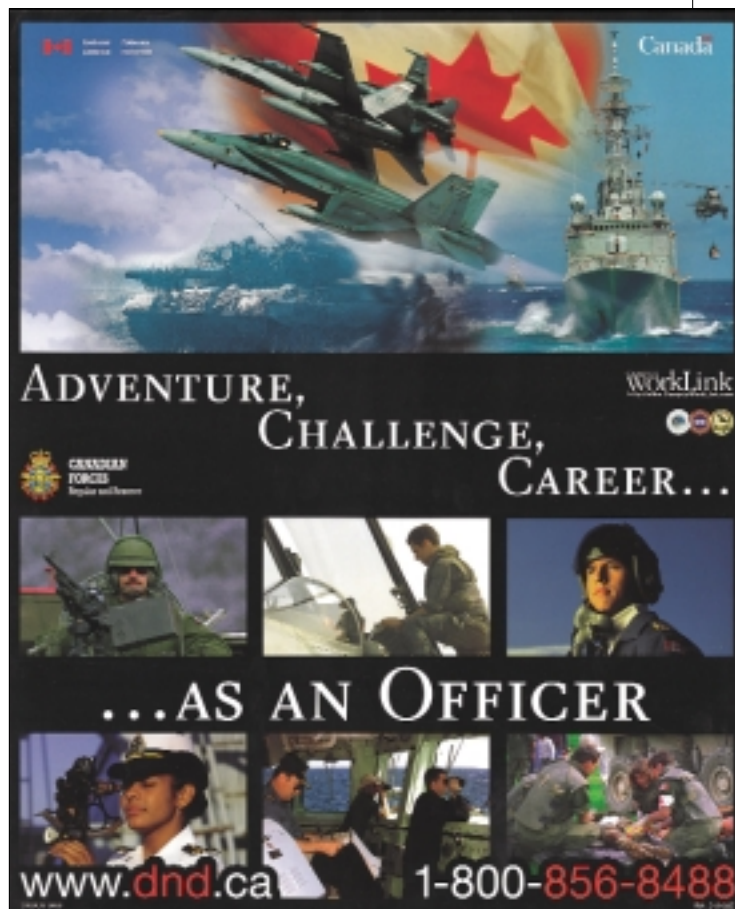
pay attention to what they are told. The leadership must recognize that because of the strong culture of loyalty in the Forces, it is often easier for those outside the CF to voice their opinions. Comprehensive, statistically valid research is needed. As one component, an expert panel should be formed and include recent leavers of all rank levels. This is current practice in DND for issues of gender equality and harassment.²⁰

- **Treat the issue holistically and for both the short and long terms.** Recruiting and retention are both sides of the same coin. There must be a coordinated approach at the highest levels to address them in tandem. Ideas such as lengthening terms of service, refusing releases and extending the compulsory retirement age are not enduring solutions because they do not address the underlying causes of dissatisfaction.
- **Think creatively, and be prepared to break some rules when trying to improve retention.** What is currently in place is not working, so be prepared to think ‘outside the box’ in coming up with viable solutions. In our interviews, the ideas of remusters, temporary transfers to the reserves, sabbaticals, periods of reduced pay or leave without pay in order to accomplish other life goals, were all considered as possible redresses to aid in retaining the CF’s best. To underline this point, 35 percent of respondents said that they left the military to pursue educational and training goals they were unable to achieve had they remained in the Forces. Since it is individuals that leave, it will be individuals that need to be convinced to stay. Case by case solutions must be included in the host of options if the CF hopes to retain trained people, especially the most talented. Educational and employment policies that stick to notions of ‘captains don’t do that, only colonels do, so get in line and wait your turn’, force high achievers to look elsewhere for challenges and advancement.
- **Admit that there are leadership problems in the military.** Subordinates, regardless of rank, want to be led by people of vision and integrity. No one in uniform wants to be a part of a bureaucracy. Not allowing junior leaders to exercise judgement or make decisions, and surrounding them with micro-management and careerism, forces them to reconsider what the CF has to offer.
- **Spend money on core capabilities, not blanket pay increases.** ‘Bread and circuses’ never fool anybody for long. Money that is spent on getting soldiers into the field, ships away from the jetty and helicopters into the air will give far better returns than allowing well-paid troops to sit around playing euchre and longing for the excitement they joined up to see. Target any kind of pay raise to the dedicated professionals at the senior NCO and mid-level officer level. These are the people who have the skills that are irreplaceable in the short- to medium-term, and who represent an investment of hundreds of thousands of training dollars. Tie pay

increases to performance where the best are rewarded and the others have an incentive to improve.

- **Use care in recruiting people to a CF that does not exist.** Flashy ads that portray a military that looks ‘cool’ will certainly attract people, but they will expect to find those pictures translated into real life experience. If they don’t find that, they will leave at the first available moment. Make the CF and the recruiting poster one and the same. As a corollary to this, do not lower standards to the point where the new recruits are incapable of performing their duties. Fixing the quantitative axis, without controlling the qualitative one, will only lead to problems in the future. Equally, the CF must remember who it is that they are recruiting. For junior officers, for example, the CF looks for high achievers, risk takers and young adults who have demonstrated academic and extra-curricular prowess. The Regular Officer Training Plan wants high school student council presidents, the captains of their sports teams, those with a history of community involvement — in short, the kind of person who is looking for a challenge. Is it reasonable to expect that these kinds of people are going to be happy in an organization that no longer meets these needs? If someone thrives on challenge, challenge must be available or they will find it somewhere else. In certain occupations, the CF only provides this sort of challenge early in a career when training and employment are tough and exciting. In other occupations, it can take up to seven years before a person is even qualified to fully take on the responsibilities of his/her trade.
- **Do not give up.** It’s a war out there: a war for talent! Throwing up one’s hands and hoping for a recession is not productive. The CF Communications Strategy notes that, “The CF offers careers that are among the most interesting and challenging in the

country, with opportunities to learn and apply new skills and expertise, and to achieve recognition and advancement based on those skills.”²¹ This is a good ideal. What lies ahead is the hard part — making it a reality.



NOTES

1. An abridged version of this Paper appeared as “Retain or Perish: Why Recruiting Won’t Save the CF,” a CISS *Strategic Datalink*, March 2001.
2. “Mothballed Military”, www.nationalpost.com, 27 January 2001.
3. Internal CF Communications Strategy Document, 10 December 2000. Hereafter: Communications Strategy.
4. Tellingly, another set of DND figures suggest the CF is ‘only’ 1,500 people below its 60,000 target.
5. Discussion with DND Source, February 2001.
6. Communications Strategy, 10 December 2000.
7. Communications Strategy.
8. Discussion with DND Source, February 2001.
9. The range in figures relates to the fact that on an 8-year average, enrollments were 2,222 per annum, but on a 3-year average (since the end of planned force reduction) they were 2,466 per annum, according to internal CF data.
10. Official ratios of those attracted to those enrolled is 2:1, but anecdotal evidence from recruiting centres across Canada sets this figure at 3 or 4:1. Communications Strategy, 10 December 2000 and discussions with DND source, February 2001.
11. Reports set the current budget at between \$1.4 million and \$5 million, and the increased levels at anywhere from \$5 million to \$15 million. Jonathan Gatehouse and Stewart Bell, “Military Launches Image Offensive to Refill its Ranks,” www.nationalpost.com, 6 January 2001, and Mike Blanchfield, “Military Faces Recruitment Crisis: Official,” www.globeandmail.com, 6 January 2001.
12. Communications Strategy.
13. Gatehouse and Bell, *Emphasis Added*.
14. Communications Strategy.
15. Discussions with DND Source, February 2001.
16. This capacity is currently under review by the CF. Communications Strategy.
17. Examples of this sentiment can be seen in Blatchfield and Communications Strategy.
18. David McCormick, www.newyorktimes.com, 10 February 1999. McCormick was a lieutenant in the US Army, served in the Gulf War, and is currently a consultant with McKinsey & Company.
19. The various ministerial advisory boards are an example, as was seeking the consultation of retired Captain Sandra Perron on issues of harassment. Also see Lewis.
20. Communication Strategy.