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## **Behind Canadian Forces recruiting success looms training dilemma**

By Bob Bergen

The Canadian Forces relatively-new recruitment advertising may be dark and foreboding.

The message "Fight with the Canadian Forces" challenges some Canadians' perceptions that the Canadian Forces are primarily peacekeepers.

The tone – "Fight fear. Fight distress. Fight chaos" – is a long way from the warm and fuzzy "there's no life like it".

But times have changed since Sept. 11, 2001, and the good news is the aggressive \$3 million recruiting ads launched last September appear to have worked.

The numbers are not all in yet, but with the military's recruiting year ending March 31, there is every indication the Forces will have surpassed its target of attracting 6,426 new recruits by its 2006-2007 year end.

And, the forceful advertising is just the tip of the iceberg. The Forces can also claim some success in speeding up the processing of new prospects once they have walked through recruiting centre doors.

Commodore Roger MacIsaac, the Forces head of recruiting, explains a new target was set to have about 30 per cent recruits' paperwork and initial screening processed and them offered a position within five days of their first meeting with a recruiter instead of the months – or longer – that it took in the past.

The Forces did that by moving away from a linear screening process that saw an applicant's education verified before he or she moved on to a medical clearance. Now screenings proceed concurrently.

Having said that, MacIsaac admits the 30-per-cent-in-five-days target wasn't met because, realistically, it envisages ideal candidates and most human beings aren't ideal.

Some, for example, will have previously broken arms and legs skiing or playing baseball, football, ice or field hockey, basketball and volleyball.

Their old injuries must receive additional medical scrutiny and many are still finding it a long time before they receive that clearance.

There are also significant bottlenecks elsewhere, particularly in reliability screening and the issuing of security certificates to potential recruits who have lived outside the country for five years.

That is driven by public service requirements and – given the nature of national security – the military wants reliable candidates, but that can result in a protracted review and a delayed offer from the Forces.

But, for the straightforward cases in which candidates have their high school diploma and are in good medical health, the military attempts to do the reliability screening as soon as possible. That can result in the whole process being completed within four or five days.

While that means there are still more than 70 per cent whose applications take longer, the good news is – as MacIsaac points out – at least the Forces now have that 30-per-cent-in-five-days target.

That has only been in place since late last summer following criticism from the Auditor General that the Forces lacked such firm goals.

But, plans and targets change. Even the government's plan to increase recruiting targets incrementally so that some 12,000 new regular force soldiers and reservists will join annually by 2011 sees yearly adjustments based on need.

If long-time members don't retire at the rate anticipated or others leave sooner, annual recruiting targets are adjusted accordingly which presents another problem hinted at in a four-sentence snippet at the end of a recent news report from Afghanistan.

In it, the head of the army, Lt.-Gen. Andrew Leslie, implored troops in Kandahar to stay in uniform after their return to Canada which underscores a serious challenge facing the Forces.

About one quarter of the more than 6,426 new recruits in 2006-2007 is infantry. Someone has to train them.

But the Auditor General pointed out in 2006 that about 50 per cent of the Canadian Forces men and women already have 15 or more years of service and are either already eligible to leave or soon will be.

Among them are some of the most important leaders: senior non-commissioned members and junior officers who represent the training cadre. Losing them presents a serious problem now which will only become more serious as the years pass.

Given the money, all of Canada's LAV III armoured vehicles can be replaced; all of its Leopard tanks can be replaced; all of its Nyalas can be replaced.

Replacing those training leaders is another story altogether.

Hence Lt.-Gen. Leslie's appeal to the soldiers in Afghanistan who have become battle-hardened in a way Canadians have not been since the Korean War.

He wants them to stay in the Forces after their tour to pass along their combat experience and their practical wisdom to new recruits.

Lt.-Gen. Leslie issued that appeal to a group of people, newly-minted war heroes among them, who have already done their duty.

Hopefully they can be convinced somehow, someday, to stay and do more.

If only television ads enticing them to stay could have the same success that the "Fight fear. Fight distress. Fight chaos" ads have had encouraging others to join the fight in the first place.

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