

Reservists' love of regiment and sense of purpose a simple solution to Canadian Forces manpower shortage

It seems like such a simple concept, but capitalizing on Canadian Forces reservists' love for their regiments and sense of purpose could be both short-term and long-term solutions for its nationwide manpower shortage.

The wonder is why the Canadian Forces don't take better advantage of that.

Here is why: Prime Minister Stephen Harper last week singled out the Calgary Highlanders and praised them for their extraordinary effort raising 64 soldiers who will deploy to Afghanistan in February 2008.

Perhaps only the Regiment de Voltigeurs in Quebec and one or two others match their success, according to Lt.-Gen. Andrew Leslie, the Forces Chief of Land Staff.

Those efforts are remarkable, given that reservists are civilians who have school, jobs and families which come first and part-time military duties which come second.

They usually train one night a week and one weekend a month.

To commit to a six-month deployment to Afghanistan is not just half a year's commitment – it's more than a year – because they must undergo full-time pre-deployment training, as well.

As a result, although their rotation begins next February, 58 Highlanders are now training in either Shilo, Manitoba, with the 2nd Battalion Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry or with the Patricia's 1st Battalion in Edmonton, Alberta.

The question is: What did the Highlanders do with such spectacular success that is different than what most other Canadian reservist units are doing?

Lt.-Col. Tom Manley, the Highlanders commanding officer, thinks it began when he took command in 2005.

Manley knew the Forces were some 5,000 soldiers short of meeting its commitments over the next few years. It would need reservists – lots of them – to make up for that shortfall.

It's no secret that he set a goal to recruit and train a company of about 150 Highlanders who could be sent to Afghanistan as a formation, as opposed to being scattered among regular force units.

When his soldiers learned of his plan to potentially send them together as a formed company, they became excited and that excitement kept building.

Unlike regular force soldiers who are posted to different locations about every two years and sometimes to different organizations, most reservists stay for years in the cities and towns where they live and work.

They train with the same people for years, if not spend most of their lives with them.

"The soldiers are deeply in love with their regiment," Manley explains.

At the time, he had 114 volunteers for Afghanistan which was admittedly short of a full company, but he was close. He gave them more than two years to think about the deployment.

That was enough time for them to think it through with their employers, to talk to their families and to re-arrange their lives sufficiently to make it possible.

"Any time you can take advantage of the incredible love the soldiers have for their regiment and service to their country, they will perform a higher level. That's essentially what we did."

In the end, Manley's plan to send a formed company of Highlanders to Afghanistan was rejected by the Forces' chain of command.

What the army said it needed was individual soldiers to fill individual tasks and, realistically, the Highlanders don't have LAV III drivers, crew commanders and gunners needed for a formed company.

There is also another reason that Manley is loathe to discuss, but you don't have to spend much time around soldiers to learn what it is.

Strategically, Canadian Forces commanders are acutely aware of the effects casualties have on the Canadian public's support for the mission. The resulting negative publicity is thought bad enough when four soldiers from across Canada are killed in one day, let alone four soldiers from the same city.

Regardless, the idea of a formed Highlander company is a dead horse Manley has stopped

beating.

The culmination of his effort, however, is 64 Highlanders who will be serving in Afghanistan next year.

Most of the Highlanders will augment other units, but at least 33 of them will be deployed together as a defence and security platoon which will defend the main camp at Kandahar and perform some convoy protection tasks. Another 10 will deploy with another defence and security platoon.

That's the short-term benefit.

The long-term benefit will take place when those soldiers return to Canada.

Coupled with 27 Highlanders who served in Afghanistan in 2006, about half of the 185 Highlanders who normally parade will be Afghan veterans.

That means they will have war zone experience and the ability to train others to a level that hasn't been possible in more than half century.

The Highlanders' Afghanistan effort was sufficiently astounding to warrant the specific attention of the Prime Minister.

With the Canadian Forces some 5,000 short of its manpower needs, Canadian Forces commanders would be well-advised to pay attention, too.

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