

## Increasing Strain on the Reserve Forces

For a G8 nation's military, the Canadian Forces are tiny. With only 65,000 regulars in the army, navy, and air force, it is all Canada can do to sustain and maintain a force of 2800 men and women in Afghanistan.

But if the Regular forces are small, the Reserves are miniscule. Only 27,000 soldiers, sailors, and airmen and women are in place to back up the full-time personnel, with 9 percent of them in the Air Force, 13 percent in the Navy, and the rest in the Land Forces. These citizen soldiers hold day jobs in the civilian workforce but give one or two nights a week, as well as one to three full-time weeks a year, usually in the summer, to practise their military trade. Many reservists are students, earning some money to help cover their college or university tuition.

In fact, that long-time pattern for the role of the Canadian Forces Reserve has changed dramatically in the last few years. The Regulars are so short of personnel to meet the naval, air, and land force deployments that have occurred since the 9/11 attacks on North America that reservists are increasingly going on fulltime service. There are more than 11,600 reservists officers and non-commissioned members working full-time in the Regular force, at 85 percent of a regular's pay. They make up 20 percent of the Canadian Forces' strength, and a large number of them work on contract and have zero connection to their old Reserve unit.

Every rotation to Afghanistan, for example, includes 15 to 25 percent reservists, all of whom go through up to seven months training before deploying to Kandahar for six to nine month tours. That training brings every reservist up to the Regular force standard. Moreover, some reservists are specialists – working on Civil-Military Cooperation or on Psychological Operations, for example; indeed, the Canadian Forces have no capabilities in these areas except those provided by reservists. Most, however, are infantry reservists who come from militia regiments around the country and who volunteer for an Afghan posting for the adventure of it all and because they believe in the mission every bit as much as the professionals. The Land Force infantry's nine battalions are all seriously understrength, and some warrants have already been to Kandahar three or four times with yet another rotation staring them in the face. Without militia "augmentees," the Land Forces could not readily do the job.

The Navy faces a similar problem. With only 4,000 reservists, some in training, the Navy must find crews for ten Maritime Coastal Defence Vessels of the *Kingston* class, and that requires 1250 full-time reservists. That means that there are only approximately two part-time trained reservists for each one on full-time service.

And when the Olympics take place in Vancouver and Whistler, B.C., next February, the number of reservists on full-time duty will increase to over 14,500. In other words, more than half of the Reserve forces, intended to be part-time soldiers, sailors and air personnel, will be on duty 24/7, exactly the same as Regular troops.

So what's wrong with this? Consider the Land Force Reserve with its 21,000 soldiers. Every year, approximately 20 to 22 percent of that number leave the military for other opportunities or because they decide Reserve service is not for them. Basic training is being given to 3500 soldiers, and that requires officers and warrants to conduct the training. In all, there are only 12,000 Reserve soldiers that the Land Forces consider to be effectively trained, and the Afghan commitment is taking about ten to 12 percent of them each year.

The result? Militia regiments have largely gone from training as units to being the providers of augmentees for Regular force units. The tempo of unit training has slowed; the pace of turning out men and women who can fill a slot in an Afghanistan-bound Regular force unit has stepped up dramatically.

The question now is whether the Reserve forces will survive until the Afghan commitment ends in 2011. Reservists who work with regulars are learning valuable military skills, but will they return to the slower pace of training in the regimental armoury? Will they instead, as many are doing, join the Regular force? Will they leave the military entirely, their connection to their unit broken long ago? No one has the answers yet, though there is reason for concern.

But let's be clear and direct. The cause of the strain is a shortage of personnel. The Land Forces are very close to meeting their yearly recruitment goals; the Navy is in the midst of a recruiting campaign. But the Regular Force is at or just above its ceiling of 65,000, and the Reserves are within ten percent of theirs of 30,000. Neither figure is truly sufficient, and until the government gives the Department of National Defence the funds to increase the Canadian Forces' numbers substantially, the strain on the country's soldiers, sailors and air personnel can only increase. With good luck and dedication, the strain won't break the military. But good luck and dedication are not guaranteed forever, especially in times of budget deficits and recession.

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