

OPINION

Changing the face of the Canadian Forces

For the past three years, the Canadian military has witnessed unprecedented change under the helm of Gen. Rick Hillier. As a new general takes over this country's forces the verdict is still out over which direction this transformation will take.



Photograph by Jake Wright, *The Hill Times*

Listen up, soldiers: The CF are now taking part in a new era. They will no longer be led by 'The Big Cod' Rick Hillier a superhero general who became larger than life in the eyes of his troops.

By **DARCY KNOLL**

By the time you read this, an era will have ended in the Canadian Forces. Gen. Walter Natynczyk now holds the post of Canada's chief of defence staff and Gen. Rick "The Big Cod" Hillier can add the word retired to his list of accomplishments.

For the past three years, the Canadian military has witnessed unprecedented change under the helm of Hillier. As a new general takes over this country's forces, the verdict is still out over which direction this transformation will take.

In reviewing the press clippings from when Hillier first became CDS, several terms were listed that are still true today. Right from the start the press labelled him as "a soldier's soldier," "well-respected," and "considered a man of vision." Such initial assessments certainly proved well-founded

as Gen. Ray Henault stepped down and Rick Hillier stormed onto the political scene.

As "a soldier's soldier" it would be tough to deny that Hillier has not spoken out for the troops and pushed in every way possible to get them whatever he felt they deserved.

In his first speech as CDS he was blunt in saying, "You know in this country, we could probably not give enough resources to the men and women to do all the things we ask them to do.... But we can give them too little and that is what we are now doing." The general then told the politicians seated—a crowd that included then prime minister Paul Martin and defence minister Bill Graham—to "remember them in your budgets."

This was only just the beginning and before long the military establishment's calls for more funding were chorused by Hillier with public demands for helicopters, big honkin' ships, and even a Tim Hortons in Kandahar.

Since taking his position in 2005, Hillier has been the mainstay of the Canadian Forces. During his tenure Canada's troops have seen their political overseers change colours and they have been led by three different defence ministers. When the military took on the challenges of Kandahar, these political bosses seemed unfocused and ill-prepared for the inevitable casualty climb.

As politicians stumbled, the four-star general with a hearty laugh and a quick wit stepped forward and easily won over the press. His talk was gruff, blunt and straight, rather than rehearsed. How many Canadian politicians can use the expression "murderers and scumbags" and get away with it? His speeches clearly laid out complex topics with the odd joke about the Toronto Maple Leafs to keep the crowd engaged. Perhaps his strongest asset to his lectures was his ability to pass his message along in the form of a folksy anecdote about a young private or corporal.

With an emphasis on posturing and election preparation, the Conservatives came across speaking the language of slogans and talking points, while Hillier presented himself with conviction, honesty and depth. This is what set him apart from the politicians and, ironically, this is also what made him such a political force.

Make no mistake, Hillier clearly had an agenda as chief of defence staff. As the pundits said, he certainly was "a man of vision." Due to the vast political capital he accrued, he was able to push his objectives through the bureaucracy and past timid politicians in Liberal and Conservative minority governments.

For example, in early February 2006, before the new Conservative government had picked its Cabinet, Hillier served as ringleader to a major ceremony transforming the entire structure of the Canadian Forces. It was a ballsy move, to say the least, since the government had barely begun its term and a defence minister had not yet been appointed. Nevertheless, four new commands were created and the forces engaged on an irreversible course under the guidance of the general.

Although many have been blamed for bringing Canada's mission to Kandahar, the broad consensus is that Hillier was one of the leading proponents of strengthening Canada's role. With Canadians moving south, the entire focus of the military shifted in support of this major commitment. The Forces suddenly took on a prominent public presence led by its publicity-friendly leader. With this newly-raised profile the Canadian Forces was ultimately able to convince Canadians of the need for strong funding for the military and the purchase of billions of dollars worth of equipment.

However, not all change is necessarily good and it is far too early to tell if Hillier has led the Canadian military down the right path. After all, to argue with a louder voice does not necessarily make your argument correct.

According to a January 2007 report—written by three senior officers and leaked to *The Ottawa Citizen*—the transformation of the military was "an organizational perfect storm." Essentially, the report stated that the CF was trying to do too many things at once in undertaking a major mission in Afghanistan, purchasing

billions of dollars worth of equipment, trying to train and retain personnel, and reorganizing the command structure. Although Hillier has acknowledged there would be a few hiccups along the way, it will be up to future leaders to determine whether these problems can be fixed.

The war in Afghanistan is another huge question mark on Hillier's tenure. Although he has been the mission's strongest advocate, this conflict has brought great strain on the military's personnel and equipment supplies. A recent report written by Army Commander Lt.-Gen. Andrew Leslie and leaked to *The Ottawa Citizen* detailed these issues and stated that the army is struggling to meet the demand for equipment in Kandahar. This mission has also severely limited the military's training apparatus as the army is looking to fill senior non-commissioned officer forces within its ranks.

Due to the ongoing commitment to Afghanistan, the Canadian Forces have taken on an increasingly army-centric role, much to the chagrin of some officers from the other branches. This mission has led to a rush in spending—not only for new equipment, but to repair damaged and destroyed vehicles. As the war continues into its sixth year the government has been forced to keep increasing its budget for this engagement, which ultimately is draining money from

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other branches of the Canadian Forces who are also in dire need of funding and equipment.

Although the merits of this mission are not the point of discussion here, one can certainly question whether the military was prepared for Afghanistan to begin with or if the country was pushed into a conflict with an assumption that the government would cough up the dough later on. After all, military planners surely knew about the dangers in Kandahar as well as the state of the CF's training, equipment and personnel status before pushing for this volatile venture.

True to his nature, Hillier embraced the Afghan mission and refused to step back from his commitment. At a time when Canadian troops from across the country have seen their comrades injured and killed, Hillier's stance in support of their sacrifice was admirable.

The Canadian Forces are now taking part in a new era. They will no longer be led by "The Big Cod"—a superhero general who became larger than life in the eyes of his troops. Perhaps this is the right time for this mighty persona to step down from the podium. Hillier laid out some major changes for the Forces and a fresh set of eyes may be needed to handle any new problems that could develop.

Although this is in no way an attempt to diminish the new chief of defence staff, it can safely be said that the troops are sorry to see their beloved leader leaving the stage. However, given Gen. Rick "The Big Cod" Hillier's stature within the Forces and Canadian public at large, it can be assumed that this is one old soldier who will not simply fade away.

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