



General Rick Hillier

The Face
of the
Canadian
Forces

by Darcy Knoll



F E A T U R E

He stands tall on the podium, confidently speaking to the crowd. His voice is determined and he conveys a passion for his topic. He has no need for notes and appears completely at ease. His audience listens. They laugh. And together they stand and applaud Chief of Defence Staff Gen. Rick Hillier.

Over the past year, this audience has been growing steadily. It can now be found in many military circles, troop formations, industry conventions, and a growing array of newspaper editorial boards.

Amidst controversy surrounding the escapades of Canadian troops in Afghanistan, Gen. Hillier has become the unflinching face of the Canadian Forces. When he speaks, his voice echoes across the nation's media. As such, this civil servant is turning into a political force onto himself – a rarity for a chief of defence staff.

Under the tutelage of this general there has been a dramatic transformation of the structure and direction of the Canadian military. Gone are the dark days of the early 1990s. Gone are the days of budget slashes. Gone is Canada the peacekeeper. Instead, the Canadian Forces of today is a beacon of patriotism, opportunity, and re-building that doesn't hold back when threatened.

This is General Hillier's army and he has galvanized a public behind him.

But Hillier's focus has come at the exclusion of others. Since he took the reins of power, the military has been primarily oriented towards the mission in Afghanistan. When he became the chief of defence staff in February 2005, a contingent of 700 Canadian troops were heading for a six-month tour in relatively stable Kabul. Only one year later, 2,300 troops were on their way to the dangerous Kandahar region to directly confront the insurgents.

Regardless of its merits, this considerable effort in Afghanistan has limited the ability of the Canadian Forces to deploy elsewhere. In an interview at CFB Petawawa in April, Defence Minister Gordon O'Connor told the press, "I have apprehension of how we can continue to do this commit-

ment, take on other commitments, transform and regenerate the armed forces at the same time. ...We are going to be hard-pressed. We can maintain the commitment in Afghanistan into the future ... if the government chooses to do so. But we will be greatly challenged to take on any substantial commitment anywhere else offshore."

Outside of Afghanistan, the largest Canadian troop deployment was in the Golan Heights, where the force of 191 was dropped down to four troops at the end of March. By June only two members will remain posted there. Today, the second largest deployment of CF personnel is in Sudan, where 42 members serve as military observers, trainers and staff officers at the UN and Africa Union. In total, only 457 men and women are serving abroad outside the Afghan theatre.

The voice of Rick Hillier has been heard and will not disappear quietly...



For Gen. Hillier the mission in Afghanistan has been his baby ever since he was selected as the commander of the International Security Assistance Force in Kabul in October 2003. From then on he has been speaking out about the benefits of the Canadian effort in this theatre – a commitment he has stated that may be needed well into the next 10 years. On CTV's Question Period on March 12 he said, "The international community will be needed here for a long time. ...This country has been beaten up for 25 or more years, everything has been destroyed, and you're not going to rebuild a country that's been beaten so badly in anything less than a decade, or a decade-and-a-half, or even more than that."

Complimenting Canada's focus on Afghanistan, the other area that Hillier has taken charge has been how he wants to equip his forces and cut the Gordian knot of procurement. To do so, he used the Afghan mission as his lever to quickly buy new equipment and publicly raise a need for action on several major purchases.

For example, in November 2005 the army managed to cut the red tape and buy \$234 million worth of armoured patrol vehicles, howitzers, unmanned aerial vehicles, all-terrain vehicles and other items destined for the mountains outside

Kandahar. Successfully proving it doesn't take 12 years to buy new tools for the troops.

For the equipment that cannot be picked up immediately, the general has not been shy from raising the issue publicly. In an April speech to the Empire Club in Toronto, he announced the Canadian military needs to get on track and buy new joint support ships, search and rescue aircraft, a replacement for the Hercules, and new heavy-lift helicopters immediately. Of the last item he said, "If we want a helicopter, we don't need it in 15 years from now in Afghanistan. Not in 10 years or five years – not good enough. ... We need that helicopter in the very near future. Actually, by September would be quite good. I'd be very happy with that."

But General Hillier's approach to procurement has not been without its criticism. Firstly, his approach to publicly announce what the government needs to buy has fueled speculation in industry circles that this has not gone over well on the political side. A few days following Gen. Hillier's comments at the Empire Club, Defence Minister Gordon O'Connor told reporters, "Let's assume for the moment we go ahead with a medium helicopter lift project. You can't have it by September. They actually have to build them."

Another criticism that has been leveled at the general has been his predominate focus on the army. Certainly it can be assumed Gen. Hillier has a natural predisposition to this branch. Having served with the 8th Canadian Hussars, Royal Canadian Dragoons and III Corps of the U.S. Army and commanded forces in Germany, Bosnia and Afghanistan, his entire military career has been army-centric. As such, several of the major purchases he has been behind – the Mobile Gun System, Multi-Mission Effects Vehicle, and all the equipment for Afghanistan – have come to the benefit of the land force. According to one naval industry official, "It seems he puts his combat green briefs on every day and leaves his navy blue ones behind."

The third criticism competing companies have geared towards the CDS has been his ties to the lobbying world. The number of senior officers stepping into this field certainly is not news and it can be nearly impossible for the top brass not to have associated with these individuals in their professional lives. However, it was first raised here publicly in January and then again in the *Globe and Mail* in April, that there is a direct link between Gen. Hillier and the chief lobbyist for Ottawa's most influential firm – CFN Consultants.

Finding this link certainly has proved to be a challenge.

In examining Gen. Hillier's current bio it states where he served and the forces he commanded, but it also says he worked as a staff officer "at the strategic level in Ottawa." Now, a study of previous bios that were published on the general as recent as September 2000 state that "the strategic level" he worked in was the heart of National Defence Headquarters from 1992 to 1995. Here he started in 1992 as the executive assistant to the associate assistant deputy minister (personnel), then was promoted to executive assistant to the vice chief of defence staff and, finally, he was promoted again to the post of director NDHQ secretariat in 1994, which he held until he was sent to Croatia in June of 1995.

For some reason, the Defence Department has kept this information rather quiet. When asked to confirm these details in January, Gen. Hillier's spokesperson at the time, Lt.-Col. Rita LePage, would only say that he served as a staff officer for the ADM(Per) and VCDS from 1992-1995. When asked directly if he served as the director NDHQ secretariat she replied, "That's something I don't have visibility on."

Finally, three months later, Hillier's new spokesperson, Capt. Vance White, confirmed all of the above. As for the reason why this information was purged, Capt. White said he wasn't sure, but said it may have been removed to trim down the size of his current bio since the general has served in so many areas and wanted to stress his commanding experience.

However, whatever the explanation may be, this information in Gen. Hillier's background is pertinent for two reasons. First, as executive assistant to the VCDS and director NDHQ secretariat from 1993-1995, Gen. Hillier worked in the top offices at National Defence Headquarters during the height of the Somalia scandal. Here he would be responsible for such tasks as taking the minutes for the daily executive meetings and writing department memos and highly confidential sensitive issue reports.

Secondly, during the period of 1992-1995, Gen. Hillier worked directly below Lt.-Gen. Patrick "Paddy" O'Donnell, who was the assistant deputy minister (personnel) and then the vice chief of defence staff. Today, Mr. O'Donnell is the senior partner at CFN Consultants. Here he has held contracts for several major clients including Lockheed Martin's C-130J for the Hercules replacement and Alenia's C-27J for the bid for new search and rescue planes. Both are projects that Gen. Hillier has publicly stated need to get rolling.

Despite these criticisms, it would be difficult to argue

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against the fact that Gen. Hillier has raised the public's attention to the Canadian Forces. Probably the best indication of the extent of his effect has been the reaction to stories about the Prime Minister's Office placing a muzzle on the CDS.

Although Capt. White told *Esprit de Corps* these stories of censorship were unfounded (the PMO never returned our calls), just the thought of tightening a leash on the straight-shooting Newfoundlander sent a chill over the general's

supporters. MPs spoke out and called the prime minister dictatorial, and editorial boards were aglow with headlines such as "Let the General Speak" in the *National Post* and "Ottawa should let Hillier be Hillier" in the *Globe and Mail*.

Now, one may notice that words like "scumbags" and "murderers" are no longer in the general's lexicon, but even if he has been slightly censored, the voice of Gen. Rick Hillier has been heard and will not disappear quietly. ♦