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Reserve Options

by George Petrolekas
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For decades, successive governments of both political stripes have been unable to design a military Reserve force, which can be a highly effective component of the defence structure, that leverages capability and satisfies Reservists and Regular soldiers alike. Equally, few other defence issues create as much political friction between the Canadian Forces and their governing civilian masters than the Reserves.

The issues of roles, tasks, recruitment, retention, locales, history and costs perhaps indicate why it is such an intractable problem – let alone that the requirements of land forces, air forces and naval forces are completely different from one another.

In the years prior to the Second World War, in other words half of Canada's history as a state, there were limited permanent armed forces and aside from a token land force, no navy to speak of. Air forces came much later.

In its first half century, Canada was a much more rural country than it is now, and depended on volunteers, organized in local regiments, who would train in peacetime, and mobilize to contribute to the nation's defence. This structure served as planned for the First World War and again for the Second. There was no legal obligation to serve, service was a moral obligation and that historically underpinned the contractual relationship between the Reserves and future governments which would employ them.

The legacy of the World Wars resulted in dozens of units across the country, in towns and cities large and small. Units were woven into the social fabric of their localities, the battles they had fought indelibly engraved on the history of the young state and armouries which housed these units were part of the architectural landscape everywhere. There are few armouries that are not considered pieces of Canada's heritage.

With the advent of the Cold War, particularly the sense of the Soviet threat in Europe and beyond, armies evolved from having manpower within a structure that could mobilize, to standing forces, many of them forward deployed. It was the emergence of 'come as you are' warfare.

In that construct, the Reserves increasingly became viewed by defence planners as a cost centre – a liability that was maintained for political reasons rather than operational effect. Bold changes might have been enacted in Canada as in the United States, where units were created and most importantly equipped for mobilization and real-time tasks, but they were not.

In the United States, Reserve air squadrons were equipped with fighter aircraft for continental defence and specialty aircraft for transport missions and air-to-air refuelling missions. The US Navy used Reservists in air roles too (the US Navy has a fighter arm and an air surveillance arm) but also as a surge capability for specialty ships (such as the USNS *Comfort*) or individual specialist reinforcement. All of this was underpinned by a training system that ensured that incoming soldiers and officers are trained identically to their Regular counterparts.

In contrast, in the early years of the Cold War Canada used its Reserves for national survival roles – a body of people that could be organized to assist civil organizations in case of nuclear attack. This was the case up until the late 1960s. The latter years of the Cold War represented

the zenith of land training when units had access to equipment and trained to do the same things as their Regular brethren though at a lower tactical level.

However the gains of the 1990s were lost with the re-equipping of the army in the 1990s. Vehicles increased in complexity due to the addition of weapon systems and turrets. Drivers and crew commanders now needed technical courses simply to operate vehicles and the prevailing wisdom was that Reservists couldn't be trained on such platforms. Thus, access to equipment and further training disappeared. The result was that the land Reserve moved to a system of individual augmentation to the Regular forces. Units were no longer tactical units of employment but units of administration.

That practice has continued to today and all recent overseas deployments have featured individual augmentation, generally up to 20% of deployed forces. Domestically, units of the Reserve have not had a formal role, notwithstanding that close to 7,000 volunteered to serve during the ice storm of 1998.

If the Reserves could generate that large a number in a time of domestic crisis why couldn't this contribution be institutionalized, many governments have asked?



Jonathan Haward/CP Photo

The issue stems from the tradition of the Reserves in Canada. The organization, the geographic footprint and the employment policies, including recruitment and pay, are mired in an anachronistic culture that has never been modernized for Canada's current security needs.

A typical Reserve unit or regiment is composed of 140 soldiers of all ranks, in effect, producing a company of soldiers with the trappings of a regimental command structure. These companies have no vehicles and more importantly no logistics capability. They cannot move themselves and cannot sustain themselves (food, fuel, water and medical). And hence assigning a true operational task to a Reserve regiment is unachievable. During summer training concentrations,



various militia units are grouped into composite units for which the Regular force provides support. At least these composite units have a modicum of ability to deliver operational effect.

However, the individuals who constitute the Reserve still do not have an obligation to serve, and pay and benefits are so relatively low that the combined effect is that the attrition rate in the Reserve annually approaches 30%.

Therefore modernization of the organization is not enough. And any discussion on improving the operational output of the Reserves falters as improved operational output comes with a cost – in equipment and salaries. This is something in which the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) writ large are not willing to invest especially when fiscal sustainability is a challenge for the Regular force itself.

Domestic operations perhaps illustrate this quandary best. The Conservative government introduced the idea of territorial defence battalions in around 2008 as part of the Canada First Defence Strategy (CFDS) – borrowing on the prospect of efficiency gained by creating composite units for training. Although individual units across the country were normally around 140 strong, at any given time, there were in Quebec and Ontario around 4,000 Reservists available. Grouping them for training and for operational employment in times of national crisis seemed to be a good idea – a notion built upon the contribution of the Reserves following the 1998 ice storm. For defence planners, grouping small numbers into a large organization looks good on paper, but accomplishes little without other fundamental changes to increase utility.

If a national crisis occurred today, planners would never consider the Reserves in their planning or even the larger groupings of the territorial defence battalions or the Arctic response companies because there is no obligation to serve. As most Reservists are either employed in civilian jobs, or going to school, planners have no idea who, or how many will show up. And so all contingency plans revolve around what can be relied upon – the Regular force. In cases where the response from the Reserves has been overwhelming, the contribution itself becomes part of the problem as a former Chief of the Defence Staff (CDS) professed. According to him, “[h]undreds of reserves soldiers showing up, without all the right kit, no vehicles and no other equipment but their rifles and a willingness to help – we spent as much time organizing them, fitting them into regular units as we did using them.”

A former Minister of National Defence opined that high readiness units could be created in each of Canada’s four geographic areas but his military leaders, notwithstanding acknowledging the soundness of the idea, were unwilling to spend financial credits when the Regular force needed to fix its own decaying capabilities.

Beyond leveraging the land Reserve by creating viable unit structures with operational deliverables, the individuals within the land Reserve are a squandered resource. To this day there is no catalogue of individual skill sets brought from the civilian world or abilities.

This is not the case in the United States. For example, in Afghanistan, a US State Department official commented that Reservists had saved the American aid programs. While aid money was flowing into Afghanistan to build schools or other infrastructure or to convince farmers to grow licit crops rather than opium, there was no means to oversee the quality of construction or the effectiveness of farming programs. The United States, which does maintain personnel lists of civilian specialties, could quickly find contractors, plumbers, electricians and engineers within



its Reserve ranks. These Reserve soldiers had far greater value to the US effort by applying their civilian skills rather than being used as general combat troops. They would quickly be regrouped to monitor construction, check on quality and ensure functional delivery of projects, and in the farming sector, Guardsmen from rural states were formed into agri-business units.

In Canada, the government has no idea what it has as individuals. In the culturally diverse urban centres where many units are located, Canada has no way of tapping into linguistic skills or cultural knowledge that could otherwise be readily harnessed.

In short, the following needs to be done.

- Territorial defence should be the prime focus of the land Reserve. It can continue to support individual augmentation to the Regular force for international operations, but territorial defence tasks should be the prime role.
- The basis of training and employment should be the territorial defence battalions and these battalions will have to be properly equipped and staffed.
- These high readiness units should have different remuneration and terms of service (as outlined below).
- For soldiers not within the territorial defence structure, the Canadian Armed Forces should update personnel databases to reflect civilian skill sets resident in the Reserve and linguistic capabilities of all its members.

What are the other uses for the land Reserve? If indeed the Defence Policy Review will deliver a 'leaner' military, in other words a smaller military or one which will abandon certain capabilities as being unsustainable, then the Reserves provide a means to retain capability or to surge capability. Some examples include:

- At present, the Canadian Army has a tank-based armoured regiment using 40-odd Leopard tanks. It is unlikely that the Defence Policy Review will result in these numbers being increased for Regular force service. Yet Canada acquired 100 tanks during the war in Afghanistan. Those 60 tanks could be apportioned to the Reserve. It would be a means to retain a larger-scale armoured capability and an ability to surge tanks and tank crews in times of need.
- Niche abilities which are necessary in warfare but difficult to retain in peacetime such as psychological operations (psyops), information operations, civil-military relations could be retained in the Reserve more so than in the Regular forces. There are other such niche capabilities which could be assigned to the Reserves.

The naval Reserve has similar geographic constraints to the land Reserve but entirely different employment considerations. Crewing a ship is entirely different to creating a land force unit.

Naval divisions were located across the country some with access to inland waters but in all cases far from oceans. Individuals were trained to supplement crews but did not have access to vessels. The acquisition of Maritime Coastal Defence Vessels (MCDVs) – small warships for coastal patrol and minelaying – gave the naval Reserve access to ships but the utilization of the



vessels for months-long deployments meant that naval Reservists in effect emerged as a semi-permanent force rather than a uniquely Reserve force. For the naval Reserve, if it continues to exist, there are in essence three options:

- accept that the structure serves to generate individuals to form crews which will then be employed on a full-time basis;
- continue to train individuals for Regular force augmentation; and
- develop ships that would only be used in crisis to which Reservists would surge. This by default means that Reserve employment policies and terms of service would have to be fundamentally altered.

What are the air Reserve considerations? Reserve continental air defence in the United States is conducted almost exclusively by US Air Force Reserve and US Air National Guard units. This would likely be far beyond what Canada is capable of in terms of scale or acquisition of aircraft. However there are niche operational capabilities that should be explored. In Canada, like the land Reserves, air units are tied to geography; in other words, a Canadian unit recruits and survives based on its local demographics. For the air force, which has Reserve squadrons in Montreal, Toronto and Winnipeg, the vitality of the squadrons depends on recruiting locally. Their operations are equally restricted to where these squadrons are located in part because Canadian Reserve squadrons only fly utility helicopters and in the case of Winnipeg fly aircraft used to train navigators. It is remarkable that Canada no longer flies fighters, transport or special mission aircraft with its Reserves.

Conversely, the United States locates squadrons where their utility is greatest and aircrews and ground support staff are flown in to their place of duty if the local area does not produce sufficient numbers. In Canada, hypothetically it would work as follows for niche roles.

Many have commented that Canada does not have sufficient surveillance assets flying at borders or coastal areas. A Reserve maritime patrol capability could be maintained on both coasts drawing on aircrews from across the country who would fly to their duty station. Aircraft could be maintained by private industry but be made available for the days aircrews, maintainers and other staff would fly in for training. In the United States this is possible because the military runs a scheduled national air service, something Canada used to do. If that is cost prohibitive, then Reserve air squadrons should be located in areas which serve as bases for Canada's preminent airlines in order to have a trained population upon which to draw.

The three elements – land, air and sea – are unique in terms of Reserve issues. What has consistently been at the forefront of government frustration is the utility of its land Reserves. Discussion of Reserve issues (a metaphor for the militia) inevitably focuses on the land Reserve because it is by far the largest Reserve component, the most geographically present and chronically under-utilized.

In the last years of the Harper government, the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) was continually frustrated by the inability of the Canadian Armed Forces to improve land Reserve recruiting and retention or to carve out roles for the land Reserve.



There are ways out of this conundrum but it will require both an injection of willpower by the government to force change upon the CAF and equally a very large injection of funding with strict guidance on where and how it is to be spent.



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ENABLING POLICIES

Recruiting

Reserve recruiting is always secondary to the needs of the Regular force. Enrolment times for a Reservist frequently takes months – where it could be done in weeks. The bureaucracy of recruitment needs to be streamlined. For example there is no reason a military doctor has to do an enrolment medical, a civilian doctor can do it just as well as long as the criteria are clear. Transport Canada accredits doctors to do flight medicals across the country, it does not insist on having its own doctors do medicals.

Retention

A major cause of attrition (coupled with insufficient access to equipment and training) stems from pay inequity. The CAF does not consider that Reserve service comes over and above a normal work week for many. Only in overseas deployments is there salary equity. Reservists employed on contract are paid 15% less than their Regular counterparts. Reservists who parade for training in their units are paid 30% less than their Regular counterparts while having no additional benefits as inducements such as medical care or dental care for themselves or their families.

As the table illustrates, the Reserves in Canada receive different benefits than the Reserves in the United States.



Items	Canada	United States
Pay 2Lt	\$4,436	\$7,676 USD
Enlistment bonus (must enlist for six years)	\$0	up to \$20,000
Education		up to \$356 per month for 36 months
GI Bill Kicker		additional \$350 per month
Civilian Skills Bonus	partially reflected in pay for pilots, legal officers, medical officers	up to \$20,000 enlistment bonus plus increased pay rate
Health Care	90% of dental only – family not covered. Family only covered on overseas deployments	Low cost life, health and dental coverage, covering full family. All health care free when on active duty more than 30 days
Retirement	similar to United States, however no military RRSP, no retirement health care	Retirement Plan Retirement Savings Plan Retirement Health Care Employment transition Preferential US Govt Hiring

Only having a modicum of the benefits available to US Reservists would utterly alter the dynamic of Reserve service, recruitment and retention in Canada. However in a Canadian context this would likely be unaffordable, but it could be offered to those who chose to serve in high readiness units or within the territorial defence battalions.

Terms of Service

Reserve service in Canada is entirely voluntary. There is no period of minimum enlistment nor a liability to serve either in normal training or in a time of crisis. In the United States Reservists commit to serving one weekend a month and to a two-week annual training period. Benefits are earned if they sign to a six-year enlistment period. To wrest value from Canada's Reserves, particularly for domestic operations, a 21-day liability to serve should be enacted. This would assure planners and the government of a guaranteed minimal cohort in times of national emergency.



Equipment

Reserve units, or territorial defence battalions, should have at their disposal at a minimum vehicles sufficient on which to train and to use on deployment. These do not need to be full-scale fighting vehicles analogous to their Regular force counterparts, but of sufficient quantity and quality to enable their utility.

Expeditionary Considerations

There is no reason to alter the voluntary nature of Regular force augmentation for ongoing missions. While the system of augmentation is imperfect, it has worked. To alter how Reservists serve abroad for extended periods (nearly six months of mission preparation and six months overseas service) would require extensive overhaul of the terms of service, job protection legislation and a series of other enabling legislation.

However, the liability for service for up to 21 days could mean Reserve units deploy in humanitarian assistance or disaster relief roles. Simply knowing that a resource would be available on call, even for 21 days, would permit planners actually to consider its usage and assign roles. Ostensibly this 21-day liability to serve would have greatest effect on domestic operations but could also be used for emergency international operations.

CONCLUSION

Canada's Reservists are in many cases, even with their restricted training and equipment, far better than the regular armed forces of many states, even of some in NATO. The raw material from which the Reserve is formed in Canada is generally very well educated and possesses a base technical acuity for which other states strive. To turn the Reserve into a more operationally viable institution is a function of the investment the government is willing to make in terms of equipment, salaries and employment considerations. We do, at the end of the day, get the behaviour and results we are willing to invest in.



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► **About the Author**

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