

*This article was published in the Calgary Herald, the Montreal Gazette, the Ottawa Citizen on Wednesday, 16 April 2008.*

### **The End of the Hillier Era**

In one week in February last year, I went twice to hear the Chief of the Defence Staff, General Rick Hillier, speak. The first time, he talked to a large military audience in Ottawa and had the officers, serving and retired, junior and senior, on their feet cheering. The second address was in Toronto, and a collection of bankers and industrialists laughed at his jokes, cheered him to the echo, and leapt from their chairs applauding when he finished. There has not been a Canadian general officer with that kind of powerful charisma for decades, likely not since General Jacques Dextraze in the 1970s or General Andrew McNaughton in the early days of the Second World War.

How did Hillier do it? First, he was funny, patriotic, and transparently sincere in the way he singled out soldiers, sailors, and airmen in the audience who had been decorated for meritorious service. Wars to Hillier were not fought only for generals. It was the soldiers who did the hard, dirty work, and the Chief wanted Canadians to know this. The troops loved him for his obvious concern for them, and so did the people. With his speeches and presence, he made sure that everyone understood that war was a costly business, and the extraordinary outpouring of respect and patriotism when the remains of those killed in Afghanistan return home is clear evidence that he succeeded.

But it was not only the military and the public that Hillier affected. He moved governments as no other soldier in our time has. Defence minister Bill Graham jumped him over the heads of more senior officers to be Chief of the Defence Staff—and will still say how proud he is of his choice. Graham and Hillier together then moved Prime Minister Paul Martin, hitherto no special fan of the Canadian Forces, to adopt a new International Security Policy in 2005, the first defence statement in years to make sense with its new vigorous approach. Martin and Graham's approbation might not have been an automatic guarantee that the new government of Stephen Harper would approve of Hillier, but the Chief made the turn seamlessly, and Harper's hard line on the need for Canada to carry its full share of the Afghanistan burden fit perfectly with the Hillier approach.

The General's approach was tough indeed. Hillier clearly believed that the idea that Canada's natural role—for some Canadians, the only role—was peacekeeping had gone too far in capturing the public mind. Putting Canadian soldiers into Kandahar helped begin knocking the powerful peacekeeping mythology right between the eyes. Hillier didn't succeed completely—to listen to the New Democratic Party's Members of Parliament and the twaddle peddled by some "defence" institutes is to be certain of that. But at the very least, large segments of public opinion and the government now understand that sometimes only the careful application of force can work to achieve Canadian interests.

It was not that Hillier opposed peacekeeping in principle or that he was averse to seeing Canadians serve the United Nations. Instead, it was simply that he understood that wearing a blue beret could not be the only role for the Canadian Forces. To him, Canada had international responsibilities to its neighbours, friends, and allies. Our soldiers, sailors, and airmen and women had to be ready for operations that ranged from

traditional peacekeeping to war fighting, along with everything in between, and Hillier also set out to remind the Canadian Forces of this. No serviceman or woman any longer could assume that military service was simply a pleasant job. Now the unlimited liability of the soldier is once again at the forefront of the military mind.

But if a soldier is asked to risk his or her life for Canada, the government and people must accept their obligations as well. If Canada sends its men and women to fight, it must give them the tools it needs to do the job. Here, General Hillier had extraordinary success. As the mission in Afghanistan altered, as the Taliban changed its tactics, the Canadians serving in Kandahar received the tools to do their job. New long-range transport aircraft, vehicles, tanks, artillery, better personal equipment, and devices that could begin to sniff out the Improvised Explosive Devices that have killed and wounded so many—whatever they required, the troops received. And now with new helicopters expected by the autumn and with unmanned aerial vehicles on the way, Hillier has done his best for his soldiers overseas.

Yes, Hillier had his difficulties with his political masters. Calling the Taliban “detestable murderers and scumbags” was not tactful in our so polite nation, even if they were. Labelling the Jean Chrétien era “a decade of darkness” for the Canadian Forces might have seemed a politically loaded remark to Liberal defence critics, although it was absolutely correct.

But telling the truth was Hillier’s forte. It was why his troops loved him. It was why the public responded, and it is why General Rick Hillier will be almost impossible to replace with anyone of similar ability and charisma.

**J.L. Granatstein is a Senior Research Fellow at the Canadian Defence and Foreign Affairs Institute.**