

In defence of tradition

The restoration of traditional names for Canada's military honours our past and sets the stage for a proud future, writes Colin Robertson

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Nations draw their character from their history. We draw our shared memories especially during times of conflict, stress and challenge. National cohesion and character are put to the test when the nation faces real trials - during national emergencies or armed conflict. Canadians look with pride to our uniformed men and women and to the service they have performed for our country.

Today, our Rangers are in the midst of this year's Operation Nanook, actively demonstrating Canadian sovereignty in the Arctic. After a decade at the sharp end in Kandahar, the Canadian Army is helping Afghans learn to defend themselves. Our pilots are flying guard over the skies of Libya, and HMCS Charlottetown recently came under fire fending off an attack on Misrata.

For a great deal of our history, our military performed under the identities of the Royal Canadian Navy, the Canadian Army and Royal Canadian Air Force. The restoration of these identities is a moment for reflection in the importance of memory and the value of tradition.

During the valiant years of the Second World War, the Royal Canadian Navy secured the vital North Atlantic sea-lanes, while the RCAF training of thousands of Commonwealth and allied crew would earn for Canada the title "aerodrome of democracy." By war's end, our army had helped to liberate Europe and we possessed the world's third largest navy. Our three services would enhance their reputation whether wearing the UN blue beret or under NATO command in Korea, Suez, Cyprus, the Balkans, Iraq, Somalia and Afghanistan.

There were many positive features to the Pearson government's decision to reinforce Canadian identity, most notably our maple leaf flag, but the erasure of the three distinct services was not one of them. There was about that decision too much of the central planner.

Doing what works to best stand guard for Canada requires constant effort and investment, with special attention to morale and the men and women who serve. Conditions of service have improved, distinctive uniforms and ranks were restored, bolstering recruitment and confidence in the individual services. The RCAF logo resurfaced as the design for popular clothing and, most recently, on the uniform of the resurrected Winnipeg Jets.

Now we need to ensure our armed services can live up to their distinguished heritage.

The world is a dangerous place. Canadians do not live in a "fireproof" house or waters free of peril. We spend a little over one per cent of our GDP on national defence. The British spend about two per cent and the Americans nearly five per cent. We will need to do more because our principal allies can no longer afford to constantly take up the slack.

Why do we need to spend more?

The Seven Seas are global highways for 80 per cent of world commerce. They are also inherently lawless. We export about half of what we manufacture as part of supply chain dynamics that date back to the Second World War. We have a record number of trade discussions under way - notably with Europe and India - as we seek to sell our goods and services. Prime Minister Stephen Harper has just returned from opening doors in Latin America and he visits China again this fall.

Trade by sea is vital to our prosperity. We also have the longest coastline in the world, enough to circle the equator six times. This has special implications for the Royal Canadian Navy.

The Canada First Defence Strategy provides a solid blueprint for the future that includes high recruitment targets and new kit; the Chinook helicopters and Hercules aircraft have already proven their worth in battle and in disaster relief. In the coming years, major projects will range from satellites to ships. We must now develop a coherent industrial defence strategy if we are to meet the procurement timetable.

The challenge for the Harper government will be to deliver on their commitment for new planes, new warships and, for the North, icebreakers. Getting this done will enable the Royal Canadian Navy, the Royal Canadian Air Force and the Canadian Army - all proud partners in the Canadian Forces - to build on their distinguished reputations.

A former diplomat, Colin Robertson is vice-president of the Canadian Defence and Foreign Affairs Institute. He is also an Honorary Captain (Naval) Royal Canadian Navy.