

Baby boomers and their kids drive Canadian Forces recruitment

Bob Bergen

It is ironic that the children of baby boomers are having a powerful impact on the Canadian Forces in 2006.

“Baby boomers” are those born between 1946 and 1964. Their 1960s’ mantra was “make love, not war.” Now, the latest baby boomers’ children are flocking into military recruitment offices in an eye-popping fashion that could see regular force enrollment hit 100 per cent of the Forces’ lofty new recruitment targets.

For the recruitment year April 2005 – April 2006, there is every reason to believe that 5,522 young men and women will have answered their country’s call to become full-time soldiers.

Recruiters are currently sitting at 90 per cent of their enrollment target with one month to go.

That, despite a dire Queen’s University analysis in September that the Forces would be hard pressed to meet ambitious expansion targets set by the government last year to add 8,000 full-time regular force soldiers and reservists to its 52,700 deployable troops.

The government’s plan is to continue to increase the number recruited by 1,000 every year so that by the year 2011, some 12,000 new regular force and reservists will join the Forces annually.

Why the urgency? Again, look to aging baby boomers, the ones in uniform who are approaching retirement from the Forces who advanced through the ranks to become among its most important junior leaders: warrant officers and majors.

“That’s where we’re going to feel the pain in the next few years because we’re getting lots of new blood in, but the older blood will be leaving at a faster rate over the next couple of years,” explains Col. Kevin Cotten, the head of recruiting for the Canadian Forces.

But, Cotten is optimistic the Forces can meet that challenge.

What will be needed, however, are three factors that have converged and which have resulted in the current spectacular recruiting phenomenon.

The first is a meaningful role for the military, such as it has right now in Afghanistan which gives it purpose and an opportunity for Canadians to understand that their men and women in uniform can make a difference in the world.

A clear purpose is the reason why Canada was able to contribute 424,589 troops overseas; some 9,000 naval officers and men, mostly to the Royal Navy; and 22,812 pilots and 13,160 ground crew to the British flying corps and air services during the First World War from a population of just eight million.

A clear purpose is the reason why Canada was able to contribute 257,978 Canadian combatants to the ground forces in North-West Europe; 95,705 officers, men and wrens to the naval effort and some 232,682 men and 17,030 women to the Royal Canadian Air Force, including 94,000 mostly flying with Britain’s Royal Air Force overseas, during Second World War.

The history is clear: Canadians step up to the plate when their country calls.

And Canada is clearly calling.

In the wake of the former Liberal government advertising scandal, then-prime minister Paul Martin’s Liberal government, put an eight-month moratorium on all government advertising.

That moratorium was lifted in February and, since then, aggressive television and radio advertising has been saturating Canadians with messages about the Forces’ employment and educational opportunities. That targeted advertising, coupled with the news media’s coverage of the 2,200 Canadian troops in Afghanistan’s southern province of Kandahar and another 100 in Kabul, has the ability to put the military front and centre in Canadians’ minds.

Thirdly, under the guidance of the new Chief of Defence Staff, Gen. Rick Hillier, the Forces have implemented Operation Connection to meet Canadians in job fairs and the like to showcase all that the Forces offer.

The recruitment statistics would indicate the convergence of those three elements seem to be working in the Forces’ favor almost everywhere, except perhaps in Alberta.

For example, the Calgary recruitment office normally sees between 20 and 30 walk-ins and a similar number of phone calls daily for information about a military career, but those numbers have grown by less than 10 per cent.

Alberta’s super heated economy with a shortage of workers is considered a major factor.

One of the most lonely soldiers in Canada must surely be reserve Lt. Brian King in the Mewata Armoury

recruiting office in downtown Calgary.

It makes for long days when, typically, King fields three telephone calls from people interested in careers with the regular forces, not the reserves.

What makes matters worse is that most callers don't even know that Canada has a military reserve that will employ them part-time while they further their education, for example.

In addition, enticing young Albertans into part-time military jobs as reservists when they can make small fortunes working part time in a host of other jobs makes for a steep up-hill recruiting climb.

As a result, where regular force recruiters talk to 10 potential candidates to recruit one, King estimates reserve recruiters need to talk to 500 to get one application.

The message needs to get out that the reserves do play a meaningful role in Canada and overseas.

Reserves specific advertising and better-than-sporadic news media attention would also help.

Nationally, Cotten says the military occupations the Forces most want to grow are in the army: "Boots on the ground, armoured crewmen, infantry, artillery and signal operators."

The good news is, although they may be civilian boots for now, thousands are walking through recruitment office doors.

That's what clear vision and a meaningful role accomplishes.

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