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# Canadian Forces Recruitment

*Captain Peter Mason, CD*

Recruiting has been one of the primary focuses of the Canadian Forces (CF) for the past two years. The CF recognizes that the long-term viability of the organization rests with its people. As changes affect personnel strength for years, care must be taken to ensure that every occupation is reviewed and a strategy for long-term succession planning exists. Maintaining the proper number of people in the right occupation at the right rank level is a huge task. Mistakes or changes made will have long-term effects.

## The Magnitude of the Problem

Ten years ago, the strength of the Regular Force was reduced from approximately 85,000 to 60,000 members. This reduction was accomplished using two methods; the implementation of a Force Reduction Plan (FRP) and a large reduction in recruiting. The rapid implementation of these reduction methods had several unforeseen side effects.

The FRP was a good conceptual plan. Primarily, it offered departure incentives to certain overstrength Regular Force occupations in an effort to reduce the overall force strength. In hindsight, this broad-based approach achieved the desired reduction result, but was too indiscriminate. FRP releases were generally given to every qualified member who applied. In many cases, more individuals applied than were required and, as it was not selective, those who the CF should have retained were instead released. As only individuals with certain years of experience qualified, some occupations that had previously been overstrength were now dramatically understrength at certain rank levels. The additional problem with this was that there were experience gaps at certain critical points in the occupation, affecting the quality of life for those who remained.

The initial 60,000 reduction target was

also controversial. This figure was referred to as the Canadian Forces Manning Level, or the maximum number of people allowed in the CF. This differs from the Paid Strength, or the number of people in the CF receiving pay cheques.

Although the number of people paid is a good indication of how many people are in the CF, the important indicator is how many of these people are trained and effective, or how many can be employed. These figures are referred to as the Trained Effective Establishment (TEE) and the Trained Effective Strength (TES). The TEE refers to the number of positions that the CF requires to be filled in order to meet its commitments, whereas the TES is the actual number of trained personnel available. The difference between the TES and the Paid Strength consists of personnel undergoing training, language courses, medical holding lists, etc. Once recruits finish their occupational training, they are considered part of the TES and are therefore qualified and employable.

The reduction of recruiting targets would also create severe long-term consequences. In 1990-91 and 1991-92, the CF took in 8,243 and 7,070 recruits, respectively. One year later, in 1992-93, this had been reduced to less than 20 per cent of the previous year's intake, or 1,369 recruits. Along with reductions came budget cuts, with the most obvious made at the recruiting centres and training systems. Occupation training schools were closed or downsized, courses were cancelled or postponed and instructors were transferred back into operational jobs.

The combination of these initiatives had a dramatic effect on the personnel system. Figure 1 visually demonstrates the average age versus years of service for the non-commissioned member (NCM) population in 2001. The blue bands indicate the age of people currently serving. The red line



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shows the target line for where the CF should be. The effects of selective attrition and lack of recruiting can clearly be seen.

The effects of these gaps are magnified over time. As the years progress, more and more of the experienced people will retire, the majority after they have completed 20 years of service. As this experience gap grows, there will be fewer and fewer members remaining in the system able to fill it. For example, there are only approximately 500 members who have served 10 years in the CF. Eight years from now, instead of having over 2,000 members with 18 years of service like we do now, we will have less than 500. This does not take into account the attrition rate for these 500 people over the next eight years.

Why is this so crucial? It takes two to seven years before new enrollees become occupation qualified. This means that if someone leaves the CF today, his or her replacement would have to have been recruited two to seven years ago. We know from studying demographics that, as we are losing the bulk of our experienced people over the next five years, we have to recruit their replacements today. To adjust for a lack of new recruits, the CF has retained individuals who would have been released in the past. These experienced people are able to fill in for the lack of junior personnel, but they are rapidly approaching their retirement gates and will soon leave.

By 2000, it was easy to see that the CF was approaching a crisis. The Paid Strength was only 57,985 and, in addition, the CF's TES had slipped approximately 3,000 below established levels. This was further amplified by the fact that 87 of the 105 military occupations were either in serious trouble or would be within a year. Unless corrective action was taken, the projections were ominous – a shortfall of up to 10,000 by 2010 unless the trend was reversed. Accordingly, plans for a three-year recruiting project were developed and launched in late 2000.

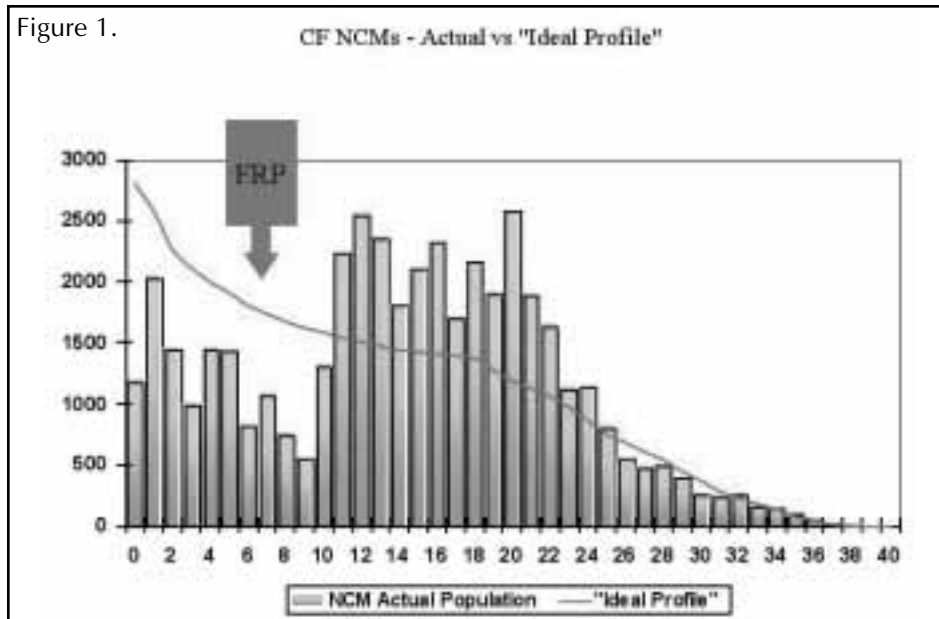
#### What was done

The CF Recruiting Project faced a huge number of issues and the magnitude of the problem meant that it had to be approached from several different angles. Primarily, recruiting needed to be increased, outdated policies needed to be reviewed and updated, and retention initiatives needed to be explored. The CF needed to remake its image as an employer of choice for the youth in Canada. They needed to know that the CF was open for business.

Increasing recruiting was a difficult proposition. Due to budgetary cutbacks, the recruiting centres and training systems had been reduced or restructured. Many of the experienced instructors had been posted out to higher-priority jobs elsewhere in the CF. The 3,000 trained personnel shortage was also disproportionately represented in the training system. The CF was faced with a conundrum. Do you remove someone from an operational position where they were already short and post him or her into a training position? In the end, this became the only solution, for without the proper instructors at the schools, the new recruits could not be properly trained. While this would further compound the “pain” felt at the operational units, it was the only way to resolve the longer-term problem.

Additionally, as a cost-savings measure, the CF had introduced “just-in-time recruiting”. Essentially, individuals were recruited a few months prior to the start of their occupational training courses. For example, if an individual's course started in August, enrollment would be in May/June, basic recruit school in June/July, and then they would go on to the occupation train-

Figure 1.



ing course. Although an excellent concept when recruiting targets were very low, it was now having an undesirable side effect. The CF was losing a lot of great applicants. If a potential recruit had approached the recruiting centre in January he or she would be told to return in May. Would the individual return to the recruiting centre? In many cases, a potential enrollee found alternative employment and never returned.

With the introduction of “real time recruiting”, the system changed. Applicants are enrolled as soon as possible, regardless of when their occupation training courses are held, and they quickly go on recruit training. To help accommodate this, 25 basic recruit courses were scheduled in 2001, up from 12 per year. The time gap between the recruit course and the occupational training course is filled through employment in their chosen environment and occupation, where possible. This gave recruits some practical experience, as well as a pay cheque, and helped relieve some of the shortfalls felt at the units.

After so many years of downsizing, there was a perception among the Canadian population that the CF was not accepting new recruits — it was “closed” for intake. To change this mind set, a large advertising campaign was launched nation-wide, on TV, in movie theatres, and in national newspapers. Additional exposure was obtained through several interviews on the national news. It was decided that the best approach to start would be through generic

CF advertising in an effort to increase the applicant levels at the recruiting centres. Occupation-specific advertising was to continue in the following years as the need dictated. To date, the entire advertising campaign has proven to be successful, with over 25,000 applicants processed at the recruiting centres over the past year. This is a two-and-a-half-fold increase over the previous year.

Previous CF recruiting trends reflected annual intakes of approximately 2,300 in the Regular Force and slightly more in the Reserves. Based on predicted attrition levels, this was insufficient to meet known or projected personnel needs for the foreseeable future. After quickly going through the numbers, the recruiting project set a target of 30,000 recruits over a three-year period for both the Regular and Reserve Force. The plan allowed for flexibility within the yearly requirements.

For the first year of the recruiting drive, efforts were concentrated on the macro level. The CF was falling so short of required personnel levels that a maximum recruiting effort was to be directed at almost every occupation. The campaign is currently in its second year, where micro-level efforts are being directed towards those occupations still in crisis. In the third year, efforts will be concentrated on fine-tuning and support, targeting those occupations which, despite previous efforts, are not recovering.

For the first year, the target was set at 10,000 recruits and was based on a project-

ed Regular Force attrition of 4,400 people. As of 31 March 2002, 5,404 Regular and 5,175 Reserve Force recruits had been enrolled, demonstrating a huge success compared to initial projections.

This success was a result of a number of factors. Final attrition figures came in at 3,600 versus the originally projected 4,400. This lower attrition level was due to new Quality of Life (QOL) initiatives and a policy to offer temporary contract extensions to members working in the occupations in crisis. Contract extensions enabled the CF to temporarily retain skilled workers for one- to five- year periods. This gives occupations that were already critically short some breathing room, allowing for the training of potential replacements while benefiting from the members' continuing expertise.

To ensure continued success, several outdated CF policies had to be reviewed. Several older policies were designed to encourage people to leave and to restrict entry, primarily because, at one point, the CF was a very desirable profession and there was a requirement to have a high turnover of personnel. Those same conditions no longer exist today. Policies have to be structured so that the CF becomes attractive to join, provides a stable, progressive work environment and ensures the CF gets a return on its investment. Essentially, policies were examined to determine if they still apply and still made sense. A huge number of existing policies were examined and modified to insert "common sense" back into the equation. Some of the primary examples of where the Recruiting Project focused are noted below.

### Skilled Workers

In the past, if an unskilled individual was enrolled, it would take approximately two to seven years for him or her to become occupation qualified. If a skilled applicant was enrolled, he or she would already be occupation qualified and therefore immediately employable. In the case of an officer, recruiting someone with a degree eliminates the huge cost and the number of years it would normally require to put this individual through university as a CF member. Obviously, this meant that a large focus was placed on recruiting skilled individuals or re-enrolling former CF members who had retained their skills.

**Enrollment Incentives and Allowances:** To aid the recruitment of skilled individuals, the CF developed allowances targeted at certain understrength occupations. An allowance of \$10,000 or \$20,000, awarded depending on academic or technical qualifications, was designed to entice skilled NCM applicants. An engineering officer allowance of \$40,000 was targeted at qualified applicants with suitable engineering or science degrees. The expense was justified as a skilled applicant can eliminate several years of training at a huge cost savings to the CF. More importantly, they can almost immediately be employed.

It was recognized that a skilled civilian was generally paid more than a recruit in the CF and this was a disincentive for them to join. The pay differential facing skilled workers was offset by offering certain skilled NCM applicants acting corporal rank on graduation. Basic corporal pay was comparable to the equivalent civilian pay and this enabled the individual to be recognized for his or her skills.

**Re-Enrollment:** The best example of a skilled worker is a former CF member wishing to re-enroll. Previous policy stated that if an NCM left the CF and wished to re-enroll, then the highest rank he or she would be offered would be that of corporal. Consequently, former members from senior ranks had little incentive to re-enroll, as they would not be granted either a reasonable rank or pay for the requisite skills they possessed. The benefit of re-enrollees to the CF is obvious. With the possible exception of some possible refresher training, they can immediately be employed with little cost to the CF. This policy is being reworked so that individuals will be offered no less than one rank lower than their former rank, provided that the break in service has not been more than five years.

**Component Transfer (CT):** The reserves have always been a source of recruiting for the Canadian Forces. Historically, 500 to 700 reserves have transferred to the Regular Force annually. However, the procedure for this is cumbersome and is thus being reviewed with an eye to streamlining and rationalizing the process. It is a difficult process as the Regular Force have slightly different enrollment criteria; however, in the spirit of "Total Force", encouraging CT only makes sense. The two forces are moving towards the point where an individual could theoretically move between

the Regular and Reserve Force at multiple points in their career.

**Occupational Transfer (OT):** Occupational transfers occur when selected individuals move from one occupation to another. For instance, once accepted, an individual from any occupation can re-train and learn new skill sets in another occupation. OTs are being carefully monitored to ensure that the OT occurs predominately from non-stressed occupations into stressed occupations. The benefit of OTs are that the CF could potentially retain an individual who might otherwise have left the CF.

The CF is looking at pursuing a program of making OT offers to members who are not granted contract extensions, provided they are eligible and transfer to stressed occupations. This policy only makes sense as the member who leaves the CF can request re-enrollment on their own anyway.

### The Way Ahead

The three-year plan is flexible and must balance the needs of the Regular and Reserve Forces. After year one of the recruiting program, the CF achieved most of its objectives: over 10,500 personnel (both regular and reserve) were enrolled; CF total paid strength now exceeds 60,000; the applicant to enrollment ratio is now 2.47:1; attrition has dropped from eight per cent to seven per cent; and many military occupations are now recovering. Reserve Force recruiting numbers are encouraging and are instrumental in achieving the large intake.

Despite these successes, the CF was not able to attract sufficient numbers of doctors, dentists, engineering officers and electronics/IT technicians into the Regular Force. If these trends continue, major operational impacts could result. The introduction of new approaches to recruiting, such as signing bonuses, have produced encouraging initial results, but the CF must continue to address these shortages.

### Conclusion

While the CF achieved considerable success in the first part of the project, much more attention must be paid to the most problematic occupations. Programs already introduced to date are proving effective while others under consideration are promising. The CF is well on the road to success. ■