

RIGHTING A WRONG

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The Canadian Airborne Forces Association (CAFA) and the Airborne Regiment Association of Canada (ARAC) wish to correct the widely held perception that the Canadian Airborne Regiment (CAR) was disbanded in disgrace in March of 1995. The disbandment was unwarranted and an affront to the entire "Airborne Forces Community" and, indeed to the Canadian Forces at large. This position paper represents the views of both associations.

The Canadian Airborne Regiment was a loyal, proficient and dedicated unit, and its disbandment was done without the benefit of a fair inquiry and prior to ascertaining the facts by the Liberal Government of Jean Chretien. It was a political decision taken in haste and contrary to the advice of senior military officers of that time and was symptomatic of the reluctance to face related issues of command, manning, supply and support for the Somalia mission.

We, the Airborne Community, well know that the Regiment provided the Army and Canada with a balanced parachute regimental formation and later a battalion sized unit. This was a Regiment that provided unique capabilities, specifically tailored to meet Canada's military needs.

The Canadian Airborne Regiment, from its formation in 1968 to its disbandment in 1995, perpetuated the proud WW2 battle record of 1 Canadian Parachute Battalion (1 Can Para) and the First Special Service Force (FSSF). It provided Canada with a very responsive, self-contained, strategically mobile parachute assault force. This force was capable of quickly moving to meet any unexpected threat or commitment either domestically or internationally. It was Canada's rapid response force, comprised of very fit, mature, battle trained and enthusiastic volunteers. It was well led with an "esprit de corps" second to none, as was demonstrated during the Regiment's almost continual exercise and operational commitments over its existence. Contrary to reports that the CAR was unsuitable for UN peacekeeping/peacemaking duties, it must be remembered that it performed commendably in the 1970 October Crisis, the 1976 Olympics, the Turkish invasion of Cyprus in 1974 and the two subsequent Cyprus tours in 1981 and 1986 prior to its deployment to Somalia in 1993. In fact, just prior to its disbandment, it was tasked to a limited commitment in the Rwanda crisis of 1994.

Apart from the deployments outlined above, the Regiment was tasked for Arctic "Defence of Canada" sovereignty operations entailing the insertion of up to 800 paratroopers including heavy engineer equipment, artillery support and extensive long range communications capabilities. It was also tasked with responding to a major air disaster in the far North. These capabilities have not been replicated in subsequent defence organizations and is well beyond the Search and Rescue capabilities currently available or the piecing together of an ad hoc parachute capable force.

The move of the CAR to Ontario in 1977 and the later loss of its formation status when placed under the Special Service Force, also led to a loss of some capabilities, but not its spirit. The move, however, carried with it more than just a reduction in strength; it

also resulted in the eventual loss of experience in the command structure.

Evidence has shown that the Canadian Airborne Regiment's performance in its sector at Belet Huen, Somalia was considered to have been of a very high standard. Local clan chiefs stated publically that they were extremely satisfied with the efforts of the CAR in calming the unrest and violence so prevalent at the time. More importantly the American Coalition Commander stated that the Canadian Airborne Regiment's performance was outstanding and more successful than any of his other units. He considered it to be the standard to which other contingents should strive. This was hardly the service that warranted disbandment!

The murder of a Somali teenager and the shooting of an intruder in 1993 were inexcusable and brought discredit to the Regiment. However, the actions of a few soldiers should not have resulted in the disbandment of the Regiment. Canadian reaction to events was largely the result of adverse media attention much of which presented the Regiment as a rogue, poorly disciplined and out of control unit. That was simply not the case. Corrective measures were taken and were well in place before the announcement to disband the Regiment was made in January 1995, by the Minister of National Defence, Mr. Collenette. It must be noted that the Somalia Commission of Inquiry did not commence until May 1995.

The disbandment of the Canadian Airborne Regiment was an unprecedented act and a mistake that sullied the Regiment's reputation as well as that of the Army in general. It was a pernicious act without fairness and justice taken by a government prior to ascertaining the facts. The result is the loss of a capability that has not, as yet, been replaced.

The Airborne Community of past and serving soldiers and the Army deserve recognition for the CAR's loyal, proficient and exemplary service rendered to Canada over 27 years. The word "disgrace" does not apply to the Airborne Regiment nor to any of its operations.

The perception of the Canadian Airborne Regiment being in disgrace at the time of disbandment must be corrected. More importantly, with the Afghan drawdown from Canadian combat participation and the Government's emphasis on the "Canada First Defence Strategy", it is time for a thorough study of the Army's role and capabilities. Many would agree that a comprehensive review should result in the restoration of the Canadian Airborne Regiment or the assignment of a unit with that Regiment's capabilities. These steps would go far in "Righting the Wrong".
