



## STRESS TESTED: THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND CANADIAN NATIONAL SECURITY

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## COVID-19 as a Constraint on the CAF? As Always, the Mission Matters

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### Introduction

COVID-19 presented the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) with personnel, training, and operational challenges, but there is variation in how the CAF has responded. While the government and the public's primary focus may have been on operations at home, first with the troops replacing depleted staffs in long-term care facilities (LTCFs) and later, in helping with the vaccine rollout, the CAF continued to be involved in several international missions. These missions varied in terms of how exposed troops were to the virus, and as a result the CAF entirely halted some operations while adapting others. In this chapter, we discuss the increased focus on domestic operations and provide an assessment of international operations, highlighting which ones mainly continued as planned, which ones were modified, and which ones were largely frozen. The domestic efforts produced more controversy than the deployments abroad. For the international efforts, the key variable was how much contact with foreign troops the CAF had, although other factors mattered. We conclude with a consideration of the implications of the pandemic for the future of the CAF.

## The CAF Enters the Fight at Home

Domestic operations are integral to what the CAF does and are highlighted in every defence review as one of its core missions, even if the focus of politicians, the media, and the budget tends to be more on expeditionary operations. Before the Afghanistan mission, one of the most prominent operations on many senior officers' biographies was the 1998 ice storm in Ontario and Quebec.<sup>2</sup> The increased frequency of natural disasters—floods, fires, extreme storms—has increased the pace of CAF operations at home. Lieutenant-General Wayne Eyre, then the Commander of the Army, noted just before the pandemic struck Canada that the pace of domestic operations had increased, creating challenges and imposing trade-offs for the CAF (Berthiaume 2020b). Therefore, it should not be surprising that the government looked to the CAF to respond to the pandemic. Unlike any other government agency, the CAF has large numbers of trained individuals who can be quickly deployed to a new mission and who have experience in planning and coordinating the logistics of complicated and sudden tasks. Below, we discuss the two key missions—support to LTCFs and helping with vaccine distribution—before noting how the CAF's day-to-day work in Canada has been affected by the pandemic.

As the CAF reacted to the pandemic, it stood up Operation LASER to protect the force, assist governments at all levels, and maintain readiness (DND 2021c).<sup>3</sup> Phase 3 (pandemic response) of Operation LASER was activated on 13 March 2020 after Phase 2 (pandemic alert).<sup>4</sup> The most visible manifestation was the deployment of soldiers into fifty-four elder-care facilities in Quebec and Ontario after the pandemic depleted their staffs (Berthiaume 2020c). This effort drew the media's attention for a few reasons. It was surprising—the public might expect the CAF to provide logistical support to distribute protective gear, but replacing nursing staff was not something most people had anticipated. Soldiers in uniform entering LTCFs provided the media with dramatic pictures. It was also controversial as the soldiers observed neglect and abuse of the elderly in some of these facilities, ultimately reporting that abuse up their chain of command; that report eventually made its way into the media (Brewster and Kapelos 2020; Treble 2020).<sup>5</sup> Because the provinces are ultimately responsible for these facilities, their request to the CAF to assist civil authorities

came back to bite them with these revelations (CBC News 2020). At the same time, the desire by the CAF to pull the troops out as quickly as possible became a point of contention with the provinces (Canadian Press 2020). While this effort almost certainly gained the CAF goodwill with the public, it may have created some tensions with the leadership of the relevant provinces. We further discuss these push-pull dynamics below.

The CAF gained attention again in the fall and winter of 2020–21 as it played a significant role in supporting the vaccine rollout in the form of Operation VECTOR. Vaccinating the entire population poses significant logistical challenges, especially as the first vaccine distributed in Canada required extremely cold storage. A first move in this effort involved the CAF delivering five freezers to northern communities in December 2020. Major-General Dany Fortin also became one of the key players in this effort in his role as Vice-President of Logistics and Operations at the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC), and CAF personnel assisted PHAC in planning the vaccines' distribution.<sup>6</sup> While there has been significant criticism of the rollout, with major problems tied to the reliability of supply chains, none focused on the CAF.<sup>7</sup>

Less visible efforts by the CAF at various stages of the pandemic included assistance to more remote communities across Canada. Early on, for example, Canadian Rangers were asked to do wellness checks, provide transportation, distribute food and supplies, provide shelter, and assist emergency operation centres (DND 2021c).<sup>8</sup> Rangers provided similar assistance in remote communities as winter approached in November and December 2021. These latter efforts included more medical assistance and help with quarantining the sick.

Lastly, the pandemic has affected the daily business of how the CAF operates in Canada. The need to work from home applied to almost 85 per cent of the CAF, similar to what the Defence Team and the rest of the government experienced (MacDonald and Vance 2020, 3). Most training efforts, exercises, and the like were cancelled, altered, or postponed at the outset of the pandemic. Search and rescue missions had a longer window to act in the spring before resuming normal alert levels in late June. Additionally, recruitment was put on hold.

Contagion within the CAF has been relatively limited. Since the CAF has roughly 100,000 members (including reservists), contagion within the

force was less than 1 per cent—and therefore less than the rate among the broader Canadian public. As some troops deployed into what was the pandemic equivalent of harm’s way—LTCFs—the relatively low contagion rate can be considered a successful adaptation to the pandemic. By scaling back meetings, exercises, and training, and through the application of COVID-19 protocols (masks, social distancing), the CAF has mostly mitigated the direct impact of the pandemic. Harder to measure will be the impact on service families during school closures and the inaccessibility of the usual forms of assistance (family, base communities), especially for those with kin deployed abroad. It is also difficult to ascertain how the pandemic and the CAF’s adaptation has affected readiness and effectiveness. Could the CAF fight as well in January 2021 as it could in January 2020? The level of activity abroad suggests that the CAF is still capable of carrying on with its international operations, as we show below. While readiness is hard to measure even in the best of times, the lack of personnel renewal and a reduced training tempo are likely to have lasting effects.

Before moving on to the CAF’s expeditionary efforts, it is worth considering the politics of the home game. The provinces got more and less than they wanted from the aid they received from the CAF. Quebec and Ontario were embarrassed by the CAF’s reports of neglect and abuse in their long-term care facilities. On the other hand, not only did the CAF fill vital positions in the LTCFs, but they almost certainly saved the provinces money. While the CAF can ask for cost recovery—getting reimbursed for the expenses of giving aid to the provinces—this rarely happens because of the optics of such a request (Leuprecht and Kasurak 2020). As Minister of National Defence Harjit Sajjan said before the pandemic, “I also want to emphasize that the CAF will not be doing any cost recovery and we have not done so for any disasters” (Global News 2019). Unsurprisingly, like in past CAF emergency efforts, the provinces wanted the CAF to stay longer. Ontario and Quebec were saving money by having federally paid troops in the LTCFs rather than provincially paid nursing staff. This tension arises frequently when the CAF assists civil authorities. However, in this case, the key difference is that most CAF assistance to the civil power missions do not reveal quite so dramatically the extent of provincial shortcomings. This one did in a very public way and at a time when the pandemic response was monopolizing headlines. The conflicting imperatives—bad

publicity, saved money—means that there may not be clear lessons to be learned by provincial leaders about whether to ask the CAF for help in the future. Politicians who are more concerned with budget challenges will likely be quicker to ask for CAF help. However, those politicians who are either more concerned about bad news stories or are more politically vulnerable may find the COVID-19 experience to be a warning against involving the CAF in their province's affairs. As the CAF was again sending troops into pandemic hot zones during the first few months of 2021, the lesson may be that desperation crowds out other concerns.

## Capacity-Building On Ice

For the CAF's operations abroad, the impact of the pandemic has varied. Maritime and air operations adjusted to the pandemic mostly with modest alterations. On the other hand, land operations were often curtailed abroad because of their large capacity-building component—training other countries' troops—which represented a higher risk of COVID-19 transmission when compared to other mission tasks.

### *Operations at Sea, Limited at Shore*

Canadian maritime operations are the less obvious case of relatively successful COVID-19 operations: there were no major COVID-19-related crises despite ships being perfect breeding grounds for the disease. Cruise ships were not the only vessels to make the news, as the spread of COVID-19 disabled the *USS Theodore Roosevelt*, one of the most powerful warships in the world.<sup>9</sup> The crew's experience shook the US Navy, ultimately leading to the firing not just of the ship's captain but also of the Secretary of the Navy (Vanden Brook 2020). The pandemic reveals that naval vessels present both safety and risk. Alone at sea, a ship is essentially a bubble that can socially distance for months on end. However, any port visit risks exposing not just a few sailors but ultimately the entire crew. As a result, while Canadian naval or joint exercises continued, albeit at a reduced pace, the port visits that usually go along with such missions did not. Indeed, crews could no longer go ashore wherever they docked and were required to stay near their ships. Visitors to these docked ships were restricted and screened.<sup>10</sup>

In 2020, the CAF continued to participate in most multilateral maritime exercises as these could proceed with minimal interaction with the crews of other vessels. Operation CARIBBE, in which Canada assists US-led counter-narcotics operations in the Caribbean and eastern Pacific, ended early as the ports in the Caribbean closed in the first months of the pandemic, making it hard to sustain logistics. Also, Canada's partners cancelled some of the exercises, such as the US-led TRADEWINDS. Two Canadian ships—*HMCS Winnipeg* and *HMCS Regina*—also participated in a slimmed-down RIMPAC 2020 (the largest multilateral maritime exercise, taking place annually in the Pacific), as the shore-based component was cancelled. *HMCS Winnipeg*'s tour continued afterwards, with the ship participating in Operation NEON, which seeks to deter and detect North Korean sanction-busting. Operation REASSURANCE, aimed at building confidence in NATO defence commitments in eastern Europe and making more credible deterrent posture towards Russia, has sea, air, and land components, with the deployment of ships continuing to the Baltic Sea. *HMCS Halifax* began its six-month deployment in January 2021 as part of this operation, and it is the flagship of Standing NATO Maritime Group 1, the NATO fleet in the Baltic.

### *Less Friction Above*

Compared to the army and navy, the air force was the least exposed to the risks of COVID-19, with the fewest operations or capacity-building efforts abroad. The most notable mission is the Air Task Force in Romania, part of Operation REASSURANCE. Lasting from September to December 2020, the deployment of six CF-18s and a support team, a total contingent of 135 personnel, made almost no news. The mission's primary aim was to take part in the larger NATO activities intended to deter Russia and reassure NATO allies. Along the way, the pilots helped train the Romanian Air Force and participated in several NATO exercises. Because of a concurrent Russian exercise, KAVKAZ 2020, the Canadian contingent was busier than usual, with more Russian planes approaching allied airspace requiring interceptions by Canadian CF-18s (Thatcher 2020). However, the planes and pilots could not participate in as many events, such as air shows and exercises in the region, that would have required their support team to move beyond the base in Romania. Keeping the support staff in

Romania was a COVID-19 mitigation measure, which ultimately limited the RCAF's presence in eastern Europe. To prevent the contingent from contracting COVID-19, they were not allowed to go outside the base unless necessary for operations and only with permission. Interactions with non-Canadians at the Romanian air base were also restricted.<sup>11</sup>

The CAF also had a series of air missions in Africa in support of various peacekeeping efforts. In the summer of 2020, Operation FREQUENCY supported France by helping to transport materiel to the Sahel region via an RCAF CC-177. Operation PRESENCE was scheduled to provide tactical airlift out of Uganda but was delayed as that country required isolation for foreign aircrews.

Just as ships at sea from different countries could operate without their personnel ever meeting, so did these air missions proceed with minimal contact with personnel from other countries. The planes do not involve mixed aircrews, unlike NATO airborne warning and control aircraft. Additionally, most of the interactions would be either on the tarmac of air bases or in large buildings—where planes are maintained—so that the risks of infection are much lower. All of this makes it easier to mitigate risk and continue with training and operations. The concern then shifts to what happens when personnel are off-duty. Since these missions involve short rotations, it was less difficult to create policies that kept Canadian aviators and support crews on base at all times. However, had these been much longer missions, it would have been more challenging to keep everyone restricted to base.

### *A Grounded Army*

In a pandemic, the land forces face entirely different challenges from those operating in the air or at sea. Many of the CAF's overseas operations are "capacity-building" efforts, which involve training other countries' troops. These missions require sustained interactions with individuals from other states, with disruptive personnel rotations on the trainer side and turnover on the trainee side, as trained units roll out and new units roll in. As a result, the CAF placed most of these missions on operational pause during the first stages of the pandemic; some have not been resumed. The one exception is Canada's role as a Framework Nation in the Enhanced

Forward Presence in Latvia, which is not a capacity-building mission *per se* but involves a lot of multinational training and exercises.

For Operation UNIFIER, the training mission in Ukraine, Canada opted to hedge its bets by not replacing all two hundred soldiers training the Ukrainian armed forces in March 2020 as part of the regular rotation, deploying only sixty troops instead as placeholders. The training itself stopped as neither side wanted to expose their forces to the virus. In June, ninety soldiers went to Ukraine to start again in July, and this training, with COVID-19 mitigation protocols, has continued since (DND 2021a).

The CAF had already altered its primary capacity-building mission, Operation IMPACT, before the pandemic due to the American assassination of Iranian Major-General Qassem Soleimani. Operation IMPACT involves different Canadian missions in the Middle East and Canada's contribution to the NATO mission in Iraq. On 3 January 2020, a drone strike targeted Soleimani while he was visiting Iraq. His death led to Iranian retaliatory strikes and fears of additional attacks on foreign troops in Iraq. Consequently, most Canadian troops were repositioned outside Iraq before the pandemic struck. They were in the process of returning to Iraq when the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a global pandemic, which caused changes to the operation once again. Major-General Jennie Carignan, the commander of the NATO mission at the time, reported that "We basically had to collapse our train-the-trainers activities in our satellite sites outside of Baghdad starting on 11 March. . . . We had to take specific actions and adapt to the pandemic context. So, they had to cease training for a while to protect the force. They had to operate differently" (Brewster 2020). Ultimately, the CAF trainers returned home. The CAF also paused Operation IMPACT's smaller and less visible training missions in Lebanon and Jordan.<sup>12</sup>

Some of the smaller missions supporting peacekeeping operations were also affected by COVID-19. Operation KOBOLD in Kosovo had a four-week delay as rotations were interrupted, but then the mission continued. This effort involves 5 CAF members in the headquarters of the NATO mission in Kosovo. Operation CALUMET, involving about 55 CAF members participating in the Multinational Force and Observers in the Sinai, had its rotations interrupted, but now the mission continues. Operation CROCODILE, with 9 CAF members supporting the United

Nations in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, was largely unaffected. For Operation SOPRANO, on the other hand, the 10 CAF members in South Sudan supporting the UN mission were relocated. Rotations were later suspended (DND 2021a).

With 540 soldiers in Latvia, the biggest Canadian land operation has been more like the naval and air operations than the other army missions.<sup>13</sup> That is, since the focus is less on training a series of different units and more on operating as a single unit, there are fewer interactions with foreign troops. Even though units from nine countries populate the base in Latvia, all countries treated the base like a bubble, not unlike the National Basketball Association's 2020 summer season. Canadian troops quarantined both before and after the deployment into the bubble (more on that below).

According to Colonel Eric Laforest, commander of Task Force Latvia, "training keeps on going, as you would suspect, with the full battle group of nine nations" (Berthiaume 2020a). The units cancelled various events where they would have interacted with the Latvian public and cut off recreational opportunities such as visits to bars, restaurants, and other outings. Most interestingly, because the CAF leads a force that includes soldiers from Italy and Spain, two countries that got hit very hard early in the crisis, Canadian officers learned quickly and adopted the rules that Spanish and Italian troops used to minimize the risks of infection. These measures allow the NATO forces in Latvia, led by the Canadians, to continue their efforts to train themselves and work together to reassure the population in the Baltics and Poland and deter Russian forces.

Before arriving, all troops quarantined before they entered the NATO base bubble in Latvia. In the summer rotation, some Canadian troops violated these procedures, leading to exposure and their return to Canada mid-flight (Berthiaume 2021). Toward the end of 2020, there was also an outbreak, including among the CAF contingent, producing some controversy as the Spanish were displeased with the quarantine arrangements for those who were exposed or infected. The union representing Spanish soldiers issued a letter denouncing the COVID-19 containment policies as insufficient (ATME 2021). While the Spanish media picked up this story (20 minutos 2021), the Canadian media did not report the complaints. The scope of the outbreak and its impact on operations has not been publicly

addressed and remains unclear. Thus, while the Canadian military tends to present the Latvian mission and its leadership as a success even amid the pandemic, the mission was not immune from the pandemic nor alliance displeasure.

## Conclusion

COVID-19 tends to reveal pre-existing conditions, not just in people but in governments and societies as well. The reverse is also true—that strengths become more obvious amid adversity. The CAF has managed to play an important role at home while projecting force and continuing many, but not all, of its operations abroad. In times of national emergency, the CAF is not just the force of last resort but often the country's early responder. When the provinces could not act, the CAF sent in their people at the provinces' request. With the large but temporary needs tied to the planning and distribution of the vaccine, the CAF was the obvious solution. Less obvious at the time of writing are the costs to the CAF and Canada regarding additional expenses, mental health challenges, and readiness.

The pandemic created more stress for everyone, but it has also altered how people deal with adversity. This affects military personnel in unique ways. Sports, visits to bars, and other social activities are reduced or eliminated, removing ways to blow off steam. Military personnel and their families usually rely heavily on their base communities to deal with the stress of military life. However, in this pandemic, these safety nets are largely missing. Moving forward, then, managing the aftermath of the pandemic will be a concern for the CAF. Some personnel need to recover from the physical effects of the disease, while some of the veterans of the deployments to LTCFs may suffer from post-traumatic stress (Thompson 2020). At the same time, the CAF response during the pandemic has increased its visibility among the general population. This profile might inspire Canadians to consider joining the CAF or improve overall support for the military.

Conversely, decisions regarding expeditionary operations are unlikely to have long-lasting impacts. Resuming training cycles after responsible pauses should not be problematic, with some adjustments. Indeed, the trainers and the trainees in various capacity-building exercises have more in common now as survivors of the COVID-19 pandemic. The navy

and air force can resume port calls and air shows without much difficulty, and the Latvian mission can increase outreach within the region once it is safe to do so. By mostly carrying on, the CAF has shown itself to be resilient not just at home but abroad as well. While there have been cases of COVID-19, no mission received anything like the bad public relations hit that the US Navy suffered due to the *USS Theodore Roosevelt* outbreak.

There will undoubtedly be lessons-learned exercises. The obvious lesson is that capacity-building is different and more fragile than presence operations and efforts where the CAF trains itself. The CAF should study the impact of disruptions on training. At home, the politics of providing assistance to civil authorities will make it harder to adopt lessons learned. For instance, academics may think it would be better if the CAF advertised more clearly to the public what it can and cannot do when it is aiding municipal and provincial governments (Canadian Defence and Security Network 2020). However, a moral hazard presents itself: being more explicit about what the CAF can do might result in the Forces being asked to do more (Leuprecht and Karusak 2020). That said, DND/CAF leadership has routinely communicated with the Forces and the public about their domestic operations during the pandemic, notably via weekly messages by the Chief of the Defence Staff and weekly Twitter threads by the Deputy Minister.<sup>14</sup>

Nevertheless, before the crisis, CAF leadership lamented the increased pace of domestic operations. One lesson from this emergency is that requests for CAF assistance to civil authorities might increase in the future. The CAF should examine its training cycles and the resources it expends to re-calibrate in the face of this increased tempo of operations at home. It is time to reset priorities amid changing realities. While the Strong, Secure, and Engaged policy includes responding to domestic emergencies as a core mission, the media, politicians, and the Forces themselves see these missions as less of a priority than overseas deployments.<sup>15</sup> If the CAF and DND do not want to invest more time and resources in domestic operations, an alternative is to develop the equivalent of the American Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) with a robust reserve capacity. While other government agencies have some capacity, Canada has nothing like FEMA. Unless and until this happens, the CAF will remain an early responder to major domestic crises.

## NOTES

- 1 The authors are most thankful for the assistance we received from Cornel Turdeanu of the Department of National Defence's Public Affairs group. We are also grateful to Carleton University for its COVID Response Research Assistance funds and for its Paterson Chair funds.
- 2 The Department of National Defence used to post the biographies of all officers at the rank of colonel/captain (N) and above on an easily accessible webpage. That, alas, is no longer the case.
- 3 For more see chapter 9.
- 4 Phase 1 is the normal state of preparedness for a pandemic.
- 5 To read the report, see Headquarters 4th Canadian Division Joint Task Force (Central), "3350-Op LASER 20-01 (COS)," Government of Canada, 26 April 2020, <https://www.macleans.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/JTFC-Observations-in-LTCF-in-ON.pdf>.
- 6 Fortin was subsequently removed due to an investigation into accusations of past sexual misconduct.
- 7 For more, see chapter 3.
- 8 For a good discussion of who the Rangers are and what they have done during the pandemic, see Moon (2021).
- 9 For an assessment of the pandemic's impact on the ship's crew, see Malone (2020).
- 10 Email with staff of the Department of National Defence's Public Affairs group, 30 December 2020.
- 11 Email correspondence with staff of the Department of National Defence's Public Affairs group, 26 January 2021.
- 12 There are discussions with the two countries on how to restart those training efforts, but as far as we can tell, training remained on hold at the time of writing.
- 13 This paragraph is based on comments made by a senior CAF officer at an event held under the Chatham House Rule in December 2020.
- 14 For instance, see the Chief of the Defence Staff's letters of 27 March (DND 2020a) and 15 May 15 2020 (DND 2020b) announcing the resumption of some of the CAF's ordinary business.
- 15 Anonymous junior officers have told us that domestic deployments are not as valued as foreign ones, and the benefits are much less.

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