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The Somalia Affair

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In late 1992, the Mulroney government dispatched the Canadian Airborne Regiment (CAR) and, a few months later, a reconnaissance squadron from the Royal Canadian Dragoons, to Somalia to serve in a United States-run humanitarian peace enforcement mission. The east African nation was a failed state, with warlords fighting and people starving, and a previous United Nations (UN) operation had failed to establish control of the situation. The new Unified Task Force was authorized by the United Nations as a Chapter VII intervention under the UN Charter that could use force to restore peace.

In the early 1990s, the Canadian Forces (CF) had been stretched to the

breaking point by budget cuts and force reductions and a continuing string of high-profile and dangerous international security deployments. In 1992, the CAR, the Canadian Forces' quick reaction force, was the only suitable combat unit not already deployed, recovering from a deployment, or preparing for one. The regiment consisted of three commandos (equivalent in size and capability to infantry companies), one each from the three regular force infantry regiments.

Stationed in the desert at a dot on the map called Belet Huen, the CAR lived in tents in the heat and dust, ate packaged rations, and tried to restore order in the midst of chaos. Locals tried to steal what they could from the soldiers, and camp security had to be progressively tightened. There were many incidents, some shooting, and several deaths of Somalis until, on 16 March 1993, 2 Commando caught a Somali teenager red-handed and took him captive. Two soldiers then tortured and killed the boy, Shidane Arone, taking trophy photographs of the grisly beating. No one intervened, despite Arone's repeated screams and pleas for help and the proximity of his torture site to surrounding tents and other positions. Ottawa learned of the death shortly afterwards, and there were some punishments handed out by a CF board of inquiry.

Little further happened until, in 1994 and 1995, videos made by CAR soldiers showed racist attitudes and vile acts during hazing rituals at Canadian Forces Base Petawawa, the CAR's base. The resulting firestorm of public criticism all but forced the minister of national defence in the Chrétien government, David Collenette, to order the disbandment of the Canadian Airborne Regiment on 5 March 1995.

It was only the beginning. On 20 March, the government appointed a Commission of Inquiry into the Deployment of Canadian Forces to Somalia under Judge

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Résumé : L'affaire somalienne a été l'événement militaire de la décennie. Horreur, mystère, drame, scandale; les médias en firent des gros titres. Le caractère totalement vindicatif des critiques côtoie toujours les plates excuses des autorités dans tous les écrits de l'époque. Nous avons écrit cette entrée en pensant à ces deux éléments, notre réflexion fermement ancrée tant sur la tragédie humaine et que sur le triomphe de l'être humain, ainsi que sur le fait que, même en expurgeant l'un, les Canadiens ont malheureusement réussi à diminuer les deux. Les historiens devront se débattre pour retirer l'affaire somalienne des mains des polémistes, pour tempérer les feux d'artifice et la sagesse populaire par l'analyse, du recul ou des connaissances. Nous avons succombé ici à nos propres déceptions, et la rhétorique s'infiltré (et semble même nécessaire).
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Abstract: The Somalia Affair was the military event of the decade. Horror, mystery, drama, scandal: it was the perfect headline. The shrill vindictiveness of critics still fences with the dull apologies of the establishment in any reading of the period. We wrote this entry with both irritants in mind, our thoughts fixed firmly on human tragedy and human triumph and how, in bowdlerizing one, Canadians had somehow diminished both. Historians will struggle to wrest Somalia from the polemicists' grasp, to temper pyrotechnics and folk wisdom with analysis, perspective, or knowledge. We succumbed here to our own disappointments, so rhetoric intrudes - and seems warranted, just the same.
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A Canadian soldier stands watch in rear hatch of a Grizzly armoured personnel carrier as it patrols through a battle-damaged Somali town.

Gilles Letourneau, Judge Robert Rutherford, and journalist/academic Peter Desbarats. The commission was to examine why the CAR was chosen for the mission, the events in Somalia, and the post-deployment phase that involved an alleged cover-up at National Defence Headquarters after the torture and murder of Arone had become known. The chair, Letourneau, was splenetic, aggressive, and openly dismissive of many of those called to present evidence, regularly badgering witnesses. This made sufficiently good television fodder that the commission's hearings became a public trial of the Canadian Forces itself, even though much of the coverage was devoted to the almost immaterial alteration of press releases at National Defence Headquarters. There was little public doubt that the

Access to Information Act had been violated as senior officers apparently tried to protect their reputations and those of their minister. Did this represent evidence of systemic failure of command? One chief of the defence staff, General Jean Boyle, was forced to resign as a result of his disastrous testimony; other senior officers were tainted. The commission rolled along, demanding more money, an expanded mandate, and additional time.

The government had had enough. After two years, a tough and capable Liberal defence minister, Doug Young, ordered the slow-moving commission to produce its report promptly and closed it down in early 1997. The commissioners, the government's political opponents, and some members of the media cried censorship and

cover-up. Most sensible observers recognized an inquiry that had become a headline-hunting fiasco, its yelps of mistreatment cloaking the steadily diminishing returns of an ever-growing mandate. The resulting five-volume report was unfortunately, if revealingly, titled *Dishonoured Legacy: The Lessons of the Somalia Affair*. It offered generally sensible recommendations on leadership, accountability, discipline, personnel selection, training, and rules of engagement. In effect, the commissioners declared that no future force should deploy without proper equipment, training, a clear chain of command, and a full understanding of its role. Had any Canadian expeditionary force ever marched or sailed with such clarity of purpose? Complex events and uncertain outcomes rarely permitted

such assurances. It was not the report's only broad-brush assertion. The commission also offered critical comments on the Somalia mission, on the cover-up of the torture and murder and other incidents, and it focused on 12 officers, including seven generals, pronouncing them "failures." It made 160 recommendations in all, of which the government eventually accepted 132. It was a reasonable response to a long and gruelling investigation and painful public flogging, rendered quickly and with government thanks to still-grumbling ex-commissioners and a suspicious Canadian public.

Subsidiary research or investigative reports produced at the commission's behest, ranging from a sociological review of military "tribes" to an assessment of the mission's international security lessons, ran the gamut from forgettable navel-

gazing to indispensable analysis. Every expert, it seemed, understood implicitly the deeper causes of the Somalia imbroglio, though none – for reasons that remained nameless – had proffered wisdom before or during the ill-fated mission. Pompous reports on "lessons learned" were more often than not lists of authors' favourites, uncompromised by perspective; helpful "recommendations" flowed, unbothered by hypocrisy, from the military's fiercest critics. Everyone purported to have the answer, and most overlooked the obvious, Arone's murder and the Airborne's disciplinary misdeeds notwithstanding: in truth, the Canadian Forces had performed superbly. On a difficult mission marred by international apathy and local chaos, they had disarmed the violent, fed the hungry, provided

water to ease thirst, and generated security to assist daily living in areas under Canadian military control. Several individuals were decorated for acts of uncommon bravery, while the force as a whole – the airborne, mechanized units, engineers, doctors, and helicopter pilots – was lauded by the campaign's American commander (and many Somalis) as one of outstanding professionalism and competence, perhaps the best in the entire international command.

In the short term, such kudos mattered little. The Somalia mission became synonymous in public parlance with the Somalia inquiry that meant, of course, the Somalia scandal or, less judgmentally, the Somalia affair (the title used here). Its result, aside from the eventual disbandment of the Canadian Airborne Regiment, was much greater caution and

Master Corporal Patrick Couture, a member of the Canadian Airborne Regiment, inventories confiscated weapons.



Photo by Jeff Speed, Canadian War Museum 19940035-017

Photo by Jeff Speed, Canadian War Museum 19940035-013



Photo by Jeff Speed, Canadian War Museum 19940035-015



Top: Two Somali boys photographed through the razor wire which surrounds the Canadian camp at Belet Huen.

Bottom: A crewman of Grizzly armoured personnel carrier observes a Somali encampment by the road. Three Somali children wave in the middle of the photo.

much greater risk aversion among Canadian Forces personnel and a fear that Ottawa might not support independent initiatives on future missions. The military soon seemed to believe that advice from the judge advocate general was a precondition for any action. There were rules and regulations for everything, thick studies to bury all operational likelihoods in layers of bureaucratic twaddle, special training on ethics, accountability, racism, gender discrimination, and, more helpfully for impending deployments overseas, greater attention to local customs, languages, social attitudes, and living conditions. Attempts to regulate all conduct in the field bred hesitancy and mistrust, failings that showed in deployments in former Yugoslavia and elsewhere. Somalia generated disgust aplenty at the behaviour of some soldiers and their commanders, but surprising sophistication in public attitudes toward the long-suffering military. Opinion surveys found astonishing support for the men and women in uniform, and understandable distaste at how the Airborne's now well-publicized antics before and after the mission could have been permitted to flourish and to undermine proud traditions. Had emphasis on a supposedly American-style warrior ethic hijacked sound doctrine and effective discipline? Had an accumulation of defence cuts and a careerist high command ignored basic principles of management, leadership, and esprit de corps?

There was more truth in bold charges than media-shy military chiefs cared to admit. The Somalia episode over much of a decade consumed careers, directorates, forests of paper, and eons of media time. Parliamentary inquiries into the state of the military, and charismatic leadership of the kind provided by defence minister Doug Young and General Rick Hillier (chief of the defence staff from 2005) gradually

Photo by Jeff Speed, Canadian War Museum 19940035-020

restored public confidence, military prospects, and operational efficiency. The CF culture, unhealthy subsumed in management, public affairs, defensiveness, and accountancy, morphed back toward its warrior roots, operational competence, and national service. Its connections to Canadian values had been far less generically threatened than the sordid actions of the few in Somalia had appeared to indicate, but they had nevertheless been threatened. The turn of the century found such essential bonds emotionally reinforced and broadly respected. At the same time, studies of the Canadian Forces produced for defence minister Young in 1997 had focused sharply on the ill education of CF officers, half of whom (47 percent) had no university degree and almost none

of whom (only 6.8 percent) had graduate degrees. This too soon began to be remedied, with better education and leadership, public and political support, and the evident competence of Canadian units in the field, at home, and abroad.

The Somalia affair led to increased scrutiny of the Canadian Forces. Muckraking books and articles, denounced regularly by senior officials, revealed fiddled expense accounts, the evasion of responsibility, the cover-up of misdeeds, and, at times, a moral climate unsuitable for the CF (or any public organization) and unworthy of the country it served. The Arone murder and the inquiry-affair that followed represented, in many ways, the nadir of Canada's modern military. Recovery, born

of media scrutiny, public interest, and political attention, was slow in coming but gradually decisive. Enlightened leadership and the overall quality of the rank and file were instrumental in seeing the Canadian Forces through and beyond the pyrotechnics of scandal to the force that would perform with near-unflinching competence on missions from Kosovo to Afghanistan.

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The crew of a Canadian Grizzly photographed while on patrol in the Somalian desert near Belet Huen.

