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The 1999 Vimy Award

Acceptance address by
Lieutenant-General (Retired) Charles Belzile, CMM, CD, DMSc.,
27 November 1999

Mr. Minister, General Baril, Ladies and Gentlemen:

Thank you very much Mr. Minister for your kind words of introduction.

My thanks also go to the Conference of Defence Associations and its Institute represented here by General Silva and Colonel Blakeley and to all of you for being present tonight. I am very touched at receiving this prestigious award. As I look around this room and see so many friends I am also very grateful that you would come in such numbers.

Nous sommes encore au mois de novembre, le mois qui représente la fin de la première

Grande Guerre et le mois où traditionnellement nous, citoyens canadiens, regardons en arrière et nous souvenons de ceux et celles qui nous ont précédés au service de la nation et commémorons leur sacrifice tant à la guerre que durant les opérations de maintien de la paix d'aujourd'hui. En même temps, nous nous préparons tous à cette grande période de réjouissances qu'est Noël et le Nouvel An, période qui, en particulier cette année représente la fin d'un siècle et celle d'un millénaire. Coïncidence ou non, cette période de l'année se prête à la méditation sur ce qui était, ce qui est maintenant et sur ce qui nous attend dans le futur.

That we need to remember the past has been well explained, not only by historians, but also

by all of us who are trying to ensure by work, deed or talk, that Canada's citizens do not forget what their armed forces have stood for and have done in the past and what they continue to do today in so many difficult commitments. Together we face the prospect of a future even more problematic, as we watch our military resources being constantly reduced. Only this morning, a short article in the National Post indicated the likelihood of the Navy having to tie up some ships in order to assist in the procurement of needed equipment.

As one who has tried and managed to stay somewhat connected, I have as most people here have, witnessed the great changes faced by our Armed Forces, some of which have been developing for a long time. I have also witnessed the gaps or misunderstandings, which seem to exist between people in uniform and those out of it. I have also, and with sadness, observed the rift which seems again to be widening between the regular forces and our Reserves, this at a time where the TOTAL FORCE envisioned in the 1994 White Paper, is more and more needed. Each of those observations would easily take days to discuss. Such is not my plan tonight and I am sure you will all be grateful for that.

In going back over the years, however, I cannot help but be struck by the fact that some of the problems we hear about today have been with us for a long time. The apparent disconnect between our people in uniform and those responsible for policy was often perceived, even in the height of the Cold War, but the Cold War and the bipolar world of the day softened our differences and made them less obvious. Today we have more troops deployed, away from their families, than at any time since Korea and this without the focus that we enjoyed in the past. Since we repatriated our troops from Europe, we have gone from crisis to crisis without that simple orientation that, although potentially terrible, was at least clear and drove our training, equipping and doctrine. That focus is gone and as we look to the future and try to gaze into our crystal ball with our ever growing dependence on technology, the forces of today have to struggle through a difficult process of re-thinking themselves, re-designing themselves at the same time as they are scattered in all directions from Eastern Europe to Africa to East Timor, a challenge not faced since the Second World War.

In short, they are trying to re-invent themselves while the train is going at full speed.

My purpose in doing such a review, inadequate as it may be, is to try to bring us back to what has led to misunderstandings between our uniformed military and those civilian colleagues with whom they work as well as in their relationship with their government masters.

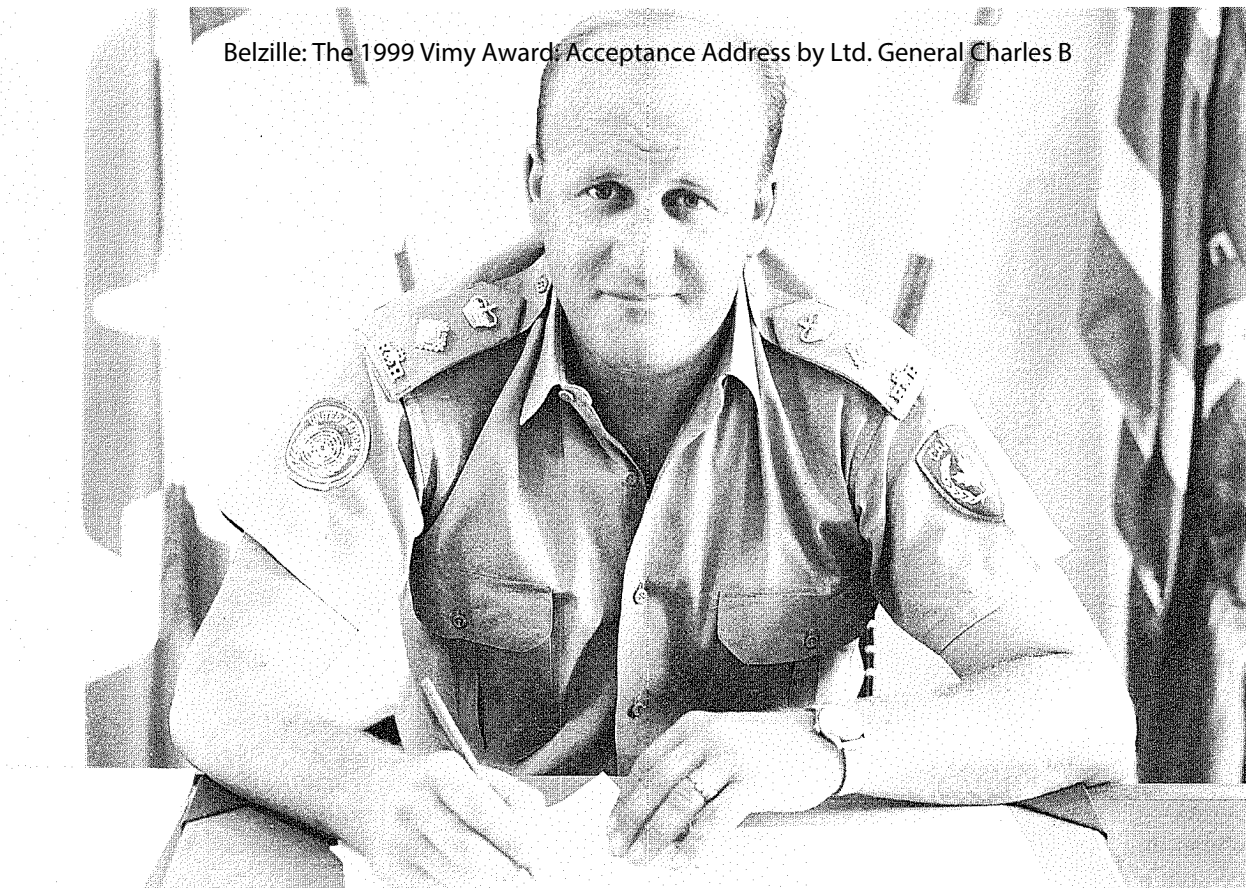
Those debates are not unique to Canada. They take place all over the western world and particularly inside the borders of our traditional allies. Recently in the USA they identified four areas where they feel there are gaps which tend to make understanding and cooperation difficult:

- One is **functional**, in that the military does not do the same thing as everyone else. They are expected to follow orders unto death if need be and to kill if required to do so for the nation.
- This leads to a **legal difference** where some activities may lead to prosecution in one and not the other.
- A third one is a **gap in values** where the military feel that they remain the ultimate guardian of such values.

Finally **experience**, where the military feels misunderstood, precisely because they have not shared the same life circumstances as some of their peers or fellow citizens, and the latter therefore cannot understand.

Whether you all agree with these premises or not you must ask yourselves who in the case of the military carries the brunt of all those difficulties, real or perceived.

It is mostly the lower echelons, the men and women in uniform who make things happen. Often working in the shadows, they are the ones who deserve the accolades but often do not receive them. They deserve recognition and support. They are the ones to whom the concept of an unlimited contract, binding the troops to the nation and the nation to the troops, is a day-to-day reality. The men and women of the military and their families often go unrecognized, yet live with long separations and difficult circumstances. They are the ones constantly between the proverbial rock and a hard place,



Lieutenant-Colonel Charles Belzille, Commander, 2nd Battalion, Royal 22eme Régiment, Cyprus, 1969.

who live with the knowledge that they must demonstrate loyalty upwards but at the same time expect to see it flow downwards and are rightfully disappointed if it does not.

Those men and women have changed over the years and continue to do so. They are more educated, more demanding and have many more technical skills. They also come from an age where individual rights often take precedence over the collective rights of society or their group, a situation which, if not fine tuned, may well be destructive to the cohesion essential to military operations.

Yet many things have not changed – They still react to the leadership applied by a Military Chain of Command, their success and their morale measurable by how that Chain of Command looks after them. They will naturally look to their Chain of Command for assistance, if need be, in such things as pensions even if technically it is the responsibility of another department. They expect that Chain of Command to earn their respect by ensuring that they are properly trained and equipped. They will respond to a fair system of rewards and punishment. They need physical, emotional and spiritual support. They need to know their family is OK and will be looked after,

even and particularly if, they should become incapable of providing for them, through injury, illness or death. This important relationship between the soldier and the Chain of Command can perhaps be best illustrated by a quote from a letter received by a family from a troop officer in the Royal Canadian Engineers in World War Two.

Dear Mr. X,

You will have received notification of your son's death before this arrives.

I am the officer of 2 Troop 10 Fd Sqn in which your son has been an old-timer, very highly respected and liked by all. The whole troop was very upset at losing him and we want to send you our heartfelt sympathies. He was a highly valued member of the troop and squadron. Everybody from the OC down to the greenest sapper knew his abilities and he was called on to do lots of important jobs. He was a great jack of all trades. At the time he was wounded, the whole troop was working on a very important Bailey bridge under shell fire and suffered other casualties as well. He was removed to medical attention right away so did not suffer...

I hope the bit of information in this letter will help you some.

This was written on a blue Armed Forces air letter in the hand of the troop commander as

many similar letters would have been. I am sure you will agree that no formal letter from the Department of National Defence would have brought the same closure to this family.

The Chain of Command needs reinforcing not weakening. The men and women of the Forces, particularly the junior ranks, who make it happen when it comes to operations, need to be able to get the answers from their own leaders and only **THEY** will do, not the amorphous mass of mixed military and bureaucrats which they perceive as senior headquarters. It would be a difficult exercise to try to separate the Headquarters in two, as advocated by many, although there is no guarantee that things would be made easier. At the very least efforts must be made to streamline the military component so the junior ranks recognize clearly to whom they must respond.

As proud as I am to receive this award, I would like to dedicate it to the ordinary soldiers and their Navy and Air Force colleagues, those truly responsible for the fact that, despite difficulties, our Armed Forces somehow manage to make it work. I can only hope that we, the

Canadian citizens, will ensure they get the wherewithal required to do their job properly.

Au tout début, je mentionnais le besoin de se souvenir. Il est naturel à ce temps-ci de l'année que nous pensions à la première et la deuxième guerre ainsi que celle de la Corée. Il nous faut aussi se souvenir des guerres plus récentes telles que la guerre du Golfe et le Kosovo. Nous devons aussi nous souvenir des 100(+) soldats tués durant toutes nos opérations dites de paix. Peut-être aussi devrions nous penser aux pertes inévitables que nous subirons dans le futur. Avec la venue prochaine de la saison des Fêtes, j'aimerais conclure avec mes meilleurs vœux à tous les militaires canadiens en service à l'étranger.

Even without the white hair and beard and even with the colour of my uniform it would take a lot of imagination to make me look like Santa. If I were Santa, I would personally provide our troops with all that they need. Unfortunately, I'm not Santa. Many of you in this room can help to ensure those needs are met. In the meanwhile, we think about the troops and wish them the best.

General Belzile was born in Trois-Pistoles, Québec, in 1933. He followed an illustrious career in the Canadian Army and the Canadian Forces from 1951 to 1986, during which time he held command of the 2nd Battalion, Royal 22nd Regiment, the Combat Arms School in Gagetown, the 4th Canadian Mechanized Brigade Group in Germany, Canadian Forces Europe and Mobile Command, and served with both the United Nations and NATO. In 1986, France appointed him Commander of the Legion d'Honneur for enhancing military cooperation between France and Canada. In 1996, he was appointed Honorary Colonel of the Royal 22nd Regiment.

Since retiring from the Canadian Forces, General Belzile has continued his pace of activity. From 1987 to 1992, he was Vice-President, Business Development, for SNC Industrial Technologies, and since 1992 has been President of CH Belzile Consultants. He has carried on his service to Canada through his voluntary activities, which include serving as Member of the Board of Directors of the Canadian Institute of Strategic Studies, as Member of the Board of Governors of the Canadian Corps of Commissionaires and as President of the Canadian Battle of Normandy Foundation.

The Vimy Award is presented annually by the Conference of Defence Associations to a Canadian who has made a significant and outstanding contribution to the security of Canada and to the preservation of our democratic values. Previous winners include the Right Honourable Joe Clark, General John de Chastelain, Major-Generals Lewis Mackenzie, William Howard and Romeo Dallaire, Dr. Jack Granatstein, the Right Honourable Brian Dickson and Vice-Admiral Larry Murray.

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