From Mother Country to Far Away Relative: The Canadian-British Military Relationship from 1945

J.L. Granatstein
York University
From Mother Country to Far Away Relative
The Canadian-British Military Relationship from 1945

J.L. Granatstein

Lieutenant-Colonel Ian Hope of the Princess Patricia’s Canadian Light Infantry commanded Task Force Orion, the first Canadian battlegroup to operate from Kandahar, for the first seven months of 2006 in Afghanistan. Colonel Hope, who spent time in the British Army, is writing a book on his experiences, and he has published at least one article in which he offers some interesting judgments. I take this one, as he writes about the American soldiers of Devil Company of the 2nd Battalion, Fourth Infantry Regiment, who were under his command: “I was proud of these Devil soldiers. Later, as I reflected upon this, I realized that, at some point in the past decade, we have had a fundamental shift in the culture of the Canadian infantry, making us identify most readily with the American, and not British, soldiers.” D Company, he says, was “easy to work with, reliable, and very professional. Perhaps the biggest similarity was that they wanted to fight, unlike the soldiers of other countries who remained very risk-averse....”

It is unusual for a Canadian officer to heap public praise on the US Army whose leaders, Hope says, “demonstrated decisiveness and tenacity, and [whose] soldiers performed battle drills quickly and with great effect.” Hope speaks for himself alone, but I believe him to be correct.

Abstract: Historically, Canada has looked to Great Britain for its military culture. During the First and Second World Wars, the Canadian army was virtually interchangeable with the British army. However, the decline of British military power starting in 1940 increasing caused Canada to gravitate towards her neighbour to the south.

I begin with his quote for two reasons. The first is to tell you where the Canadian army – and also the air force and navy – are today in their relationship with the US and UK. The second is to suggest that Colonel Hope is also right when he notes that the army’s very close relationship with the British military had lasted well into the 1990s. The Royal Canadian Air Force had flown south by the mid-1950s and the Royal Canadian Navy had certainly sailed the same way by 1962. Why did the army stay loyal to its traditions for so long? What drove the military relationship apart for the other services?

Canada and Great Britain emerged from World War II as the closest of friends and allies. At least a half-million Canadians served in Britain during the war, and Canadian soldiers, sailors, and airmen fought under overall British command in Northwest Europe, Italy, and Asia. The Canadian government also gave billions of dollars in gifts and Mutual Aid to Britain with the overwhelming support of the Canadian people.

But the war changed everything. Britain’s defeat on the Continent in May and June 1940 forced Canada to turn south for protection, the Permanent Joint Board on Defence (PJBD), created in August 1940, being the first North American defence alliance. It was followed by the Hyde Park Agreement in 1941, in effect the first economic alliance. Prime Minister Winston Churchill scorned what he saw as Canada’s scurrying for cover under the US umbrella, but though he saw the future, he was wrong in 1940. Without the guarantee of homeland security provided by the US alliance, Canada could not have sent the huge forces to Britain that it did between 1940 and 1945. On the other hand, Canada prepared a division for service in the invasion of Japan, one that was to be organized on American lines and equipped with US weapons. Why? As General A.G.L. McNaughton, the Defence Minister in 1945 and always a cautious man in dealing with the Yanks, said, “One of the primary reasons...was to obtain experience with the United States system of Army organization and U.S. equipment in view of the obvious necessity for the future to co-ordinate the defence of North America...” The future was drawing near and it was American.
These strategic military (and economic) changes turned out to be permanent, as Churchill foresaw, just as the commitment to the PJBD was renewed in 1947. The Soviet threat kept Canada and the United States working closely together on continental defence, and the signing of the North Atlantic Treaty in 1949 and the despatch of troops and an air division to Europe in 1951, cemented Canada’s reliance on its neighbour. Yes, the Canadian NATO brigade, just as the Korean brigade, served with British troops, but very significantly, the soldiers in Korea refused to eat British or Australian rations and insisted on American. Brigadier J.M. Rockingham “explained that my cooks had been trained to cook American rations and my soldiers had become used to them and liked them very much.”

The American helmet, by contrast, offered better protection and, because it had a liner that was removable, could even be used for cooking over an open fire in a pinch. No Canadian wept when the UK helmet was scrapped in the late-1950s. Even the American mess tins, eating utensils and cup were better designed than the comparable Canadian equipment issued to soldiers in the field. In advanced weaponry, this American superiority was even more marked and, as the Avro Arrow cancellation in 1959 demonstrated, Canadian industry now was priced out of the market for big ticket items. So too were the British, as the cancellation of the Blue Streak missile in 1960 also showed. Nonetheless, Canada bought British Centurion tanks in the
1950s and used them for more than two decades.

Still there were big differences between the Canadian and US armies. The army commitment to northern Germany under the British Army of the Rhine had been pushed through by the anglophile Chief of the General Staff, Lieutenant-General Guy Simonds, one of the few victories he won over the US-leaning Chairman of the Chiefs of Staff Committee, General Charles Foulkes. Simonds had complained in 1947 that the American “military authorities made plans based entirely on potential enemy capabilities, whereas it was the practice in Canada to take into consideration not only capabilities but probabilities.” Simonds tried to maintain the filial links with the British forces and even created a Regular Force regiment of Canadian Guards when he was Chief of the General Staff. The Anglo-Canadian alliance was implicit and informal; Simonds wanted it to be more, but the fact that the RCAF in NATO served under the US and that the RCN served under SACLANT, run out of Norfolk, Virginia, were in retrospect far more significant.

The next key event, of course, was the Suez Crisis of the autumn of 1956. The Eden government had not taken Canada into its confidence as it planned its strike at President Nasser’s Egypt, and the sense of shock in Canada and in the St. Laurent government was pronounced when British and French aircraft attacked Egypt, followed belatedly by soldiers. Whatever the rights or wrongs of the case, London and Paris’ timing was execrable, the attacks coming in the days just before a US presidential election and during the time when the USSR’s iron heel was being applied to Hungary. Ottawa’s instinctive response was to try to save Britain from its folly, and Lester Pearson tried to turn the Anglo-French invaders into a United Nations peacekeeping force. It took only a few moments for that to be a non-starter, and Pearson then called for the creation of the first large UN force. That idea worked, gave Britain and France a way out of Egypt, and won Pearson a Nobel Peace Prize.

The military significance of Suez for Canada was real. Pearson offered Canadian troops for the UN Emergency Force, a battalion of the Queen’s Own Rifles of Canada. The Egyptians protested – how could their citizens distinguish between the British invaders and the Canadian peacekeepers? The name of the unit reeked of Empire, the uniforms were very similar, and the flag carried by the Canadian soldiers had the Union Jack in the corner. There was much logic in this complaint, and it took a major diplomatic effort to persuade Nasser to let Canadian logistics troops into UNEF.
Pearson learned from this experience. First, the government in which he served lost the 1957 general election to John Diefenbaker who espoused loyalty to the Empire, one sign that much of the Canadian public still looked to London for its lead. Diefenbaker’s loyalism was severely shaken by British efforts to join Europe and to abandon the Commonwealth trade relationship, and by the time he left office, Britain scarcely mattered economically to Canada. Second, and more important militarily, when Pearson came back to power in 1963, this time as Prime Minister, he moved to give Canada its own distinctive flag, and his government pushed through the unification of the Canadian Forces with a distinctive uniform worn by all three services. The lessons of Suez indeed. An unintended effect was that Pearson’s Nobel Prize made the Canadian public believe that peacekeeping was their métier, and over time this attitude let governments cut defence budgets because peacekeepers did not need much beyond blue berets. The attitude also affected the soldiers who came to think that they were not meant to fight.

The air force had already changed imperial masters. The Royal Canadian Air Force and the United States Air Force had developed a close relationship after World War II. The Canadians wanted US fighters, and they secured the F-86 Sabre. They recognized that they had to cooperate with the USAF in defending the continent, and both air forces pushed their governments into the North American Air Defence agreement in 1957-58, a pact that treated air defence as a shared task. Historian Joseph Jockel noted that the “two air forces had every reason to cooperate. They were faced with a common military threat. As airmen, they shared an outlook which created a similar identity and even an emotional bond. They were interested in convincing civilians of the danger to the continent. Both were locked in struggles with their sister services for defence funds. Finally, for the RCAF, the USAF was a source of funding for radar stations and a source of pressure on Ottawa to recognize the importance of air defence.”

And soon the RCAF wanted nuclear weapons to make its air defence task easier and aircraft like the CF-104 Starfighter and the CP-140 Aurora under schemes that often saw parts built in Canada or offsets for Canadian industry included in the deal. American equipment was not always the very best available, but it was invariably close to it. Moreover, in contrast to the increasingly impecunious Canadian and British armed services, the United States military had the goods of modern warfare in lavish profusion, and the officers and men of the Canadian Forces inevitably and understandably wanted their small share of it. In effect, this equipment envy was often a driving force for policy. The RCAF desire for Bomarc surface-to-air missiles
in fact destroyed the Diefenbaker government with just a little push from the Kennedy administration in early 1963.

The navy similarly had turned south. There had been mutinies on RCN ships in early 1949, and one cause was said to be slavish imitation of Royal Navy style. Canadianization was urged on the sailors, but Americanization was to follow. As one commentator noted, “The coming change was first detected in the new terminology”– the British term “asdic” was superseded by the American word “sonar.” The establishment of NATO’s Supreme Allied Command Atlantic (SACLANT), with headquarters at Norfolk, VA, also meant that the RCN now had its place with the USN and not the Royal Navy. The RCN worked itself into being a first-rate anti-submarine fleet, and the ties forged with the United States Navy were strong, so much so that in the fall of 1962 during the Cuban missile crisis, the RCN in Halifax put to sea on its commander’s orders despite the refusal of the Diefenbaker government to order a full-scale alert. Rear-Admiral Kenneth Dyer’s relationship with his US commanders at SACLANT had been formed over the years in countless NATO exercises and was so close and so trusting, his assessment of the Soviet threat so fearful, that he felt obliged to put to sea to assist his ally. “That ‘band of brothers,’ Nelson’s basic way of running things at sea, by mutual understanding and a firm grasp of the basic aim,” Commander Tony German wrote, “was alive and well in North America in 1962. The navy...honoured Canada’s duty to stand by her North American ally.”

Even if the Prime Minister had wished otherwise. The air force did much the same at its air defence bases in Canada, responding to NORAD, not to Ottawa.

Only the army seemed untouched by the southwards attraction. Canadian soldiers tended to sneer at the Americans as too wasteful of lives and equipment, too soft, too American. Brooke Claxton, a Canadian Corps veteran of the Great War and the Minister of National Defence under St. Laurent, visited Korea and returned unimpressed with the American commanders and appalled by the “lying” of staff officers who gave the briefings. He wrote a friend that “American expenditures of lives and ammunition are high according to our standards, higher than our people would be willing to accept.” The British model of mustachioed officers with their swagger sticks was the better one, or so soldiers appeared to think. The regimental names, the links to British units, the royals as colonels-in-chief, even uniforms made by British military tailors (on credit) – all such things kept the ties alive for a long time as the world changed.

Unification in 1968 was a major blow to the traditions and links, dealing a killing blow to the Army’s system of corps and its distinctive and much loved uniforms, buttons, and badges. The dark green uniform that came with unification homogenized the Canadian military and especially weakened the land forces’ psychological defences against Americanization. It was, one officer unhappily said, “an attempt to cleanse the forces of their Britishness,” a trait “contrary to the cause of Canadian unity.” The 1970 stand down of regiments like the Black Watch, the Queen’s Own, and the Guards also sapped army morale – and further diluted Britishness.

But for another three decades the Canadian army still resisted the southward pull. It was still “leftenant” and “kharki”, not “lootenant” and “khaki.” The ties,
like the pronunciation, I think, disappeared under the strain of the 1990s. The Canadian army had been reduced to some 25,000 all ranks by successive cuts, and as the Cold War ended, it was so weak that it could not despatch a fully equipped battalion, let alone a brigade, to participate in the first Gulf War.

Then came Somalia and revelations of torture and murder by members of the Canadian Airborne Regiment and failures in command by senior officers. Simultaneously there was the operation in Former Yugoslavia where at least one unit performed very well in action against Croatian regulars, but others, handicapped by post-Somalia rules of engagement, found themselves referring to the Judge Advocate General’s branch for permission to smoke, let alone fight. The Canadian units were abbreviated as Canbat I and II, for Canadian battlegroups I and II. They were known to British troops in theatre as the “Can’t bats,” and it was largely true.

The dismal 1990s turned the Canadian Forces and especially the army inwards, and it determined that it was ill-educated, ill-prepared, ill-trained and, most obviously, ill-equipped. The events of September 11, 2001 made clear that this was no longer adequate, and the Paul Martin and Stephen Harper governments began re-arming the military. The psychological change had already occurred, and I would suggest that looking south for the model and finding it in the U.S. Army that had regenerated and re-educated itself after the disasters of Vietnam was both appropriate and necessary. The names of Canada’s historic regiments remain, redolent of Empire, but little else of that British past is still there. We are friends and allies forever, but the Canadian military now look fondly to Britain as a relative living far away. Mama, sometimes feared and occasionally admired, is now right next door.

Notes

1. In Kevin Patterson and Jane Warren, eds., Outside the Wire: The War in Afghanistan in the Words of its Participants (Toronto, 2007).
5. Lieutenant-Colonel K.L. Campbell, “Summary of Experiences: Korean Campaign, 25 Mar 53–25 Mar 54.” This document was kindly provided by Prof. David Bercuson.