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Improving the Canadian Armed Forces' Recruitment and Retention of Indigenous People: Best Practices from the New Zealand Defence Force

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Question: How has the Canadian Armed Forces approached the recruitment and retention of Indigenous members? What are best practices used by the New Zealand Defence Force that could be adopted by the Canadian Armed Forces to ensure its practices are rooted in mutual understanding and respect?

Purpose

This brief discusses how the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) has approached recruitment and retention initiatives for Indigenous members, and how these practices can be improved to ensure they are rooted in foundations of mutual respect and understanding. The New Zealand Defence Force (NZDF) has had considerable success in recruiting and retaining Māori members, and in providing them with cultural supports and accommodations. As such, this brief offers recommendations for the CAF based on best practices of the NZDF, using the Canadian Rangers as an existing example within the CAF of where such practices are already reflected.

Context

There are many similarities between the cases of Canada and Aotearoa New Zealand, though, several key differences between them nuance this analysis. Canada and New Zealand share similar histories of colonial relations with Indigenous peoples, though, in the Canadian context Indigenous is an umbrella term that refers to First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples, while in New Zealand the Māori are the sole Indigenous population. Both countries were primarily colonized by the British Empire, possess comparable political cultures and institutions, and still share a common head of state. Indigenous peoples in Canada and New Zealand experienced similar historical and contemporary impacts of

colonialism, including loss of land, culture, language, and identity. Similarly, chronic social challenges such as higher mortality, poorer health, high unemployment, and lower rates of educational attainment still affect Indigenous peoples in both countries. Both countries' militaries also have complex legacies of armed conflict with Indigenous peoples and Indigenous soldiers serving with distinction in conflicts such as the First and Second World Wars.

Moreover, in both Canada and New Zealand Indigenous peoples are among the fastest-growing segments of society and are increasingly urbanized, politically empowered, and culturally assertive.¹ Māori represented 14.9% of New Zealand's population in 2013, and grew to 16.5% in 2018.² In Canada, the Indigenous population grew from 3.8% in 2006 to 4.9% in 2016.³ In both contexts, Indigenous populations are also relatively young compared to the national average, presenting a significant opportunity for defence forces to position themselves as a prime employment opportunity for Indigenous youth.

One significant difference is the size and composition of the Indigenous population within each country. In addition to being a proportionately larger demographic, Māori are more homogenous than Indigenous peoples in Canada; though differences exist among tribes (*iwi*), Māori share a

common language and similar spiritual and cultural practices.⁴ Unlike Canada, New Zealand has also moved forward with the development of "bi-cultural policies" that have set the foundation for much of the government's relationship with Māori people.⁵ Initiatives undertaken by the NZDF to integrate Māori cultural knowledge exist within the larger discourse of maintaining good relations between Māori and Pākehā (a Māori term for New Zealanders of European and immigrant descent). In the Canadian context, First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples have diverse historical experiences and contemporary relationships with the Canadian state. There are over 600 Indigenous communities in Canada, representing more than 50 distinct nations and languages.

As such, discussion of the implementation of cultural policies within the CAF must be nuanced by the fact that Indigenous cultures in Canada are more diverse and numerically larger while forming a smaller proportion of the national population than Māori in New Zealand. Considering their similarities, there are lessons the Canadian Armed Forces can learn from its New Zealand counterpart in terms of integrating Indigenous people and cultures into the military and its operations, but discussions of cultural initiatives within the NZDF and CAF must reflect the relative unity of the Māori people and diversity of Indigenous peoples in Canada.

Current CAF Recruitment and Retention Initiatives

Improving representation of – and cultural support for – ethnic diversity within Canada was identified as a goal in the House of Commons Standing Committee on National Defence’s 2019 report, *Improving Diversity and Inclusion in the Canadian Armed Forces*.⁶ According to the report, Indigenous people make up 2.7% of the CAF, roughly half their proportion of the general population, with a goal of increasing this number to 3.5% by 2026. The CAF maintains a Diversity Strategy “centred on promoting and safeguarding the respect and dignity of all of its members.” In compiling the report, testimonies from several of the Committee’s witnesses spoke to the unique experiences held by individuals of diverse backgrounds, and how this should be considered an asset in the current strategic environment characterized by complexity and multifaceted security concerns.⁷ The Department of National Defence and the CAF have implemented several different programs and policies pertaining to diversity in hiring.

Part of the report’s focus addressed ensuring equal opportunities within the CAF for remote, rural, and Indigenous communities. Several programs for Indigenous people to explore careers within the military – including the Aboriginal Leadership Opportunities Year, the CAF Aboriginal Entry Program, and various training programs – have been developed in consultation with Indigenous elders, and have included a large cultural component.⁸ Further, the CAF is prioritizing the implementation of a recruitment campaign aimed at increasing diversity in recruitment and retention. This includes updating the recruitment website and increasing social media presence to feature diverse representation within the CAF, allowing Indigenous people to see themselves reflected in the CAF as a

potential career opportunity. The CAF is also prioritizing employment of multilingual recruiters from a wide range of ethnic and racial backgrounds, who participate in Indigenous awareness and cross-cultural training programs that are designed to sensitize recruiters to cultural norms that may differ from their own backgrounds and beliefs.

Additionally, the Defence Aboriginal Advisory Group (DAAG) was created to provide advice to senior CAF leadership on issues impacting recruitment, retention, development, and promotion of Indigenous people in the CAF. There are several DAAGs across Canada, which communicate regularly and advise on systemic barriers facing Indigenous people. Most recently, the National Capital Region’s DAAG has an initiative to establish a Sacred Indigenous Lodge within the region.⁹ The DAAG is an important team created to provide useful information to senior leadership, and advocate for Indigenous people’s experiences with the CAF.

Yet, amid these positive initiatives, testimony to the Standing Committee on National Defence also spoke to more negative experiences shared by Indigenous CAF members, who have felt a lack of proper Indigenous mentorship, opportunities to practice Indigenous spirituality, and who have been denied rights to cultural expression.¹⁰ A 2017 DAAG report found racism and discrimination to be a “systemic issue” within the CAF that is rampant through land, air, and naval forces.¹¹ Though the CAF has taken steps to improve Indigenous recruitment and retention, there remains substantial gaps in the representation of Indigenous people within the Forces, and a lack of cultural support for Indigenous members.

Analysis: Best Practices from the NZDF and the Canadian Rangers

In looking at how the CAF can improve recruitment and retention of Indigenous members, it is helpful to consider defence forces that have successfully facilitated greater representation of, and provided proper cultural supports for, Indigenous people. The New Zealand Defence Force has achieved significant representation of Māori members within their forces, and integrated Māori culture and knowledge into military practices through bicultural policies, making the NZDF a case study for Indigenous recruitment and inclusion. In addition, the Canadian Rangers – a subcomponent of the CAF reserves – are an important domestic example of military recruitment and retention of Indigenous people. Managed at a decentralized, community level, the Rangers have strong Indigenous representation and draw on Indigenous knowledge in order to operate within the socio-economic context of rural and remote communities across Canada. Both the NZDF and Canadian Rangers have modelled best practices for the recruitment and retention of Indigenous people that can inform how the CAF as a whole might improve.

The New Zealand Defence Force

Defence scholars have identified integration of Māori members and cultural practices in the NZDF as exemplary.¹² As of 2017, Māori comprised 14.6% of the NZDF Regular Force, only slightly below their proportion of the population, and from 2003-2016 their representation was higher than any other self-identified ethnic minority in New Zealand. The last two decades have also seen a slow increase in Māori representation within the officer corps and other senior positions.

Beyond successful recruitment, there is a significant embrace of Māori culture and warrior ethos within

NZDF operations; this has been achieved through the adoption of biculturalism and Māori cultural policies into the NZDF, as well as through comprehensive integration of Indigenous knowledge into military training curricula. The NZDF has adopted a series of cultural policies aimed at enhancing partnership between Māori and Pākehā. The bicultural policy – adopted by the Royal New Zealand Air Force and the Royal New Zealand Navy – “recognizes Māori cultural interests and the special place of Māori within the NZDF. It helps meet the NZDF obligations to recognize the aims and aspirations of Māori people, to respect and honour Māori language customs and items of cultural significance within NZDF, and enhance military ethos, fighting spirit and camaraderie.”¹³ It was the introduction of these types of policies that paved the way for significant changes in military education, as well as a series of integrated Māori cultural practices that enhance the military experience of Indigenous and non-Indigenous military members alike.

Professor Debbie Hohaia, researcher at the School of Indigenous Knowledge and Public Policy at Charles Darwin University, notes that this benefit occurs in three ways.¹⁴ First, the act of including Indigenous knowledge in military curricula is, in and of itself, decolonizing through its acknowledgement of respect for Māori knowledge. Second, the organizational processes – including courses in Te Reo (Māori language) and Māori history, culture, and protocols – work to improve cultural understandings, and help non-Indigenous military members connect to others’ experiences. Third, the active learning experience connects military members around their increasing Indigenous knowledge, building esprit de corps and strengthening the general organization.

The NZDF has worked to implement a series of cultural policies and practices that allow it to live up to its stated commitment to a partnership with its Māori members. A synergy between Māori culture and warrior ethos and that of the NZDF has been achieved through integration of Māori ceremonials, the Haka, and the establishment of a *marae* (Māori meeting place) on New Zealand military bases.¹⁵ Further, Māori Cultural Advisors have been instituted for each armed service to support and advise leadership and other personnel.¹⁶ A Chief Instructor at the New Zealand Defence College characterized the NZDF's approach as one founded on principles of collaboration, mutual acknowledgement, understanding, and respect.¹⁷ These guiding values have allowed the NZDF to approach the relationship with its Māori members in a way that is effective in supporting broader organizational success.

The Canadian Rangers

The Canadian Rangers are an important, though limited, domestic example of high recruitment levels of Indigenous people and cross-cultural understanding within the CAF. As a sub-component of the CAF Reserves, the Rangers provide support for national security and public safety operations across Canada. Their main tasks are providing support to sovereignty operations in Canada's Northern region, carrying out and supporting ongoing CAF operations domestically, and maintaining CAF presence in rural and remote communities, many of them in the North.¹⁸

Unlike other components of the CAF, the Rangers are managed at a community level, and draw on the knowledge that Indigenous members have to offer.¹⁹ For this reason, the Rangers are predisposed towards military decentralization, a move away from the strict hierarchies common in other military forces, and feature a unique merging of military and

civilian realms.²⁰ 26% of Canadian Rangers self-identify as Indigenous, reflecting a ten-fold increase compared to representation of Indigenous people within the CAF overall.²¹ The Rangers' prominent presence within Northern Canada, its significant proportion of Indigenous members, and its promotion of difference make it a unique and successful example of high Indigenous recruitment and engagement.²²

While modern military institutions are "quintessentially assimilationist," the Canadian Rangers are a notable deviation away from typical military assimilatory practices such as strict uniforms, systems of rank, and standardized training, all of which seek to replace individual identity in favour of commitment and loyalty to the unit and nation as a whole.²³ By contrast, the Rangers have evolved to embrace and utilize cultural differences among its members.²⁴ The move away from assimilation into an embrace of Indigenous knowledge is one of the main reasons why the Canadian Rangers are a successful component of CAF.²⁵ Military activities in remote, rural and Indigenous communities do not exist outside of the domestic socio-economic, cultural, and environmental contexts in which they are located. The Rangers represent an integration of community and military seldom seen in other military bodies. This promotes cooperation with community, individual empowerment, and cross-cultural understanding.²⁶

Further, balanced relationships between CAF instructors and Ranger patrol members are derived from the adaptation of these leaders to Indigenous culture, and their willingness to reinforce Indigenous members' agency within their roles.²⁷ The Canadian Rangers fulfill the operational needs of the CAF without compromising community and Indigenous self-determination. All these

characteristics have resulted in the successful protection of Arctic security in Canada.²⁸ The Rangers serve Canada from their home communities, allowing them to utilize their intimate knowledge of the land to make the best decisions for their communities.²⁹ The Canadian Rangers are a vital source of shared knowledge and play important roles in liaising with community partners.³⁰

While the Canadian Rangers are a reserve force and ultimately have a different role compared to the CAF regular force, their ability to not only include but also embrace indigeneity offers a valuable guide for the rest of the Forces. Through the embrace of Indigenous knowledge and the move away from military centralization in favour of merging military and civilian realms, the Canadian Rangers can be seen as a reference point for best practices in recruitment and retention of Indigenous people based on cross-cultural understanding and respect.

Recommendations

The NZDF demonstrates the importance of creating synergies between Indigenous and military culture through the embrace of ceremonies, providing opportunities for Indigenous mentorship, and offering cultural support and programming for Indigenous and non-Indigenous military members. Likewise, the Canadian Rangers have built positive relationships with Indigenous people through cross-cultural understanding and the prioritization of shared knowledge. The CAF could benefit from adopting some of the best practices used by the NZDF and the Canadian Rangers, including:

- Prioritize the recommendations made in the *Improving Diversity and Inclusion in the Canadian Armed Forces* report, specifically those that address creating equal

opportunities in the CAF for remote, rural, and Indigenous communities.³¹

- Consult regularly with DAAGs to identify additional specific barriers to recruitment and retention of Indigenous people, and to establish recommendations and an action plan for nation-wide implementation.
- Develop a formal multicultural policy pertaining to Indigenous recruitment and the implementation of cultural initiatives and support for Indigenous members.
- Engage local Indigenous nations to identify customs and practices that could be incorporated into military protocols and practice for CAF members operating in their traditional territories.
- Educate and prepare CAF leaders and membership for the incorporation of Indigenous practices and customs, and build expectations around the use of Indigenous customs and practices.
- Address difficulties associated with recruitment in remote and rural Indigenous communities, including: lessened of human and financial resources; centralization of application facilities; delays in processing medical and security clearances.³²
- Develop support for the provision of traditional and spiritual healing practices for Indigenous members who have served/are serving in the CAF.³³
- Incorporate elements of Indigenous knowledge within traditional military curricula.
- Mandate anti-oppression and equity training for all CAF members.
- Consider symbolic changes to honour historical Indigenous contributions to the CAF, including naming/renaming military bases and facilities, and acknowledgements during public announcements.

- Increase representation of Indigenous people in leadership roles, and favour opportunities to decentralize military operations and presence in favour of local involvement and leadership.³⁴

By taking such actions, the CAF can improve what the Canadian Rangers and the NZDF have set a precedent for, in terms of meaningful recruitment and retention of Indigenous people rooted in principles of mutual understanding and respect.

Notes

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⁴ Grazia Scoppio. "Embracing Indigenous culture in military organization: experience of Māori in the New Zealand military." *Journal of Military and Strategic Studies* 9, no. 2 (2018): 90-114.

⁵ Corinne David. "Divergence and Convergence in the New Zealand Bicultural Model." *Caliban* 21 (2007): 57-66. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/caliban.1856>, para 2.

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⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Department of National Defence. (2017). *Strong, Secure, Engaged: Canada's Defence Policy* (D2-386/2017E). Ottawa: Government of Canada. <http://dgpaapp.forces.gc.ca/en/canada-defence-policy/docs/canada-defence-policy-report.pdf>.

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¹² Scoppio, "Embracing Indigenous culture in military organization", 100.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Debbie Hohaia. "In Search of a Decolonised Military: Māori Cultural Learning Experiences in the New Zealand Defence Force." *Kōtuitui: New Zealand Journal of Social Sciences Online* 11, no. 1 (2015): 48.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 51.

¹⁶ Scoppio, "Embracing Indigenous culture in military organization", 102.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 106.

¹⁸ Canada, Parliament, House of Commons. Standing Committee on National Defence. *Evidence*. 42nd Parliament, 1st Session, No. 130 (February 26, 2019). <https://www.ourcommons.ca/DocumentViewer/en/42-1/nddn/meeting-130/evidence>

¹⁹ P. Whitney Lackenbauer. "The Canadian Rangers: A 'Postmodern' Militia That Works." *Canadian Military Journal* 6, no. 4 (Winter 2005): 49. <http://www.journal.forces.gc.ca/vo6/no4/doc/north-nord-03-eng.pdf>.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 51.

²¹ Standing Committee on National Defence, *Improving Diversity and Inclusion in the Canadian Armed Forces: Report of the Standing Committee on National Defence*, 10.

²² Lackenbauer, "The Canadian Rangers: A 'Postmodern' Militia That Works," 53.

²³ P. Whitney Lackenbauer. "The Canadian Rangers: A Living History." *Studies in Canadian Military History* (2013): 21. <https://www.ubcpres.ca/asset/9394/1/9780774824521.pdf>

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²⁵ Lackenbauer, "The Canadian Rangers: A 'Postmodern' Militia That Works," 50.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 52.

²⁷ Magali Vullierme. "Towards human security in the Arctic: Lessons learned from Canadian Rangers and Junior Canadian Rangers." *Arctic Yearbook* (2019), 3. https://arcticyearbook.com/images/yearbook/2019/Scholarly-Papers/7_AY2019_Vullierme.pdf

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²⁹ Vullierme, "The Social Contribution of the Canadian Rangers," 194.

³⁰ P. Whitney Lackenbauer. "'Indigenous Communities are at the Heart of Canada's North': Media Misperceptions of the Canadian Rangers, Indigenous Service, and Arctic Security." *Journal of Military and Strategic Studies* 19, issue 2 (2018): 182.

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³³ Standing Committee on National Defence. *Evidence*. 42nd Parliament, 1st Session, No. 130.