

# QUICK IMPACT



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## Celebrating and Reinforcing Indigenous Participation in the Canadian Rangers

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### **P. Whitney Lackenbauer**

Thank you, and I am glad to be joining you from Oxford County, on traditional Anishnabek and Neutral territory that is covered by the Upper Canada Treaties.

For the last three decades, I have dedicated much of my academic career to understanding Indigenous Peoples' service in the armed forces and their contributions to the defence of our homeland. From the onset, I have been enamored with the Canadian Rangers – proud Canadians who serve in an unorthodox sub-component of the Reserve Force. Their longstanding mission is to provide a military presence in sparsely settled northern, coastal and isolated areas of Canada that cannot conveniently or economically be provided for by other components of the Canadian Armed Forces. With more than 5000 members in more than 200 communities, they do so admirably.

In my assessment, the Canadian Rangers are a prime example of substantive versus symbolic integration of Indigenous and military ways of knowing, being, and seeing. We have lots of policies with affirmative language about the importance of Indigenous traditional knowledge and engagement, as well as the importance of consultation and partnership, but that ultimately do not share agenda-setting or decision-making authority in a substantive way. The Canadian Rangers are a success story of a practical Indigenous-Crown partnership rooted in reciprocal trust and respect.

I have written books and articles about the history of the Canadian Rangers, the high rates of Indigenous participation in the organization, and why I see it the Rangers as a positive example of reconciliation. I always want to highlight that the Rangers are not an "Indigenous program" – they are Reservists, not part of a program,

and participation is open to all Canadians. In small communities in our Arctic and North, where Inuit, First Nations, and Metis make up the largest percentage of the population in their homelands, this is reflected in the composition of the Canadian Rangers.

The Army's official statistics, which are rooted in a highly problematic methodology and skewed self-identification data set, continuously underrepresent Indigenous participation in the Rangers – and also often exclude the Rangers from statistics on Indigenous people's participation rates in the CAF as a whole. [In a 2021 report](#), I suggest that correcting the figures for the Rangers elevated the estimated number of Indigenous People serving in the CAF at that time to more than 5% - so well above the CAF Employment Equity target of 3.5% Indigenous representation by 2026. The first thing that I would suggest is to have official Army statistics critically re-examined.

I say this because I find the persistent underrepresentation of Indigenous service troubling on various levels. First, it fails to conceptualize the CAF as an “employer of choice” for Indigenous Peoples living outside of the main population belt. This means a shift in mindset to understanding how we can better support them to reinforce success and expand functional opportunities. If I am being cynical, I might also read it in the context of Canada's historical failure to credit Indigenous Peoples for their service to Canada. In the case of the Rangers, the per capita rates of Indigenous service in remote communities in the Territorial North and Inuit Nunangat, for example, are already far above the national average. We need to celebrate this more directly, and not turn immediately to the need to increase numbers.

The Rangers have always, in my mind, been more substantive than symbolic as a form of differentiated military service that is aligned with the priorities of Northern Indigenous communities. The logic was laid out in the 1970s, when military began to revitalize the Ranger organization in the Canadian Arctic. First came the benefits of moving from a conventional company-platoon structure to community-based Ranger patrols, with local leadership selected by the Rangers themselves. This local self-determination has been a hallmark of the Rangers ever since and brings legitimacy at the community level. There was also the logic of retaining top talent in the North. Rather than trying to recruit young Northern leaders into the Regular Force or Primary Reserves in the south, leave them in their Inuit, First Nations, and Metis communities where their leadership is needed. This still holds true today. And the simple fact that there is no retirement age is a strong validation of how the military accepts the value of the wisdom and expertise of Elders in enabling safe and effective Northern operations. This is strongly aligned with Indigenous values.

Other themes that we might discuss include how the Rangers use their own clothing and equipment on operations – from qammutiik (sleds), to fur clothing, to their own snowmobiles – because they know what works best in their homeland. This philosophy of “lightly equipped, self-sufficient” fits well with Indigenous practices.

To wrap up, a misplaced critique that you might hear in some media circles is that the Rangers are not trained for combat and therefore do not represent a credible defence. This misses the mark on several levels. First and foremost, the Rangers are force enablers who draw upon their local and Indigenous knowledge to allow other CAF members to apply combat doctrine as required. They are pathfinders and guides, mentors and subject

matter experts who know their communities and their homelands intimately. We have soldiers and special forces operators and other CAF personnel who can apply kinetic effects if needed. The Rangers will get them on to target efficiently and effectively. That is a huge competitive advantage.

So let's start taking seriously the Rangers' role as force multipliers. The late Simeonie Nalukturuk from Inukjuaq described the Rangers to me as the "eyeglasses, the hearing aids, and the walking stick" of the Canadian Armed Forces in the North. In this, he suggested that the Regular Forces and Primary Reservists needed the Rangers to enable them. Today, as we seek to bolster our Northern defences, we must be careful to get the equation right. The Rangers are a proven multiplier. If we want to get a larger product, we need to consider whether the Regular Force and Primary Reserves that they are amplifying have the skills and experience needed to be multiplied, rather than thinking that we need to retool the Rangers. The maxim, "if it ain't broken, don't break it," applies here.

Rangers ensure that the Canadian Armed Forces are stitched into fabric of Inuit, First Nations, and Metis communities across the Canadian North. There is a reason why the Greenlanders and Danes, Alaskans, Swedes, and other Nordic colleagues are interested in the Ranger model for their countries. The Rangers are inseparable from Indigenous self-determination, authority, and resilience at the community level. This must guide us forward as we consider how to enhance the organization to enable them more.

## Peter Kikkert

I would like to begin by acknowledging that I am joining you from Mi'kma'ki, the ancestral and unceded territory of the Mi'kmaq People. Thank you for the opportunity to appear today.

I have worked closely with the Canadian Rangers for 15 years, particularly in 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Canadian Ranger Patrol Groups. Many of the Rangers I work with are Indigenous, and much of my research has focused on their roles in emergency response and in building resilience.

The Canadian Rangers are one of the most important emergency response assets in remote, northern, and Indigenous communities. They are present, organized, trusted, and capable. As Ranger Abel Aqqaq from Taloyoak, Nunavut, told me: "we are the eyes and ears of the military, but we are also the eyes and ears of our community. We protect our communities." Baba Pedersen from the Kugluktuk Ranger Patrol put it even more simply: "we are the people to call when things go sideways – period."

And they are. In recent years, Rangers have responded to wildfires, floods, avalanches, severe storms, power outages, critical infrastructure failure, aircraft crashes, and the COVID-19 pandemic. They conduct search and rescue, evacuations, wellness checks, re-supply, and infrastructure protection. They provide the local and Indigenous Knowledge, the situational awareness, and the connections that make outside responses possible and effective.

They are exceptionally good at these roles. Just weeks ago, five Rangers were awarded Medals of Bravery for rescuing two stranded French nationals in a blizzard near Naujaat, Nunavut. During the 2019

evacuation of Pikangikum First Nation, Chief Amanda Sainnawap said the presence of Rangers alone brought calm: “I don’t know what we would have done without them.”

These are roles that Rangers value and want to perform for their communities – and they are exactly the kinds of visible, meaningful activities that draw people to join. But despite this, they face persistent barriers. It is often unclear when and how they can be activated for emergencies and search and rescue. Training opportunities are inconsistent. The emphasis on these roles’ waxes and wanes with leadership changes and shifting institutional priorities. As one former Ranger from Kuujuaq, Nunavik told me, “the roles and expectations change a lot. ... It’s frustrating. We need consistency. We want to serve our communities, so give us the tools and skills to do this. Make it simple.”

So let me offer three recommendations:

- First, make it easier to use the Rangers. Although the Canadian Armed Forces is intended to be a force of last resort in domestic emergencies, in many northern and Indigenous communities the Rangers are the only timely and effective response – and policy must reflect that reality. Clarify authorities and reduce jurisdictional friction. Ensure civilian agencies understand Ranger capabilities and how to employ them and streamline activation processes so they can be deployed quickly when needed. The memorandum of understanding on search and rescue between 3CRPG and the Ontario Provincial Police shows what this can look like.
- Second, give the Rangers the tools they need. Increase and sustain training and exercises that reflect the to which Rangers might have to respond and the needs of their communities: ground, ice, and light urban search and rescue, flood and fire response, mass rescue operations, evacuations, wilderness and advanced first aid. Support these efforts with the required equipment and technology solutions, building on initiatives like the new Ranger Team Awareness Kits.
- Third, we must better understand and support the human dimension of Ranger service. For Rangers, responding to emergencies often means searching for or assisting family members, friends, neighbours, and Elders. Sometimes it means finding them deceased. A good example of what they face are the many aircraft crashes that Rangers have responded to over the years – few accidents cause greater physical trauma to the victims, and I’ve heard many Rangers talk about the effects of responding to these incidents. It’s also critical to understand that Rangers often wear many other responder hats: they are volunteer firefighters, paramedics, search and rescue volunteers, and members of the Coast Guard Auxiliary. The cumulative impact of this trauma is profound. A more holistic approach to their well-being is required, including improved awareness of and access to support programs such as the Member Assistance Program and Veterans Affairs services; critical incident stress programming that better reflects Indigenous realities and requirements; and recognition of their service, including, perhaps, development of a Ranger Responder medal.

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Acting on these recommendations will strengthen more than a capability; it will also bolster Ranger recruitment and retention. It will improve the institutional experience of Indigenous Rangers by supporting them in roles that matter deeply to them and to their communities. So I will close with this: When emergencies happen in Canada's most remote regions, the Canadian Rangers are already there. The question is whether we will give them the tools, training, and support they need to keep protecting their communities.

Thank you and I look forward to your questions.