Tradition, Heritage and Group Identity[1]

The Purpose of Tradition

This series of volumes, *The Traditions and Customs of the Canadian Forces*, is about the intangibles of Canadian military heritage. At heart, it is about war, not behaviour on parade.

Canadians have always met the test of battle – naval lookouts who stood at their posts, braced against the freezing spray of a North Atlantic run; exhausted, muddy soldiers, isolated on the battlefield, steady against an advancing foe; and aircrew who braved enemy flak and fighters. All knew where their duty lay. To do less would have been to let down their country, their unit, their peers and themselves. Such actions, and the beliefs which lay behind them, form the true basis of our military tradition.

Critics sometimes focus on habitual practice and fear that the "dead hand" of custom may stifle initiative and change. Such worries imply that we are slaves to routine, not masters of it. As Field Marshal Lord Slim, the Second World War British commander in Burma, once noted: "Tradition does not mean that you never do anything new, but that you never fall below the standard of courage and conduct handed down to you. Then tradition, far from handcuffs to cramp your action, will be a handrail to guide and steady you in rough places."[2]

Canadian military tradition – its beliefs and behaviour patterns – improves professionalism and effectiveness, guided by the actions of those who went before. This is an essential point. Tradition provides one means for past experience to set standards against which to measure present and future conduct. It has a practical purpose in an armed force: it sustains the will to win.

The soldiers of the 1st Canadian Division in April 1915 instinctively knew that. They stood firm in the face of the first massive gas attack launched by the enemy on the Western Front while flanking units from other nations broke and ran. Such conduct provides examples of duty for all of us to follow in moments of crisis.

We all know how difficult motivation and dedication to duty are under the sometimes exhausting conditions of peacetime exercises. In war such conditions are magnified by constant danger, breakdowns in the chain of command, casualties, and confusion. Yet, the job must still be done. The attitudes and actions required were summarized many years ago by Horatio, Lord Nelson, of the Royal Navy, and form part of the heritage shared by all Canadian service personnel. Duty, he said, "is the great business of a sea officer; all private considerations must give way to it, however painful it may be."[3] This unyielding code still applies.

Leadership, training, administrative support, and a host of other factors sustain personnel in battle. Newly formed units are often victorious; old ones sometimes fail. Tradition only plays one part in strengthening the will of a modern force, but its power should not be ignored. It provides fortitude to the lonely and afraid and a determination to do their best. Custom merely for custom's sake would be a waste of professional time. Yet even the strongest advocates of administrative efficiency acknowledge the depth of emotion that such matters arouse. Clearly, tradition is a subject that cannot be ignored.

Nor should it be. The development and maintenance of group identity in an armed force improves operational effectiveness. Instinctive understanding of how fellow service members will behave under the strain of war increases trust, cooperation, morale, and cohesion in battle. A sense of common and shared heritage and expected standards of behaviour gives guidance to the future.

Such patterns of behaviour are best exemplified by the battle honours borne by most Canadian operational units; the names of actions or campaigns where predecessors performed notably well. These honours, displayed before and explained to a ship's company or a unit's personnel, foster a sense of history, continuity and identity.

Unit badges and mottoes fulfil similar purposes. Insignia for branches, formations and commands widen collective identity, as do distinctive uniforms.

Service customs such as salutes, ceremonial and social deportment, musical marches, and bugle calls, give a familiarity to service life and routine, while fostering a sense of occasion and corporate

identity at unit, branch, service and national levels. Yet none of these are frozen in place forever; all evolve and change slowly with time.

Living tradition is never rigid and inflexible. Nor is it only concerned with customs, which are habitual actions or practices. It is a set of opinions, beliefs and customs derived from past experience that provide perspective for future actions.

Heritage encompasses both traditions and customs, combined with historical knowledge. Such patterns of behaviour vary with cultural background, for we are all products of our past. The more we share the better will be our appreciation of how we, and our comrades, will react to the stress of war.

All members of the Canadian Forces have a heritage of duty and service faithfully completed. Our tradition is to do as well whenever we are called.

Heritage and Group Identity

One of the most powerful influences is our evolution to independent statehood within the British Commonwealth of Nations. For much of Canada's history we were a colony or self-governing dominion with strong imperial ties. Declarations of war by France and, later, by Great Britain automatically included Canada. Despite the constant presence of nationalism in our society, few questioned this situation or denied the advantages of organizing, equipping, and training along French or British lines. The results are still obvious in today's customs and routines, uniforms and drill, leadership and organization, opinions and beliefs. In particular, shared experiences and shared attitudes with the forces of our British "parent" and other Commonwealth partners still give us common bonds of which to be proud. To a lesser extent, customs and traditions retained from the former regime of New France continue to play a role in our military heritage. As a result, the modern Canadian Forces reflects the Canadian society that it serves, including its linguistic duality (English and French) and multi-cultural nature.

No social pattern is frozen, however, and change reflects the growth of national maturity. The Canadian units raised for service in South Africa at the turn of the 20th Century were eager to follow

imperial colours, but pride in the accomplishments of the Canadian Corps in the subsequent First World War caused its members to believe that they had won nationhood for Canada. In the Second World War the Canadian Army built on this firm base to strengthen its sense of independence.

Canadian identity was also prominent in naval and air force units during the world wars, and fostered such developments as identifiable ship funnel markings, ship and squadron badges, an insistence on Canadians serving together, and the recognition of Canadian naval and air command organizations. To a much greater degree than army units, however, ships and squadrons were integrated into the Royal Navy and the Royal Air Force. Seamen, for example, were attached to the concept that there was only one king's navy on one continuous sea under the unified control of the British Admiralty.

However, an inquiry into post-Second World War rebellious "incidents" in the Royal Canadian Navy proved how strongly the lower deck actually felt about Canadian identity. A loyal armed force in a democracy, after all, mirrors the society it serves. And so it should. We serve Canada. The ability to be recognized as Canadian service personnel the world over is strongly entrenched in government policy. National identity comes first.

National identification does not involve a rejection of British or French heritage or preclude other types of group identification. There is a brotherhood of the sea, for example, which unites all sailors; and in spite of a naval "all-of-one-company" philosophy, submariners see themselves as a breed apart. Each ship, naturally, considers itself the best in the fleet.

None of this is surprising. A large body of research on group identity and its relationship to operational effectiveness, cohesion in battle, and morale has been created over the last few decades. The results stress the importance of the small, tightly knit group. Intuitively, this was already known during the last world war when the Royal Navy dramatized the cohesion and spirit of a ship's company in the movie "In Which We Serve", and Royal Canadian Air Force morale studies highlighted the value of keeping crews together and stressing squadron spirit. The army recognizes the same concept as one of the fundamental strengths of the regimental system.

There is nothing inconsistent in this phenomenon. Submariners can be proud of their boat, their service, their nation, and their naval heritage at the same time. This is a web of loyalties that reinforce each other to create a unique identity and behaviour pattern, one that will sustain a sense of duty and responsibility in the ultimate test of battle.

In each issue of the Royal Canadian Legion's *Legion* magazine and dozens of other publications dedicated to veterans, active service members and interested civilians include notes on upcoming reunions. Why are there so many, and why do people care? Perhaps because in a very real sense units are "families", and families are forever.

An armed force has an interest in fostering such identification, for it increases unit cohesion and effectiveness in battle. The army was the first to recognize this factor and develop policies to maintain family connections for its personnel. In so doing it emulated the patterns of families in society as a whole.

An army unit's life span is generally measured by its unbroken period of existence, though here, as everywhere, exceptions prove the rule. New France was the first to create militia forces in what is now Canada. British North America originally was composed of several separate colonies, each with its own militia. There were also fencible regiments, colonial regulars on the British order of battle but designated for local service only. All form part of our heritage, but counting them all as "Canadian" poses problems. By fiat, Canadian army lineages start with the Militia Act of 1855, and only apply to the units of other colonies as they joined Confederation. The amalgamation of two or more units in this system broadens the family through a type of marriage, the traditions of all being shared as one.

When an army unit disbands, its family life ends, and its honours, lineage and traditions are lost to posterity. This custom posed worrisome problems after the First World War, which saw separate expeditionary battalions raised for overseas service and later disbanded. These had drawn heavily on the personnel and support of the existing militia, and the problem was solved by allowing units to perpetuate those overseas battalions with which they had close connections. This ensured that honours were not lost, a custom that continues today.

That custom applies to the other services as well, though the details of the practice vary. Air force squadrons, for example, perpetuate units of the same number on the Canadian order of battle. Disbandment in this case does not end a squadron's life, which is considered to be the sum of all the antecedent units' experiences.

The custom is more complicated for the navy. Physical hull life, of course, is limited, but ships perpetuate the honours of those of the same navy who have gone before. This long-standing practice received official sanction after the Second World War. Unlike the army and air force, the Royal Canadian Navy then considered itself the Canadian portion of a single king's navy on a common order of battle; warship names were not duplicated to prevent confusion in any worldwide conflict. All predecessors were considered part of a ship's lineage. HMCS *York*, for example, is the first-of-name on the Canadian order of battle, but perpetuates the honours of eight previous ships of name of the Royal Navy on the common Commonwealth naval list. Today, ships such as HMCS *York* continue to bear such honours by right of continuous service. However, new construction is awarded only those honours earned by Canadian ships on a Canadian order of battle.

This is not the only continuing formal tie between Canadian and Commonwealth units. Since near the turn of the 20th Century army regiments have formed alliances with sister regiments in the United Kingdom and elsewhere in a practice originally designed to foster imperial unity. Such alliances are now open to all Branches of the Canadian Forces. The practice, like a similar one for affiliations between Canadian units, extends family connections to others, relatives on the service family tree.

Military Ethos and Ethics

Systems of military ethos and ethics are essential to the character and spirit of a military force and its members. More than a martial spirit, they encompass the beliefs and qualities against which personal military actions are judged.

There have been many attempts to describe and codify military ethos over the ages. The most recent Canadian version has been distributed as a guideline for the development of members of the Canadian Forces, and is reproduced in full here:

The Ethos of the Canadian Forces

The Canadian Forces is a military Organization dedicated to the service of Canada and the Defence of Canadians. It is a volunteer institution with a proud history, built through the sacrifices of the hundreds of thousands of Canadian men and women who have served their country in uniform for more than a century. It possesses a unique readiness and capacity to serve Canada, in peace and war, at home and abroad.

The men and women who make up the Forces come from all parts of our country. Their strength is drawn from our two official languages and the many different ethnic and cultural communities in Canada. They understand and respect the same values, which their fellow Canadians hold dear – fairness, integrity and respect for the rule of law. They also know that the profession of arms places special reliance on duty, honour, loyalty, discipline, courage, dedication and teamwork without which no military organization can be effective.

The men and women of the Canadian Forces are committed to fulfilling to the very best of their abilities their mission as defined by the Government of Canada. They share a commitment to integrity and excellence in everything they do as members of the Forces. They know that the unique demands of the military profession can only be met through leadership and conduct based on respect of people.

Members of the Canadian Forces are accountable to their superiors up the chain of command that leads ultimately to the Minister and the Government of Canada. Like all who serve their country, their vocation as servicemen and women obliges them to act in a way that meets the highest expectations and standards of Canadians.

The men and women of the Canadian Forces constitute a proud and distinctive community within the Canadian family. They go forth to do their duty for Canada, prepared if necessary to make the ultimate sacrifice, because they are confident in the values of Canadians and the purpose for which their service is rendered.

SERVICE HONOUR COMMITMENT

We serve Canada and Canadians on the land and at sea and in the air.

We take pride in our unique contribution to our country and its people.

We are committed to the peace and security of our nation and its allies.

We honour the sacrifice of those who have gone before us.

We are dedicated to those who will follow.[4]

Likewise, a statement of defence ethics has been issued for the guidance of members of the Canadian Forces:

Statement of Defence Ethics

The Canadian Forces and the Department of National Defence have a special responsibility for the defence of Canada. This responsibility is fulfilled through a commitment by the department and its employees, and the Canadian Forces and its members, to the following ethical principles and obligations:

Principles

Respect the dignity of all persons

Serve Canada before self

Obey and support lawful authority

Obligations

Integrity We give precedence to ethical principles and obligations in our decisions and actions. We respect all ethical obligations deriving from applicable laws and regulations. We do not condone unethical conduct.

Loyalty We fulfil our commitments in a manner that best serves Canada, DND and the CF.

Courage We face challenges, whether physical or moral, with determination and strength of character.

Honesty We are truthful in our decisions and actions. We use resources appropriately and in the best interests of the Defence mission.

Fairness	We are just and equitable in our decisions and actions.
Responsibility	We perform our tasks with competence, diligence and dedication. We are accountable for and accept the consequences of our decisions and actions. We place the welfare of others ahead of our personal interests.[5]

[1] Acknowledgements to E.C. Russell, Vincent Bezeau, Major Paul Lansey, Steve Gannon

[2] Cited in Lieutenant-Colonel N.A. Robinson, "On Tradition and its Outward Symbols", *Canadian Defence Quarterly*, vol.3, no.4 (Spring 1974), p.59

[3] Cited in Robert A. Fitton (ed.), *Leadership: Quotations from the Military Tradition* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1990), p.92

[4] "MARPACHQ N18 – CF Ethos, The Ethos of the Canadian Forces", esquimalt.mil.ca/marpac/n18/ethos.htm (accessed 24 Mar 04)

[5] "Statement of Defence Ethics", Annex A to DAOD 7023-1, Defence Ethics Program, admfincs.mil.ca/admfincs/subjects/daod/7023/form/a_e.asp (accessed 24 Mar 04)