

New Look at the North

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Canada's defence policy has swung back to the Arctic this year after a gradual decline over the last ten years.

A decade ago the Canadian Forces kept 1,500 men permanently in the north, and as late as 1961 staged a full-scale anti-submarine exercise in Hudson Bay with the aircraft carrier *Bonaventure* as flagship. These soldiers, sailors and airmen who grew up with the Canadian North were far from just a military presence. They were builders and contractors for the Alaska Highway, surveyors and mappers for most of Canada's western Arctic, and communicators. Their roles were inevitably linked with the evolution of the land.

Now, after gradually falling off to 397 servicemen stationed permanently in the North in 1969, the Canadian Forces are taking a new interest in that region — as guardians, and as its traditional corollary, partners in its development of the north.

So far this year — as guardians — the Canadian Forces have stepped up aerial surveillance of the Arctic by about twenty-five per cent, opened an advanced staging base for Argus patrol aircraft at Frobisher, and begun year-round arctic exercises. Maritime Command naval forces also have staged the first major anti-submarine exercise in Hudson Bay since 1961. Arctic surveillance, and a reservoir of arctic know-how among Canadian servicemen, are the main ingredients of the Canadian Forces new stress on northern defence.

As developers, the Canadian Forces are taking part in the construction of a 360-foot steel and concrete bridge over the Ogilvie River in the Yukon Territory. The defence department will also build or improve six airstrips in the Eastern Arctic over the next four summers. The sites are at Pangnirtung, Chesterfield Inlet, Pond Inlet, Whale Cove, Igloodik, and Cape Dorset: all native settlements on Baffin Island or on the mainland near Hudson Bay. The strips will open these settlements to year-round commercial or emergency flight operations.

The question that remains now is what more can be done, and the man who will probably have the greatest say is Brigadier-General Ramsey Withers, a 39-year-old electrical engineer from Ottawa with a passion for the North. General Withers commands the new 35-man Northern Region Headquarters which will be established at Yellowknife in January, and will bring the Canadian Forces strength in that region to 446 Officers and Men.

The Northern Region Headquarters will co-ordinate and support the increased military activities in the North; but at the same time, its close liaison with the territorial governments will give the military a more intimate feeling for the problems and character, as well as the military significance of the Yukon Territory and the Northwest Territories.

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And General Withers seems an apt choice for this position. His father's work on hydro-electric projects sparked an early fascination with the North. Later, as a signals officer, he commanded the first military exercises ever held on Baffin Island. In April this year, he travelled with former Defence Minister Cadieux and chief of the defence staff General F. R. Sharp on an extensive tour of the Arctic.

He is familiar with the land, its people, its social code. At this point, he does not see Canada putting any more permanent troops in the North. Military transport has proved this year that it can move Canadian soldiers into that region at short notice. "To a worker on an oil rig," says General Withers, "sovereignty isn't an Argus patrol aircraft flying past at 20,000 feet. It's a light plane with a Canadian maple leaf on the side circling the site and the pilot landing for a coffee. That's what a Canadian military presence means to a northerner.

"The north is a frontier country and technologically-oriented people don't necessarily fit in. That's why I'd like to work with the people who are already northerners: the Rangers, the Eskimos, the Indians. For one thing, I intend to do a lot more for our 1,600 Rangers within the limits of the resources we have — visit them at regular intervals, make sure they've got facilities to communicate back to us, take them on trips to the big Canadian bases so they can see what they're part of. Already this year a study team has visited all the Ranger outposts to size up their present state.

"There's no reason why we couldn't train some of them in the skilled trades, such as electricians for a radar station near their home. We're working on a means now to enhance the chances for Eskimos and Indians to come into the Forces, without getting the technological submersion necessary in southern Canada."

The mineral and oil boom in the North, and the new pollution limits are bound to have some effect on the military's planning. One obvious offshoot of increased commercial activity is increased search and rescue flights. Actually most northern fliers are so conscientious about their flying habits that there are relatively few incidents. One single-engine aircraft, however, got lost this year in fog on the tail end of a trip from Schefferville, Quebec, to Frobisher Bay. An Albatross rescue aircraft from Frobisher located the plane in the fog, and guided it back to a safe landing in Frobisher — it had 10 minutes fuel to spare. With 35,000 people already living north of the 60th parallel, General Withers feels that sooner or later military search and rescue facilities will have to be extended to serve them.

The defence department is certainly taking a new look at the North.

"The serviceman of the seventies," says General Withers, "is going into the Arctic with a more expanded role than he did in the fifties". For the land force, it is the same concept of training and outfitting the soldiers. But now a stated Canadian Forces' priority is sovereignty and the defence of Canada. The focus is on the homeland, and most of our real estate is in the North. That's where much of the Forces' interest will lie in the seventies.