

The Role of Ritual and Tradition in Resisting Culture Change in the Canadian Armed Forces

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ABSTRACT

In response to ongoing systemic problems with a toxic masculine culture, the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) initiated a new attempt at culture change in 2021, starting with the creation of the Office of the Chief, Professional Conduct and Culture (CPCC). This effort also saw the release of a new formal set of values and professional ethos that all members of the CAF are expected to adopt, perform, and embody, The CAF Ethos: Trusted to Serve (DND 2022a). One potential, and largely unexamined, complication to this ambitious effort at culture change is the reality that such efforts can result in one of three outcomes – members and subgroups (i.e., regiments) of the organization can either (1) adopt such efforts wholeheartedly, (2) adapt the ethos and desired culture in unexpected ways (both positively and negatively), or (3) resist these efforts at culture change (Connell 1987, 2005; Hinojosa 2010; Messerschmidt 2019). An element of the CAF culture that seems to have been overlooked, and which creates inertia or resistance to culture change, is the role that ritual and tradition play in the maintenance and transmission of culture. Additionally, while the military may resemble a total institution (Foucault 1975; Goffman 1961) it is not an entirely closed culture. Drawing on a near-decade-long ethnographic project and personal experiences while serving as a commissioned officer in the CAF, this paper provides two key examples to demonstrate how the often liminal and entangled elements of ritual and tradition play such a key role in what culture in the CAF is, and where moments of resistance to the desired culture change are likely to occur.

INTRODUCTION

In the new *CAF Ethos: Trusted to Serve* (DND 2022a: 53), culture is defined as: “A shared and relatively stable pattern of behaviours, values and assumptions that a group has learned over time as an effective means of maintaining internal social stability and adapting to its environment, and that are transmitted to new members as the correct ways to perceive, think and act in relation to these issues”. The approach that the CAF has taken in understanding the particulars of its own culture, and attempting to change its culture, started with the assumption that the top-level organizational culture is hegemonic and that this top-level culture will be adopted at all subordinate levels. This assumption misses one key point: each subordinate level of the CAF, from branch (Royal Canadian Air Force, Royal Canadian Navy, and the Canadian Army) each have their own subcultures that distinguish each from the other, and within each branch there are a multitude of subcultures somewhat unique to each trade and unit. The current attempt to understand CAF culture has also been largely predicated on work conducted by an external agency under contract to CPCC that held a series of focus groups and townhall-style events during 2021-2022, and which recently came under scrutiny by the House of Commons of the Parliament of Canada (Canada 2023). While these focus groups and townhalls did serve a purpose, giving a voice to serving members of the CAF, these consultations were limited in scope by virtue of the methodology employed (Bernard 2011: 172-176). A key limitation is that much of culture is unspoken – it is performed, enacted, and embodied, creating *communitas* (Turner 1969) and *habitas* (Bourdieu 1977).

These unspoken elements of culture tend to be overlooked or missed simply because they exist in a liminal space, not discussed unless specifically queried, and usually requiring an external reviewer to witness or experience them. Elsewhere (Callaghan 2022, 2023a), I've highlighted the role of ritual items and their liminality as examples of such unspoken but foundational elements of CAF culture, and how these items can complicate the CAF's current project of culture change. In this paper I focus on a different element of this unspoken culture –rituals that serve to maintain connections to the past while simultaneously reinforcing a status quo within local forms of culture and marking in-group social belonging as privileged and separate from wider society. Two key examples that I present here are: (1) initiation rituals and (2) church parades.

In both of these examples, rituals serve to mark participants as belonging to a social body with that socialization being considered part of tradition within the relevant group. In the first case, that of initiation rituals, I've chosen to focus on the moment when new graduates of advanced fighter pilot training are given their "call-signs", an occasion that marks them as part of an elite group with the special privilege of a unique personal identifier. However, while the rituals involved mark the individual as special, of being of elite status, they also contain moments of reinforcing traditional masculine and often sexist behaviour – the very types of behaviour that the CAF's project of culture change is aimed at correcting. The second example, church parades, have a long tradition in the CAF of creating both *communitas* and *habitas* – a normalization of group behaviour on common grounds. However, at the very same time that this traditional ritual behaviour creates commonality, it also acts to exclude some members of the CAF who are neither Christian or religious.

By not understanding the nuances of these traditions and rituals, and how they can act as moments of resistance to culture change by inherently reinforcing a status quo, of maintaining the culture that exists by calling on and repeating the past, the CAF's current project of culture change faces some hidden and unrecognized barriers.

INITIATION RITUALS: "CALL-SIGNS"

Initiations play a special role in the creation of social identities within any culture, affirming the place of individuals within that culture (Turner 1969). Within the military context, this starts with the process of indoctrination and socialization during basic training (Carré 2019) but also includes the moments that individuals are accepted as full members of their units and when individuals are acknowledged for completing specialized training. One such instance is when pilots of the Royal Canadian Air Force graduate from advance training with 410 Tactical Fighter (Operational Training) Squadron and are given a "call-sign" by their colleagues. Being given a "call-sign" marks these members as being of an elite group, differentiated from the rest of the CAF by virtue of having a highly personalized individual identifier in a culture based on uniformity is traditionally eschewed.

The moment in which these pilots are given their call-signs is normally one of celebration, with a social gathering full of rituals including the sharing of funny or embarrassing stories that contribute to the collective decision-making on what that call-sign will be. Outsiders are normally not privy to what goes on during these events, adding to their special significance in the lives of the individuals involved and clearly marking the events as being rituals. In 2008, the general public was granted a glimpse into this world through a documentary called *Jetstream* that followed a cohort through their advanced fighter pilot training (Discovery 2008).

In giving outsiders a glimpse into this world, the boundaries that separated this elite group from everyone else were momentarily removed. Aspects of the rituals involved, such as chugging beer from a gun barrel and the sexualized language that dominated conversation, were suddenly able to be seen by all outsiders. That there wasn't much of an outcry at the time that the documentary aired is possibly indicative of where Canadian society was at the time, only starting to recognize that the sexism associated with hypermasculinity

was possibly detrimental to the creation of an inclusive working environment. I do remember sitting in the combined all-ranks mess with a number of my subordinates and colleagues after work one evening watching this documentary, and the conversation that occurred over how many of us were somewhat disturbed by what we had just seen.

The CAF, and Canadian society at large, only really came to the recognition that sexualized and sexist behaviour were detrimental with the release of a scathing external review into this behaviour within the CAF (Deschamps, 2015). In the aftermath of that review, the CAF initiated Operation HONOUR in an attempt to address what was clearly a serious problem within the organization, but little attention was paid to the role of rituals and traditions such as how calls-signs were created and given to fighter pilots. Unfortunately, this internal operation did not have quite the impact or result that was hoped for, as demonstrated by a crisis within the CAF throughout 2021-2022 (Burke & Brewster, 2021), and another external review that not only reaffirmed the findings of the Deschamps report but detailed other serious problems within the CAF (Arbour 2022).

In the midst of this, the rituals involved in the assignment of call-signs to new fighter pilots suddenly erupted into public view once again, having gone back behind closed doors and kept from public eye since the 2008 *Jetstream* documentary series had aired. During the one of these events in the summer of 2022, with senior leaders of the RCAF in attendance, the ritual process allegedly devolved into vulgarity with a derogatory call-sign being selected and assigned to one of the newly-minted fighter pilots. Complaints were filed internally within the CAF, and the incident was brought to the attention of Canadian national news media after being publicly acknowledged by the CAF (Berthiaume 2022; Brewster 2022; DND 2022b).

When rituals become tradition, are justified as tradition, the behaviours involved become normalized within culture (Turner 1969). When those behaviours involve things that run counter to the espoused norms, standards, values, and ethos of an organization, then those rituals and traditions become moments of potential resistance towards the organizational culture and especially to initiatives to change that culture. That the behaviour in the summer of 2022 was called out, that complaints were filed, may denote moments of success in the drive for culture change in the CAF. However, that the behaviour in question had already been placed on display over a decade prior but had not been openly challenged or corrected and instead was allowed to continue behind closed-doors, out of sight of the public or anyone in the CAF not belonging to this elite group, indicates and highlights how rituals, especially initiation rituals, can easily run counter to and resist initiatives designed to create a more prosocial and inclusive culture.

CHURCH PARADES

Religion, particularly the Christian faith, has a long history within the CAF, but times have changed and the social and religious fabric of Canada continues to change. According to the most recent Canadian census, only 53.3% of Canadians consider themselves to be Christian, down from 67.3% in 2011, while the proportion of Canadians who consider themselves non-religious has more than doubled, going from 16.5% to 34.6% in that same time frame, and other religious denominations making up the remainder (Statistics Canada 2022). There has been some research conducted in NATO countries that has delved into the difficulties and complexities of creating inclusive spaces and cultures for religious minorities within contexts of dominant religious majorities (Ahmad et al. 2014; Hammer et al. 2013; Park et al. 2021; Rosman 2016). There is also an abundant literature on the interactions between religion and mental health within military contexts, but this is problematically over-focused on the American context and assumes Christianity to be a normative aspect of psychosocial functioning (Callaghan 2023b). In this section, I lay out how the reliance on a tradition of Christianity within the context of the Canadian Armed Forces creates moments of exclusion for some members of the military, and how certain traditions and rituals themselves, particularly the “church parade”, have the potential to become elements of resistance to culture change.

Dating back to the origins of the Canadian military, church parades have been a tradition for many units, particularly in the Canadian Army. Since the end of the First World War, church parades have primarily been held in conjunction with Remembrance Day ceremonies, starting with a vigil at a local cenotaph or war memorial, followed by a formal parade to a church affiliated with the regiment conducting the ceremony. Protocols for how such parades are to be conducted, including when a church parade is held within a garrison instead of at a church, are detailed in the CAF's *Drill and Ceremonial Manual* (DND 2001), but this text does not provide direction on how to proceed should a service member not wish to enter a church and participate in an overtly religious ceremony.

On looking to the judicial record of courts martial in Canada, one finds an interesting case that demonstrates how tradition, and particularly religious tradition, maintain the status quo and resists change, even actively attempting to discipline and punish those who resist tradition and attempt to enact change. In 2003 a guilty verdict was handed down in the case of *R. v. Scott* (Canada 2003) where the defendant had refused to remove their head-dress during a prayer in the middle of a ceremonial parade, arguing in their defence that doing so would violate their rights to freedom from religion. This decision was successfully appealed (Canada 2004), with the appeal courts stating that "it is simply impossible in these circumstances not to see both the order itself and the prayer that followed as having a religious connotation that required all those present to appear to participate in the sentiments expressed. There was no room for dissent, reservation, or abstention" and that this was "clearly inimical to the freedom of religion guaranteed by paragraph 2(a) of the *Charter*" (this is a reference to the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, Canada 1982)

Around the same time that this case was winding its way through the courts martial process, I had my own experience with the perception attendance at church parades was mandatory when my regiment suddenly decided to hold a church parade as part of its annual Remembrance Day ceremonies. This sudden shift in protocol caught many members of the unit off-guard, with only a few members even remembering the last time that the unit had participated in a church parade – for most of us, Remembrance Day ceremonies consisted of a formal parade starting at one of the many cenotaphs in downtown Toronto, with a march back to our garrison. The sudden change, the reintroduction of a church parade, coincided with one of the officers in the regiment having been recently ordained into the clergy and formally switching his trade to become a padre in the CAF.

Almost immediately after the announcement was made that we would be holding a church parade, I suddenly found myself being approached by a number of the junior non-commissioned members from the platoon that I was commanding, all raising concerns about being forced to attend a church ceremony. I knew the troops under my command well enough to realize that these concerns were coming from a variety of places: some of these soldiers were of non-Christian religions, others were non-religious, and a handful were lesbian or gay. In all of these cases, I knew that this situation was one where it would be ethically and morally wrong to force these members to participate in a church ceremony, and so I raised the issue with the commanding officer of the regiment. In that discussion, I highlighted the diversity in the regiment and how the forced participation in a religious ceremony not only did nothing to further unit cohesion but could actually create a crack within the esprit de corps of the regiment. I pointed out that the Charter protections covering freedom of religion also meant freedom *from* religion, and that as a non-religious individual I was finding it very problematic that I was being asked to attend and participate in a religious ceremony of a faith that I had myself personally rejected years before. A compromise was made: while all members of the regiment were expected to be present for the formal Remembrance Day ceremony at the cenotaph, and participate in the march over to the church, no one would be forced to actually enter the church and participate in the mass that was to be held. This seemed like an acceptable compromise, and the soldiers who had brought their concerns to me agreed.

On the day of the parade, we were all present, our uniforms impeccable. We participated in the Remembrance Day ceremony with pride and dignity, honouring all those who had paid the ultimate cost before us. We formed up and marched over the church. The officers fell out and, deviating from official

protocol, formed a line on each side of the path leading to the doors of the church, which the non-commissioned members then proceeded to walk through in single-file, being given no opportunity to avoid entering the church. I had not been briefed that this was going to be done, and in review afterwards it was clear that this was deviated from the official protocols laid out in the CAF's *Drill and Ceremonial Manual* (DND 2001), but keeping with the spirit of the agreement made with the commanding officer, I proceeded to step out of the line to allow those soldiers who had raised concerns to also step aside and not be forced to enter the church. This act quickly drew angry looks from several of the senior officers of the regiment, and attempts to unofficially punish me followed shortly afterwards – unofficial because no direct order had ever been issued to compel any of us to attend the church service. However, every single one of us who had refused to enter the church and participate in the religious mass were made to feel like outsiders by other members of the regiment, especially the senior officers who believed that what we had done was a grievous affront to the traditions and honour of the regiment and of the CAF. By refusing to participate in this ritual of the church parade we had marked ourselves as “outsiders”, as not fully belonging, as being something different.

There was little guidance from the highest levels of the CAF throughout this period, until 2014 when updates were made to the *Queen's Regulations and Orders* (QR&O; DND 1959) covering participation in religious ceremonies. However, these updates to the official standing orders are not only of little assistance but actual create further confusion. While one section of these orders clearly states that “officers and non-commissioned members shall not be ordered to attend a parade that is primarily religious or spiritual in nature” (QR&O 33.11), this freedom from religion is complicated and restricted by the subsequent section that dictates “officers and non-commissioned members may be required to attend a military ceremony that has a religious or spiritual aspect, including a Remembrance Day ceremony ...” (QR&O 33.12). The contradiction between these two sections of the QR&O creates a moment of potential crisis for any service member, and their chain of command, as to how to proceed.

In response to complaints from serving members of the CAF about being required to attend church services, and comprehending the dilemma created by contradictory orders within the QR&O, the commanding officer of 32 Canadian Brigade Group (32 CBG), Colonel Daniel Stepaniuk, bravely issued an order in October 2019 that all units in 32 CBG were to cease holding church parades until further notice. Predictably, the issuance of this order created some fervour and public backlash, as articulated by one notable opinion columnist for the *National Post* (Blatchford 2019) who wrote:

But most of all, in such small incremental strikes, does Canadian history and tradition lose strength. I am an atheist. I have been to a church parade in a small eastern Ontario town. It was lovely. It was entirely benign. It did no harm and probably some good. Stepaniuk appears to believe there is malevolence there. He also appears to believe that the core business of the Canadian Army is diversity, not training soldiers for war. What a disservice he does to those he leads.

Blatchford, who was well known for her critiques against anything resembling progressive social change, made clear reference to tradition in her column but she also demonstrated a near total disregard for how the required participation in such ceremonies could cause distress among non-Christian or non-religious CAF members. This lack of awareness, going even so far as to try and claim that “it did no harm and probably some good”, is almost the perfect description of what I've elsewhere labelled “willful blindness” (Callaghan 2020), or the act of purposefully ignoring the potential for and reality of harm caused by the status quo, frequently instead seeing harm being caused by potential change.

With the cessation of all social events during the global COVID-19 pandemic, Colonel Stepaniuk's order for units in 32 CBG to cease holding church parades became a moot point until public health restrictions started to be loosened in 2022. In the fall of 2022, ceremonies held in conjunction with Remembrance Day resumed, including formal military parades. While it is not entirely clear whether it constituted a formal

religious ceremony within a church or chapel, at least one regiment within 32 CBG did hold a parade, starting at a local cenotaph and culminating at a nearby Anglican chapel. This raises the question of whether Colonel Stepaniuk rescinded his 2019 order, if this particular unit ignored that order altogether, or if they adapted their parade to maintain their traditional church parade but without the actual church service. Did this particular regiment adapt to or actively resist the local level of culture change enacted by Colonel Stepaniuk with his 2019 order forbidding church parades?

CONCLUSION

In modern society, we tend to think of ritual as being part of religion. From an anthropological perspective (Turner 1969) we can understand ritual as being something that maintains culture beyond the religious. If we understand the connection between ritual and tradition, that they are connected and reconstitute each other in the maintenance of culture, we can understand culture in a more nuanced detail. Rituals serve to connect individuals to subgroups, and subgroups to larger organizations. This is true for the CAF as much as for any other organization or social entity. Rituals also serve to create and maintain links to the past, imagined or real. They reinforce what has always been. They inherently resist change. This is not to say that ritual is inherently negative, for the stability it creates sustains the social fabric, particularly in times of crisis or upheaval. But it is in this very stability that the CAF's project of culture change could founder. Without understanding the rituals that exist within the CAF, they become moments of unseen and unexpected resistance. However, in order to understand the direct and indirect ways in which ritual can impede culture change, we need to know what those rituals are, what purposes they hold, and what elements of the ritual might be problematic. We need to understand how even rituals that are aimed to solidify the collective, to create unit cohesion, may inadvertently or even purposefully exclude individuals. This cannot be done easily with methods like focus groups or townhalls, because unless the mediators of those consultations are already aware of the rituals that may be at play, they are not likely to know to ask questions about them. The connection between ritual and tradition means that these elements of culture remain unnoticed and unexamined unless they are directly observed, witnessed, and experienced. And even then, if that engagement is uncritical or unaware of both the positive and negative potentials of any given ritual and its role within the group, the nuance of how ritual can be that moment of resistance or alternatively a potential catalyst for change, can be easily missed.

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