

Paradigm Shift: Training the Military for Emergency Relief

By Ron Kuban, PhD

Canada's military has a long tradition of responding to natural calamities in support of local (i.e., civil) authorities. During the last decade alone, the military responded to many natural disasters and at the same time worked to enhance its response capacity to such disasters outside Canada's boundaries. To its credit, whenever it responded its contribution was significant. Nevertheless, occasionally its ability to operate at full capacity was limited by its out-of-date or inappropriate operational paradigm. Many reasons, including the growing complexity of emergency management, require the military to review and adapt its emergency-response paradigm.

Research conducted during the last two decades and across many disciplines, confirmed time and again that our world is confronting disasters with greater intensity and frequency. On an average, the number of fatalities per disaster is declining, *but* the extent and cost of other damages (i.e., property, infrastructure, or the environment) are escalating exponentially. Not surprisingly, interest and activity regarding hazard prediction and mitigation, emergency preparedness, disaster management, and recovery have intensified.

The events of September 11, 2001, accelerated the evolution of emergency management. Security is now a significant component of emergency planning or response, sometimes surpassing the traditional preparedness of civil authorities for natural or technological disasters. That change alone, is bringing military and paramilitary services greater visibility within the emergency management community and the public.

The continuing (and escalating) demand for military services is understandable. The military delivers a relative wealth of resources - many of them unique, through a disciplined organization that often reacts with speed, precision, and dogged commitment to stated objectives. The credibility and "presence" of military personnel is often a welcome sight at times of chaos, operational fatigue by others, and loss of hope by the general public. Nevertheless, these same operational strengths also serve as potential barriers to the integration or adaptation of military operations to meet evolving conditions or needs at local level.

Generally speaking, military forces represent a well defined and closed system, whose members operate within hierarchical organization structure, with clearly defined roles and expectations. They often prefer to operate independently and are understandably reluctant to lose control over their resources, activities, and information. In a way, one may make the same claim of non-military (i.e., civilian) organizations. However, the intensity or emphasis of these characteristics is

often less intense or absent in the 'civilian' systems, thereby setting the two cultures apart.

The military-civilian differences become particularly apparent during the response to natural or technological catastrophes that typically unfold under the jurisdiction of the local authorities. Often, the response to these events encourages the creation of 'emergent' organizations, which form during the response period to meet the explicit or unique demands of the situation at hand. While each organization brings its own jurisdiction and roles to the response effort, these quickly blend and adapt to the extraneous needs of the situation as a whole. Initial efforts, which are typically centralized, evolve into a decentralized structure that permits greater adaptation and initiative at the lowest level of response, even by members of non-government organizations (NGOs). Additionally, the overall structure of the civilian response organization transforms during the response period to allow for a less hierarchical approach.

The adaptation by the civilian response structure typically goes against the grain of military culture and its preferred way of doing business. This creates a situation that could set the military as an outsider in the local 'response team', and may result in unnecessary friction, conflict, reduced capacity, or failure. A further complication in military-civilian integration is the inherent day-to-day insulation of the military from its civilian emergency partners.

If the military is to better adapt to the evolving field of emergency management and disaster response at local level, it requires a paradigm shift. This demands a reassessment of its role and responsibilities in emergency planning and response effort within Canada, clarification of its partners or key stakeholders, and definition of how it is likely to interact with these partners.

To date, the military's involvement in disaster response has been akin to a major supplier contracted to deliver little-available (i.e., unique, specialized, or expensive) resources, where urgently needed. This kind of arrangement limits interaction to a specific (and often limited) arrangement, and minimizes the ability of local response agencies or the military to fully explore the potential of their relationship. It also has the potential of keeping the military at arms length and preventing it from contributing as a true partner, which it should, particularly in large-scale catastrophes.

Consider for example, the impact across Canada of catastrophic events the likes of health-related outbreaks (e.g., pandemic flu or Foot and Mouth Disease), wide-area disruption (e.g., to transportation or utilities), or mass evacuations that overwhelm local or provincial authorities. In such circumstances, the military would likely serve at the local level as a key partner, or in a leading role. To do so successfully, military personnel need to be better prepared. The key question is: How? The answer is not the status quo.

Relatively few of Canada's military personnel focus on emergency management. Stationed in strategic locations across the country, they often serve as liaison to provincial Emergency Measures Organizations (EMOs), and help coordinate emergency planning with other agencies, notably at federal and provincial/territorial level. These individuals also help coordinate the military's activities or resources with local needs, when the military is deployed to disasters at local/provincial level. The military's underlying presumption is that it could and would continue to operate in a disaster zone as it would in the course of its normal (i.e., military or armed) duties. This presumption is faulty, because it assumes sufficient similarities between disaster response and armed combat environments to treat them alike. In fact, the two are different. Even at local level, practitioners (e.g., fire, police, medical, social services) have long realized that they need to adapt their day-to-day SOPs to emergency-based operations because the two environments are significantly different.

It is important, therefore, that those who structure and coordinate the military's emergency response effort be well informed of the realities and evolving nature of emergency management. This kind of information needs to reach the troops before they are deployed to disaster scenes, so that they are better prepared (and able) to operate in the unique environment of disaster response at local level. When deployed, these troops and their commanders also need to understand the jurisdiction of Canadian local authorities and their response agencies, the broad mechanisms taken by these agencies to respond to disasters, and the linkages between their response system/structure and the military.

Successful emergency response is founded on effective emergency planning. Here too the military would be well served to become a more active and *visible* player in provincial emergency planning. While that could place additional burdens on the military, it would nevertheless pay big dividends: closer and more positive relationships with key stakeholders at local level, more effective planning effort, and enhanced public image. Stated differently, military planners need to frame the role the military would play in local catastrophic events as more than a mere "supplier". Then, there is the matter of the post-disaster recovery operations to restore life to some sense of 'normal'.

Canada's military personnel are rarely deployed in support of the post-disaster recovery or restoration period. There are valid reasons for this limitation on the military's role on behalf of the local authority. Nevertheless, for two reasons, the military must strive to enhance its capacity during this phase. One is that its personnel are likely to be affected by the traumas of the disaster event and the response to it, and may seek counseling and other support. Two, the military's facility may be affected by the disaster agent and may require direct recovery action. This action may have an impact at local level, or the community where the military is stationed.

Canada's military has a long and proud tradition of assisting local authorities during disaster. It could continue to act as a supplier of much needed goods. However, to be more effective the military must reassess its emergency management capacity in the context of evolving emergency management principles and practices. This would require a paradigm shift away from the extension of armed combat-mentality towards the current realities of emergency management at local level.

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