

## Crisis in the Canadian Military

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## **Review Essay**

### **Crisis in the Canadian Military**

Bercuson, David. *Significant Incident: Canada's Army, the Airborne, and the Murder in Somalia*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1996.

Taylor, Scott and Brian Nolan. *Tarnished Brass: Crime and Corruption in the Canadian Military*. Toronto: Lester, 1996.

On 16 March 1993, Shidane Arone, a teenage Somali prisoner, was tortured and beaten to death by members of the Canadian Airborne Regiment serving in a peacekeeping mission in Somalia. This incident led to cover-ups, media saturation, court-martials, the disbandment of the Airborne, suicide attempts, resignations, and a full-scale government inquiry. However, the complete truth of what has become the worst scandal in the history of Canada's military has yet to come out. Two books try to provide some perspective on not only the events in Somalia, but on the greater issue of the crisis in the Canadian military.

The first of these books was written by the well-known military historian David Bercuson. In *Significant Incident: Canada's Army, the Airborne, and the Murder in Somalia*, Bercuson argues that the Arone killing was not an isolated incident, but was inevitable because of the systemic problems inside of the Canadian armed forces, and in particular, the Airborne Regiment. In short, Arone's death could be traced to the fact that "Canada's people, government, military, and specifically its army have failed to keep real soldiers, combat effectiveness, and traditional military leadership at the centre of the Canadian army." (p. 238-39)

Bercuson uses the murder in Somalia to place a microscope over the Canadian army's regimental system, the changes that the military has undergone in the post-World War II era, and the creation of the Airborne Regiment. It is his view that Canada's long peace since World War II has led to a policy of bureaucratization, civilianization, and careerism inside of its armed forces, which has led to the proliferation of soldier-managers to the detriment of soldier-warriors. This has taken away from what should be the primary goal of an army; fighting wars.

In his section specifically on the Somalia affair, Bercuson points out that the Airborne regiment was deployed despite its well-known discipline problems. It is suggested that the Canadian armed forces were greatly overextended by the peacekeeping missions in Cambodia and Bosnia, and that if Canada was going to participate in the Somalia operation, it had little choice but to send the Airborne. This is an important revelation, and should have had some elaboration. Have defence cuts reached the point that DND (Department of National Defence) must deploy ill-disciplined regiments, require soldiers to do multiple tours of duty, and rely heavily on reservists, in order to accommodate

promises made by the politicians in Ottawa? Perhaps this is the real root of the crisis in the Canadian military, and the rest of the issues, i.e., lack of leadership, are simply the outcome.

The second book, *Tarnished Brass: Crime and Corruption in the Canadian Military*, was co-written by Scott Taylor, the editor and publisher of *Esprit de Corps* magazine, and Brian Nolan, a military affairs journalist. *Tarnished Brass* does not have the historical scope of the previous book, as it goes back only to the late 1980s, but it is in this period that the two villains – former Deputy Minister of DND Robert Fowler and former Chief of Defence Staff John de Chastelain – take centre stage. According to Taylor and Nolan, "it was under their stewardship that greed and corruption flourished in the high command." (p. 11)

Taylor and Nolan have a two-pronged thesis. The first is that Canada's "defence budget is nothing more than a pork barrel free for the plundering." (p. 134) They argue this point in many ways: the growth in Canada's "general to grunt" ratio; the high spending practices of senior officers and civilians inside of DND; and the billions which have been wasted in the procurement process. A very brief catalogue of these stories would include: a golfing junket in Florida for the Canadian air force ("Operation Palm Tree"); the existence of a large slush fund which generals and other senior officers use to cover entertainment expenses; a bongo-playing seminar for stressed out civilian DND workers; and air force commanders using CF-18's as their own personal taxis. Second, is the assertion that senior members of DND (military and civilian) have been above the law. This is explained by pointing to systematic deficiencies inside of the military justice system. The Somalia affair is used to show how "the present senior management at DND have been singularly unable and unwilling to apply justice fairly across the Canadian Forces rank structure." (p. 245) For example, Taylor and Nolan show how the treatment that Private Kyle Brown received (five years in a military prison) was in stark contrast to those much higher up on the chain of command (no charges or acquittals).

These two books form a good tandem for understanding the crisis in the Canadian military. *Significant Incident* is a well-written, analytical and nuanced book which provides plenty of historical and comparative context to support its thesis. Its evidence was gathered through a gleaning of academic writings and personal interviews with senior officers. On the other hand, *Tarnished Brass* is a muckraking volume as it documents, in exacting detail, story after story of corruption within the Canadian military during the 1990s. At times, *Tarnished Brass*, due to its reliance on *Esprit de Corps'* extensive files of DND leaks and access-to-information requests, reads like a highlight reel of the magazine. Unfortunately, it is not written especially well, particularly in comparison to *Significant Incident*. For example, Taylor and Nolan frequently use the National Defence Headquarters phone book to illustrate their points. Once was cute, twice was satisfactory, but five or six times made the reader wonder whether the phone book was their primary source of research!

Although obtaining both books would be the ideal, if a reader must choose the choice should be made on what one's intellectual needs are. If one is seeking a deeper

understanding of the crisis in the Canadian military, then Significant Incident is for them. However, if they are looking for plenty of examples of corruption in the Canadian military which can be threaded through their own research, then they should pick up Tarnished Brass. In short, Significant Incident examines systemic causes, while Tarnished Brass examines personalities.

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