

Operation LENTUS and You – An Emergency Manager’s Guide to the CAF

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Members of the CAF and RCMP working together in response to BC wildfires. Photo by MCpl Malcom Byers

Author Note:

I have no known conflict of interest to disclose.

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Introduction

As the scale and frequency of natural disasters and other emergencies continues to rise in Canada, the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) has increasingly taken part in domestic disaster assistance operations. Operation LENTUS, being the CAF's name for all domestic natural disaster assistance operations, has seen the deployment of thousands of CAF personnel over recent years (Government of Canada, 2020). The same is true for Operation LASER and VECTOR—the CAF's operations in support of COVID-19 mitigation and vaccination efforts respectively (Government of Canada, 2021e; Government of Canada, 2021f). As such, emergency management (EM) practitioners are increasingly interacting with CAF personnel, both in headquarters environments for operational planning as well as in field conditions during the execution of specific EM tasks. Despite this, and by no fault of their own, many EM practitioners are unfamiliar with the CAF and are subsequently unsure how best to integrate CAF resources into their operations. Due to the complex nature of interagency EM operations, fostering mutual understanding and awareness is crucial to conducting effective EM operations. As such, this paper seeks to bridge this gap in the general knowledge of emergency managers towards their CAF partners during domestic operations.

In doing so, this paper will explain and discuss various aspects of the CAF in domestic operations across the complete spectrum of operations, from legislative/strategic considerations to aspects of local execution of EM tasks. These explanations will serve as a starting point for emergency managers to improve their understanding of the CAF and guide their considerations when working in partnership with the CAF. It is hoped that bridging this gap will improve the operational effectiveness of CAF-Civil authority interagency operations and subsequently benefit Canadians in their times of need.

How is the CAF Structured?

At first glance, the CAF appears to be an extremely complex, sometimes confusing organization—an impression that is sometimes even shared by CAF members themselves. As the

single largest organization in the Government of Canada (GoC), the CAF employs approximately 80,000 service members and maintains 24/7 operations across the world (Government of Canada, 2021a). As laid out in Canada's most recent defence policy, *Strong, Secure, Engaged* (2017), the CAF is mandated to operate along three broad lines of effort: to ensure Canadian sovereignty and assist in EM, contribute to the security of North America through the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) and other partnerships with the US, and pursue the interests of the GoC abroad (Government of Canada, 2017).

Headed by the Chief of the Defense Staff (CDS), the CAF is split into three branches based on their traditional operating environment: The Royal Canadian Navy (RCN), Canadian Army (CA), and Royal Canadian Airforce (RCAF). These branches are responsible for conducting individual and collective training to force generate personnel for use in operations. When employed in domestic disaster assistance operations, CAF personnel fall under the command of Canadian Joint Operations Command (CJOC)¹.

It should be noted that, while each of the three branches wear distinct uniforms and insignia, the CAF operates under a unified command and has done so since unification in 1969. That is to say, all CAF personnel, regardless of branch, operate under the same command structure. A Captain in the RCAF holds the same authority as a Captain in the CA when working with the other's branch, and despite differences in their uniforms, all military personnel are members of a single unified chain of command beginning with the CDS. While some cultural and operational difficulties still exist when operating in joint environments, this allows the CAF to overcome administrative challenges faced by other organizations when integrating vastly different capabilities together.

¹ CJOC is one of 4 operational commands in the CAF which employ personnel on operations. The others include Canadian Forces Intelligence Command (CFINTCOM), Canadian Special Operations Command (CANSOFCOM), and CAF operations under joint US-Canadian North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD).

At the regional level, CAF operations are managed by 6 Regional Joint Task Forces (RJTFs) (Government of Canada, 2018). These include RJTF Atlantic in the maritime provinces, RJTF East in Quebec, RJTF Central covering the Province of Ontario, RJTF West spanning from Manitoba to Alberta, RJTF Pacific operating in British Columbia, and RJTF North being responsible for the 3 territories. These RJTFs are responsible for managing the operational employment for CAF personnel within their areas of responsibility and for maintaining continuous situational awareness of the security and defense environment within their areas of responsibility. During domestic operations, RJTF commanders will form task-tailored forces and direct their employment in assisting civil authorities. As such, these RJTFs form the brain and backbone from which CAF domestic deployments are directed.

Building upon that, although often mistakenly believed to be the same organization, the Department of National Defense (DND) and the CAF are two distinct organizations. DND employs approximately 20,000 civilian employees and is responsible for supporting the Minister of National Defense (MND) in administering the entirety of the government's defense portfolio. This portfolio includes the CAF as well as other organizations such as the Communications Security Establishment and Defence Research and Development Canada. In this sense, CAF personnel are not public servants as defined by the *Public Service Act*. While civilian DND personnel sometimes participate in CAF operations, their presence is normally limited to specific support and specialist roles which the CAF cannot provide itself.

Legislative and Strategic Considerations

Deploying the CAF in assistance of civil authorities is an increasingly frequent occurrence. Despite this, deploying the CAF in domestic operations is a relatively complex, legislatively founded process that requires coordination and cooperation between several different organizations across provincial and federal levels. As such, this process necessitates an understanding of different pieces of legislation that enable and place reasonable restrictions on domestic deployments of the CAF.

Any request for assistance from the federal government begins with, as its name suggests, a request from provincial public safety authorities to their federal counterparts. Once requested, the federal Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness is responsible for “coordinating the provision of assistance to a province in respect of a provincial emergency” from the CAF, as per the *Emergency Management Act* (2007). It should be noted that this authority is limited to emergencies not included under Part VI of the *National Defense Act*, which legislates the deployment of the CAF specifically in response to riots or other disturbances to the peace. In such situations, requests for assistance from the CAF are requested to the CDS from provincial Attorneys General. This distinction is important because the legislative mechanism under which the CAF is deployed frames the type of activities that CAF members can be employed in while assisting civilian authorities. Prior understanding of these differences can inform the expectations of civilian EM personnel when considering how best to integrate the CAF in their operations. That is to say, when deployed in response to a request from provincial public safety authorities, CAF members do not necessarily have any special authority to maintain peace and public order. Rather, they are simply present to aid in addressing the disaster at hand. Conversely, CAF personnel deployed in 1970 and 1990 in response to the October Crisis and Oka Crisis respectively were mandated to restore public order and were authorized to use force if required (Grant, 1998).

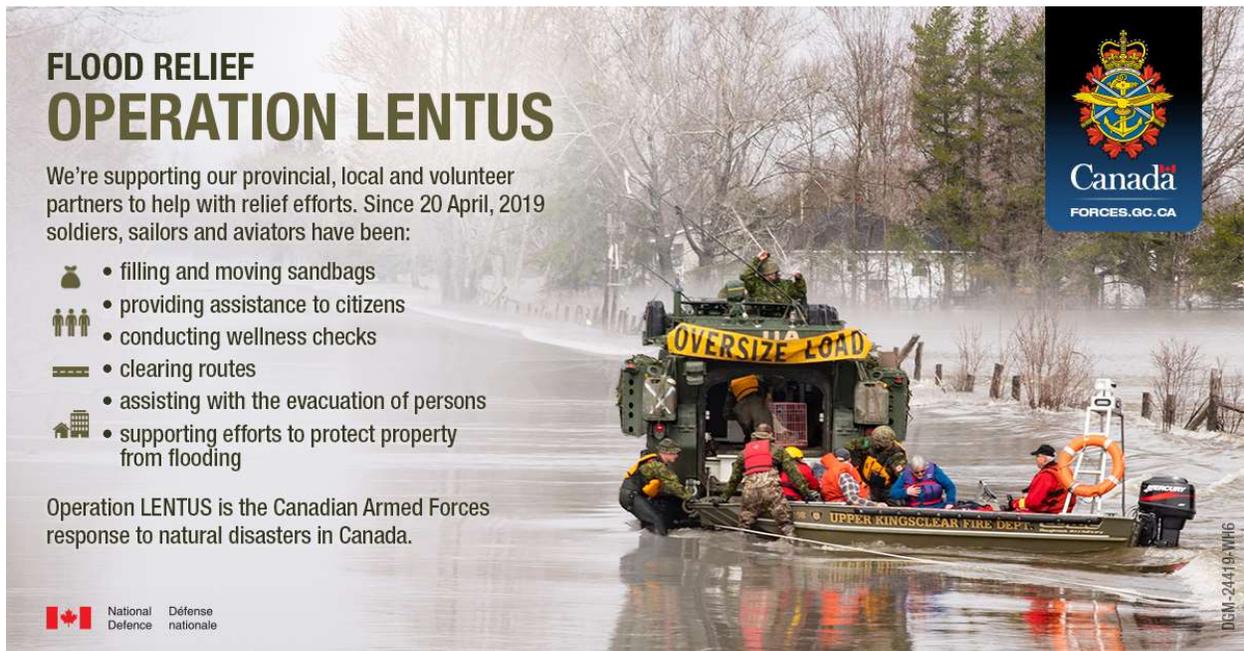


(Left) CAF members responding to the 1990 Oka Crisis (*The Canadian Press/Tom Hansen*). (Right) CAF members responding to 2013 Alberta floods (*Government of Canada*)

In natural disasters or other situations requiring the CAF to assist in EM, the Minister of Public Safety may, in consultation with Public Safety Canada's (PSC) Government Operations Centre, forward the request to the MND. The MND, under section 273.6(1) of the *National Defense Act*, may then authorize the CAF to "perform any duty involving public service." Previously, duties which the CAF has been authorized to carry out under this legislation includes clearing roads, transporting civilians and EM personnel, and supporting efforts to limit the scale of the disaster and protect property. Once authorized, CJOC and Regional JTFs will establish task-tailored groups of military personnel and equipment to begin responding to said emergency.

Operational Considerations

Once deployed, the CAF can bring a plethora of capabilities to local and provincial EM practitioners. While the specific capabilities brought to bear will vary depending on the nature of the emergency and structuring of the responding task force, they can be conceptualized across three distinct categories: mobility and logistics, scale, and unlimited liability and endurance.



**FLOOD RELIEF
OPERATION LENTUS**

We're supporting our provincial, local and volunteer partners to help with relief efforts. Since 20 April, 2019 soldiers, sailors and aviators have been:

- filling and moving sandbags
- providing assistance to citizens
- conducting wellness checks
- clearing routes
- assisting with the evacuation of persons
- supporting efforts to protect property from flooding

Operation LENTUS is the Canadian Armed Forces response to natural disasters in Canada.

Canada
FORCES.GC.CA

National Defence / Défense nationale

UPPER KINGSCLEAR FIRE DEPT.

OVERSIZE LOAD

DEM-24419-WMG

Operation Lentus – Produced and Published by DND

Mobility and logistics

The CAF is unique within the GoC in the physical mobility of its forces and its robust logistical support system. That is to say, the CAF is generally able to physically deploy personnel and provide logistical support anywhere in Canada, and at relatively short notice. CAF vehicles and equipment can often traverse otherwise inaccessible areas such as flooded city streets. Building upon that, the Royal Canadian Airforce, through its strategic lift capabilities, is able to relatively quickly transport supplies and equipment essentially anywhere it is required in Canada. We can see this capability being exploited today in the CAF's provision of logistical support to communities in northern Manitoba aiding the Government of Manitoba's vaccination efforts in said isolated communities (Government of Canada, 2021c).

Scale

The CAF is again unique among public organizations in Canada in its ability to muster large numbers of personnel and equipment at relatively short notice. As previously mentioned, each of the CAF's regional joint task forces maintains immediate reaction forces for quick deployment to developing emergencies. The CAF also has the ability to deploy many hundreds more personnel if needed. For comparison, the Surete du Quebec (Quebec Provincial Police) currently employs approximately 5000 sworn officers across the province. The CAF Joint Task Force East (covering the province of Quebec) contains approximately 10,000 regular and reserve army personnel from the 2nd Canadian Division, as well as approximately 1000 RCAF personnel and a small number of Royal Canadian Navy personnel. In this sense, while the CAF's workforce is not unlimited, it is often higher than any other public organization. This capability can be seen in the 2020 deployment of approximately 1500 CAF personnel to support long term care homes in the province of Quebec as part of Operation LASER (Government of Canada, 2021e). During this operation, the CAF deployed a large number of medical staff, including military nursing officers and medical technicians.

Other personnel were also deployed to assist with important non-medical tasks such as food delivery and general caretaking/sanitation services (Government of Canada, 2021e).

Unlimited Liability and Endurance

The CAF is also unique amongst government organizations in its ability to provide persistent support over long periods of time and through challenging/dangerous conditions. From a cultural standpoint, the CAF generally accepts extended physical and mental hardships as a reality of their employment. While at sea for extended deployments on naval vessels or operating in austere field conditions, CAF members are no strangers to physically and mentally challenging environments. This is also reflected in the concept of unlimited liability which all CAF members accept upon their enrollment (Government of Canada, 2019). This concept stipulates that members of the CAF are liable for anything up to and including the loss of their life in the execution of their duties. In other words, where other public safety organizations can not legally oblige their personnel to carry out unusually dangerous or arduous tasks, the CAF has the cultural acceptance and legal authority to do so. This extremely unique aspect frames CAF operational planning and manifests itself in the CAF's institutional focus on the principle of "mission first." While civilian EM personnel are no more or less dedicated to their profession than CAF members, these important, unique aspects of the CAF's operational philosophy must be understood by EM practitioners when working with the CAF. That is to say, while civilian EM organizations may be limited in the number of consecutive daily hours their personnel can work or the conditions they can work in, CAF personnel do not necessarily have such limitations. That being said, it must be noted that the CAF takes the safety and security of its members extremely seriously. Commanders at all levels are responsible for ensuring the well-being of their subordinates at all times, and the imposition of unnecessary suffering or risk is unacceptable. Thus, the CAF's ability to endure hardship is a highly unique capability which is not taken lightly by CAF leadership.

All that being said, when deployed on domestic disaster assistance operations, the CAF is normally deployed to assist provincial and local EM organizations. That is to say, regardless of the presence of the CAF, disaster and emergency management remains the responsibility of responding public safety organizations. As such, the CAF and the capabilities it brings integrates itself into emergency managers' plans, not vice versa. While it can be intimidating for some junior public safety personnel to approach military personnel, integrating the unique capabilities of the CAF requires dialog. This is true both at the operational level as well as the local level, where the initiative of junior EM and CAF personnel is critical for driving EM operations. EM practitioners should not hesitate to initiate local-level discussion and planning with any CAF personnel they might find themselves working in proximity to. While operational level discussions are often more formal and procedural in nature, at the local level, such discussions could be held on an ad-hoc basis as required. Doing so would allow junior EM practitioners to maintain much needed flexibility in their operations while simultaneously improving CAF integration into EM operations. At the operational and strategic levels, senior EM practitioners should familiarize themselves with CAF policies and legislation. Having a basic, prior understanding of CAF policies and legislation would significantly benefit senior EM practitioners when planning operational integration of CAF resources into EM response plans.

Conclusion

Emergencies and disasters in Canada are unfortunately increasing in frequency and intensity. As such, provincial authorities are increasingly requesting support from the CAF to provide assistance to provincial and municipal EM organizations. Indeed, integrating the CAF's unique capabilities has the potential to vastly improve the ability of provincial and local EM practitioners to respond to emergency situations. Despite this, EM practitioners are often unfamiliar with the CAF and are subsequently unsure how best to integrate the CAF into their operations and leverage said benefits. This is especially true at the local level, where chaotic environments can contribute to

confusion about individual and group roles within overall operational EM plans. While there is much that could be done to ameliorate this, independently initiated local level dialog with CAF members is one of the most important things that junior EM personnel could do to ameliorate this.

The CAF is a vast institution with sprawling bureaucratic, administrative, and operational components spread across Canada and the world. Fully describing such an organization would require a more in-depth discussion than what is possible in this article. However, it is hoped that this article will serve as a starting point for EM practitioners in improving their understanding of the CAF in disaster assistance operations, and subsequently improve their ability to conduct interagency EM operations with their colleagues in camouflage.

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