
“A nurse in Somalia and the current call to increase women’s membership in the Canadian Armed Forces. A retrospective re-interpretation.”

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What can we learn from one person’s oral testimony some thirty years after key events have taken place? This piece offers new insights into the 1993 Canadian deployment to Somalia (known as Operation Deliverance), adding to the historiography by revealing how a naval nursing officer serving in this operation used her professional and gender-specific skills to enhance United Nations (UN) operational goals. Looking back at the constructed memories of this particular woman offers us a rare glimpse into how that deployment changed her as a person, as a nurse, and as an officer, increasing her confidence in nursing ethical practices and in her leadership abilities. This retrospective account, drawing upon the author’s 2021 whole life oral history interviews with Rebecca Patterson, government reports, and selective works about this event, tells a compelling story and, for the first time, demonstrates how gender influenced the Canadian Armed Forces’ (CAF’s) ability to provide key operational capabilities in Somalia.¹

As one of only seven women serving in this Canadian deployment, Rebecca Patterson was at the time known under her maiden name, Lieutenant (Navy) Rebecca Gowthorpe. In this account, I will refer to Rear Admiral Rebecca Patterson as “the Rear Admiral”, “this nurse”, and as “Lieutenant (Navy) Rebecca Gowthorpe” and variations on these terms. These terms emphasize three contrasting aspects of her story. The first, her rank at retirement, is used to emphasize that these 2021 constructed memories reflect

¹ The Rear-Admiral made explanatory additions and corrections for clarity to the original quotes from the 2021 interviews on 31 October 2022. These are indicated in the notes.

three decades of increasing responsibilities, including service in Afghanistan and not just the immediate reactions she experienced at the time.² The direct quotes in the latter part of the article are the mature deliberations of an individual who balanced a demanding and successful career with a family life. As such, they represent her own words and new insights into this deployment. The second term is used to highlight how *this nurse* drew upon specific professional skills to benefit Somalis and members of the CAF. The last term separates this early period of her service when she was a young single woman, not yet married, but already in a position of some authority as a new officer. As a result of her experiences in Somalia, Lieutenant (Navy) Rebecca Gowthorpe consciously became a feminist, an activist, and a leader – willing to stand up and speak out against wrongdoing. Somalia stayed with her for the rest of her service and she continued to ruminate on its lessons. Thus, although these constructed memories came after a myriad of other experiences, this particular story is about a single woman not yet thirty years of age who was thrust into an exceptionally demanding post which changed her life forever.

Before we dive into quotes from her interviews, I will briefly describe the Somalia Crisis, its aftermath, and scholarly studies of it. The crisis resulted in a mountain of evidence and many studies which warrant separate analyses beyond the scope of this article. Here I focus on select studies to frame this particular story, covering some lingering historical controversies, and emphasizing the key points linked to the oral testimony which follows. In the last twenty years, as a result of global feminist scholarship, the UN has called for greater female participation in military deployments in recognition of the important role played by women in building peace and protecting women's rights.³ However, the Somalia Crisis scholarship generally did not address this topic nor did it provide any positive insights about how women might improve the CAF operational performances. New historiographical trends provide insights into the interplay among discriminatory behaviours, warrior culture, and caregiving which may benefit the CAF leadership as they seek to create a diverse and effective combat force.⁴ In this particular article, we will see how the Somalia experience reinforced Lieutenant (Navy) Gowthorpe's compassion and the ethical leadership derived from her professional knowledge from the first moment when she arrived in the bleak desert

² The Rear-Admiral was appointed to the Canadian Senate and retired from the CAF in 2022.

³ United Nations, *Women in Peacekeeping. A key to peace*. Accessed 6 October 2022. [Women in peacekeeping | United Nations Peacekeeping](#), p. 1

⁴ Isabel Campbell, "How emerging trends in historiography expose the Canadian Army's past discriminatory practices and provide hope for future change," *International Journal*, October 2021, pp. 465-476.

amidst bitter tribal warfare. Somalia became the unlikely crucible for a transformational feminist leadership role in the CAF.

Somalia had endured division under colonial rule. The British and Italian areas united in 1960 to form the independent Somalia Republic with multiple political parties aligned to specific clans competing in a newly established legislature. Major General Siad Barre, the chief of the armed forces, overthrew this democracy in 1969. His government was dominated by only three clans. When war broke out with Ethiopia (aided by the Soviets), Barre threw out his Soviet military advisors and sought American aid. Clan warfare worsened and towards the end of the Cold War (1989), the Americans halted aid amidst accusations of Barre-led genocide. By late 1991, the central government collapsed and the UN withdrew its agencies. Famine spread amidst the anarchic fighting and the distribution of international aid became increasingly dangerous.

The UN 1992 decision to intervene in Somalia came after that country broke into civil war at the end of Siad Barre's regime in 1991. About two million of the six million Somalian people became refugees, fleeing from their traditional areas. Anthropologist Donna Winslow described how most Somalis lived a nomadic, clan-based life. Men had several wives who performed most of the demanding physical labour, including caring for camels and other animals. All endured scorching days darkened with dust and sand blowing continuously during the dry seasons. Somali culture adapted to these harsh scarce conditions, with highly gendered family relationships very different from those found in Canada.⁵

Amidst rising global criticism, the UN declared an arms embargo and then negotiated a short cease-fire in early 1992.⁶ While Canada hoped to re-establish humanitarian relief amidst starvation, the UN required armed peacekeeping forces to protect and distribute relief, especially food resources. Although the Americans, the British, and the French expressed doubts about the viability of peacekeeping amidst violent chaos, pressure grew for the UN to intervene. When the Brian Mulroney government decided to commit troops to the UN mission in August 1992, the Department of National Defence (DND) warned that the forces were stretched and could not sustain a long mission in Somalia. UN and Canadian goals were limited to guarding food and

⁵ Donna Winslow, *The Canadian Airborne Regiment in Somalia. A Socio-Cultural Inquiry. A Study prepared for the Commission of Inquiry into the Deployment of Canadian Forces in Somalia*, (Ottawa: Public Works, 1997) pp. 157-159.

⁶ Canada. Commission of Inquiry into the Deployment of Forces in Somalia, *Dishonoured Legacy. The Lessons of the Somalia Affair*. (Ottawa: Public Works, 1997) vol. 1, pp. 218-229.

other emergency relief and not to any democratic reconstruction. That mission changed shortly before Canadian deployment when the United States invoked the Chapter VII provisions of the UN charter, authorizing the use of “all necessary means” to establish a secure environment for aid workers, deliveries, and recipients.⁷ The UN forces were decentralized and too small to achieve the modest goal of protecting humanitarian aid.⁸

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In January 1993, Canada deployed three commando units from the Canadian Airborne Regiment (CAR) and other supporting units to Somalia. The regiment and



Our medical facility at the end of the tour.”

(Credit: Rear-Admiral (retired) Rebecca Patterson)

especially 2 Commando had a history of assaults, drunkenness, and other disciplinary issues prior to this date.⁹ Shortly before the deployment, Lieutenant Colonel Paul

⁷ Lieutenant-Colonel (Rtd.) Charles Oliviero, “Operation Deliverance. International Success or Domestic Failure?” *Canadian Military Journal*, 2, 3 (Summer 2001), p. 52; *Dishonoured Legacy*, Vol. 1, pp. 241-242. Canada had initially agreed to provide troops under Chapter VI which permitted deadly force “only for self-preservation.” With other countries withdrawing forces, the U.S. publicly offered to lead the forces, but under Chapter VII in December 1992 because of the increasing danger posed to those distributing aid. Both the Deputy Minister and the Chief of the Defence Staff provided advice to the Minister of National Defence. Many of the issues addressed apply to all of DND as well as the CAF.

⁸ Grant Dawson, “*Here is Hell.*” *Canada’s Engagement in Somalia*, (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2007), pp. 75-98.

⁹ *Dishonoured Legacy*, Vol. 2, pp. 433-443. The Commission of Inquiry cited above noted that some disciplinary or inexperienced soldiers were sent to the CAR, however, the achievements of those who did serve with honour in this

Morneault, the commanding officer of the CAR, was replaced by Lieutenant-Colonel Carol Mathieu because of the ongoing disciplinary issues. Morneault and others had been unable to penetrate “a wall of silence” when they attempted to locate and discipline the worst troublemakers. In addition, the Rules of Engagement were poorly drafted, revised several times, and confusing.¹⁰

Almost immediately after they arrived in Somalia, Major Anthony Seward, the commanding officer of 2 Commando wrote to a senior officer in Canada because his unit had five negligent discharges of weapons and he himself had negligently fired his own weapon.¹¹ These problems were not addressed and, as Patterson’s oral history shows below, this negligence had tragic consequences for those deployed. Worse, under poor leadership members of the CAR shot at Somali intruders and two members of 2 Commando tortured and murdered a Somali teen, Shidane Arone. These horrific events were followed by whistleblowing about these wrongful deaths and cover-ups within DND which became known as the Somalia Crisis. This crisis exposed profound fault lines in DND’s decision-making and leadership failures within the CAF as well as deep-rooted disciplinary issues.¹² As the oral testimony and historiography will show, despite these failures, most of those deployed behaved with restraint and honour under difficult circumstances.

Yet, by the mid-1990s, more stories emerged in the national press revealing racist hazing, criminal acts, and other incidents among the airborne regiment before they were sent to Somalia. After these stories created scandalous headlines, the Canadian Government disbanded the CAR and then created a Commission of Inquiry into its deployment to Somalia.

In 1995, just as the Commission began its work, Lieutenant (Navy) Patterson, (née Gowthorpe) published an early account of the deployment, highlighting the accomplishments of the Canadian medical team in improving hygiene and health care in Somalia between January and June 1993.¹³ She praised this team, including medical

mission should be considered here too. The CAR’s company sized units were called commando units, but its members were paratroopers, rather than commandos.

¹⁰ *Dishonoured Legacy*, Vol. 4, Chapter 22.

¹¹ *Dishonoured Legacy*, Vol. 1, p. 290.

¹² *Dishonoured Legacy*, Vol. 1, Vol. 4.

¹³ E.A. Landells, (ed.) *The Military Nurses of Canada. Recollections of Canadian Military Nurses*, (White Rock, B.C.: Co-Publishing, 1995), pp. 521-534.

assistants, (men and women) whose hands-on care-giving work has rarely received historical attention.¹⁴ She and others did not yet perceive of women as providing unique protections to vulnerable populations and her short chapter published in a book on the history of military nurses did not include any gender analysis. It simply described practical health measures which saved Somali and CAF lives. This chapter and Commission testimony by Patterson and others who served in Somalia with honour provided a refreshing counterpoint to the leadership failures documented when the Commission published its reports about the deployment. It thus marked the beginnings of contrasting historiography, highlighting the CAF's achievements amidst the more dominant early studies which condemned the CAF's failings. However, by the time of her 2021 interviews, Patterson had reflected further on these failings and was more critical of the CAF culture.

In 1996, David Bercuson published *Significant Incident: Canada's Army, the Airborne, and the Murder in Somalia*, beginning with the horrific events in Somalia. He broadly analysed the history of the disbanded airborne regiment and the systematic failings among the CAF leaders, including empire-building and neglecting the welfare of members. While the book contains no gender analysis, Bercuson's condemnation of the prevailing boys will be *boys* attitude and his observations about global paratrooper anti-social traditions accurately describe how deep-seated toxic masculinity created issues in this regiment.¹⁵ Yet, considering all the evidence, his conclusion that paratrooper culture attracted the best and worst sort of soldiers seems well-justified in retrospect.¹⁶

Meanwhile, the Commission held public hearings, analyzed a massive body of evidence, and published extensive recommendations for reforms in *Dishonoured Legacy. The Lessons of the Somalia Affair*.¹⁷ These reports and Patterson's 2021 interviews show that the problems of the disbanded CAR extended to elsewhere in the CAF. Members of the CAR had been drawn from three regular force infantry units. The Royal 22e Régiment fed into 1 Commando; The Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry fed into 2 Commando; and the Royal Canadian Regiment fed into 3 Commando.¹⁸ As we will see,

¹⁴ Isabel Campbell, "How emerging trends in historiography expose the Canadian Army's past discriminatory practices and provide hope for future change," *International Journal*, October 2021, p. 473.

¹⁵ David J. Bercuson, *Significant Incident: Canada's Army, the Airborne, and Murder in Somalia*, (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1996), pp. 192-216.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 238-9.

¹⁷ Canada. Commission of Inquiry into the Deployment of Forces in Somalia, *Dishonoured Legacy. The Lessons of the Somalia Affair*. (Ottawa: Public Works, 1997) 7 volumes.

¹⁸ *Dishonoured Legacy*, Vol. 2, pp. 433-443.

years later the Rear-Admiral remembered the hostility she encountered before the Somalia posting. The Commission was correct that hazing and harassment spread further than the CAR and these issues did not disappear with its disbandment.

By 1997, the government, concerned over sagging CAF morale, shut down the Commission, while sponsoring academic studies to address defence difficulties. Professors David J. Bercuson, Jack L. Granatstein, Albert Legault, and Desmond Morton made recommendations for mandatory officer education programs and other measures designed to improve officer leadership in their 1997 published papers to the Minister.¹⁹ Patterson's 2021 testimony, below, about her return to university supports the merits of these particular recommendations. Bercuson, Morton, and the Commission acknowledged the honourable service of most of the Canadian service people deployed to Somalia, but their general conclusions rightly condemned the poor leadership and a careerist mentality among the Canadian officers.²⁰

Granatstein and Legault tended to blame societal changes for the CAF difficulties. While they and Bercuson supported the integration of women and minorities into combat forces, these scholars warned against any lowering of physical standards. None of these scholars undertook any sort of gender analysis, yet Morton attributed an improvement in the Royal Military College to the addition of women and he enthusiastically endorsed CAF cultural changes to welcome a younger generation with "double its pool of dedication and talent." These scholars thus mirrored mixed attitudes found in the CAF and in Canadian society towards female soldiers and opposition to specific changes designed to integrate them into the services.²¹ Few people considered that women might provide expert professional skills of exceptional value in deployments like Somalia. As we will see, it took thirty years for that insight to finally come to our attention through this oral history.

In the aftermath of the Crisis, many service people struggled to maintain high morale, while acknowledging systematic weaknesses. Lieutenant-Colonel (Rtd.) Charles

¹⁹ *Paper(s) prepared for the Minister of National Defence*, by D.J. Bercuson, PhD, FRSC, University of Calgary, and Dr. J.L. Granatstein, Canadian Institute of International Affairs, Professor Albert Legault, Laval University, and Desmond Morton, McGill Institute for the Study of Canada, (Toronto: Institute of International Affairs, 25 March 1997)

²⁰ *Dishonoured Legacy*, Executive summary, ES-17, ES-43, ES-50-51.

²¹ Bercuson, p. 19; Granatstein, p. 13; Legault, p. 51; Morton, pp. 23, 29. Later on, military scholars began to question traditional upper body strength tests which did not necessarily relate to combat capability. Such tests filtered out females with strong fitness and superior combat capabilities as measured by better testing. Assumptions about "lowered standards" impaired rational assessment of female performances.

Oliviero demonstrated exactly those characteristics in his 2002 article entitled “Operation Deliverance: International Success or Domestic Failure?” He focused upon operational overstretch, last-minute ad hoc solutions, and doctrinal deficiencies, while emphasizing that the deployment actually accomplished its goals of safely delivering humanitarian aid, saving countless Somalis in the process.²² His article did not mention the few women who had served there, but he came to the same general conclusion that Patterson had reached in 1995 about the medical team. Overall, the deployment accomplished its difficult goals.

This conclusion was bolstered when Grant Dawson published *Here is Hell. Canada's Engagement in Somalia* in 2005. He emphasized the international context, the changes in the United Nations' goals, the increasing hostility of Somalis to foreign troops, and the extreme conditions on the ground.²³ Dawson acknowledged questionable orders that directly led to criminal acts, including Lieutenant-Colonel Carol Mathieu's 28 January 1993 instruction that Somali thieves raiding Camp Pegasus could be shot and Major Anthony Seward's order that intruders infiltrating the Commando (Airborne) compound should be abused shortly before the torture and murder of Arone. Some commanders refused to pass on Mathieu's order on legal grounds and apparently, other members missed “a nuance” in Seward's order that intruders not be killed.²⁴

Although Dawson is correct that most of the troopers and other service people deployed on Operation Deliverance performed challenging tasks with dedication and efficiency, his own points above and other evidence contradict his final conclusion “that the Somalia mission, was for the most part, handled professionally and competently.” The deployment accomplished its challenging tasks, but too many, including officers, displayed little regard for the rule of law, safety measures, and other professional standards of conduct during the mission.²⁵ All those members who served with honour putting their lives at risk to guard humanitarian aid deserved better from their leaders. Further, Dawson ignored the insidious CAF cultural issues brought to the fore by other scholars of the crisis and reinforced them in these 2021 interviews.

²² Oliviero, “Operation Deliverance,” p. 55.

²³ Dawson, *Here is Hell* p., 170.

²⁴ Dawson, *Here is Hell*, pp. 156-7. Seward's order was on or about 14 March, just two days before Shidane Arone was tortured and murdered.

²⁵ Dawson, “*Here is Hell*,” p. 170; *Dishonoured Legacy*, Vol. 4 details failures among senior leaders. The Commission's other reports detail multiple issues, including the negligent firings of weapons.

In the intervening years, scholars have focused more on gender, military culture, and operational performances, leading to new insights. Most recently, historian Charlotte Duval-Lantoine analyzed toxic masculinity and its negative effects on operational performances. In her 2022 book *The Ones We Let Down*, she describes how the Somalia Crisis represented the climax of the “decade of darkness” a term referring to the period between 1989 and 1999 which included concurrent difficulties, beginning with budget cuts, external pressures for cultural changes including employment equity, and the above mentioned Commission of Inquiry.²⁶ In this key work, she explains how those examining the separate matter of gender integration during the 1990s flagged the issues of harassment and assault of female members along with the perceptions that women were weaker, less qualified, and also being favoured, even as those women endured hostility directed against them.²⁷ And so the few women serving in Somalia received almost no recognition for the special gender-related skills they brought to this challenging environment.²⁸

The oral history interviews discussed here are particularly relevant at this juncture because Patterson gained a deeper appreciation of how her nursing skills and her gender enhanced Canadian capabilities in Operation Deliverance over time. Her retrospective insights were informed by a long career dedicated to the well-being of all members of the CAF, by feminist activism and humanitarian motivations, as well as recent experiences in attempting to implement Operation Honour, measures designed to prevent and address sexual misconduct in the CAF.

She was just 27 years old when, as Lieutenant (Navy) Gowthorpe, she walked out of a Hercules aircraft, facing into the wind, dust and intense heat of the Somali desert. It was not the first time she had faced danger. Although a newly minted direct entry officer, she had already served in the First Gulf War.²⁹ The worst part of that 1991 experience occurred when some Royal Canadian Regiment Battle School officers at Petawawa, who had not been assigned to this mission, hazed members of No. 1 Canadian Field Hospital (which included four male nurses) before they departed for Saudi Arabia. In her words:

²⁶ Charlotte Duval-Lantoine, *The Ones We Let Down. Toxic Leadership Culture and Gender Integration in the Canadian Forces*, (Montreal, Kingston: McGill-Queen’s Press, 2022), pp.78-9.

²⁷ Duval-Lantoine, *The Ones We Let Down*, chapter 4. On p. 102, she notes that Colonel Serge Labbé, the senior commander in Somalia had been accused with harassment and sexual assault by a waitress in Kingston in 1996.

²⁸ The Commission, for example, interviewed the deployed women, but they did not address their gender specific skill set or experiences which were outside the terms of reference.

²⁹ The term direct entry refers to officers who entered the forces with a completed diploma.

We endured psychological torture from our own people. Told we'd be captured and tortured, have our nipples cut off, and watch babies being killed... Really terrible that our own people were attacking us and trying to demoralize us... the reality was we were very good at what we did. Once they arrived in the field, relations among the Canadians [including Charles Company 1 RCR deployed as a protection force for 1 Canadian Field Hospital] improved. Soldiers accompanied wounded Iraqis. [They] got to see how professional we were... have to see value, others, not the trigger-pullers, bring to the table.³⁰

Even before that hazing, in 1989 she had found the French language school in St. Jean, Quebec to be "very toxic... but I'm like, brushed myself off, picked myself up, and moved on to the next thing." These quotes reinforce the critical scholarship about the CAF culture (described above), but they also provide a more hopeful message. Gowthorpe believed that she and her fellow medical personnel impressed combat soldiers once they actually got into action.

Always searching for the positive, she developed deep bonds, lifelong relationships with men who were like "brothers... like family to me." She established precisely the type of camaraderie which misogynists had long argued that women (and others) destroyed in combat units.³¹ "It's very hard for us when we see our family attacked. Whether it's from within or without. Very hard for us." Her father had been a Royal Canadian Navy stoker and her mother, a Royal Naval nurse. She and her siblings had served as sea cadets during their teen years. And so, she considered herself part of the service family from day one and she used the term "family" to describe the forces throughout her interviews.³² Her early naval associations empowered her and she refused to consider herself an outsider. This testimony adds to our understanding of how a specific woman negotiated a place in this culture.

³⁰ Rebecca Patterson, Interview with Isabel Campbell, 29 October 2021. 1 Canadian Field Hospital, Annual Historical Report, 1991, Directorate of History and Heritage Archives (DHH) pp. 1325-2122. The Annual Historical Report for the RCR Battle School is missing for 1991. 1 Battalion, RCR, Annual Historical Report, 1991, DHH, pp. 1325-1847. The square brackets in the quote above indicate explanatory information from the author rather than the Rear Admiral.

³¹ Duval-Lantoine, *The Ones We Let Down*, pp.36-39. Duval-Lantoine draws upon key studies by Karen Davis and Rosemary Park, two scholars whose pioneering studies laid the groundwork for later historical analysis. Karen Davis demonstrated how the cultural shift from the integration of women to gender analysis, provided a more powerful and inclusive cultural approach in "Sex, Gender and Cultural Intelligence in the Canadian Forces" *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics* 47:4 (2009).

³² Rebecca Patterson, Interview with Isabel Campbell, 29 October 2021.

Despite previous experience as an intensive care nurse in the civilian world and at National Defence Medical Centre [NDMC], as well as her training and previous mission, the Somalia experience stood out as a transformative moment in her life. In her words: “It stayed with me for always. It changed who I fundamentally was as an officer and as a young woman... It was good thing I had a heart of adventure... when we arrived in Somalia, we literally had nothing but what we stood up in.”³³ Her memories of primitive conditions mirror the Commission’s reports. As recorded there, the Canadian base at Belet Heun (near the border of Ethiopia just outside the town of Beledweyne) eventually housed the CAR troops, the helicopter detachment of 427 Tactical Helicopter Squadron, the hospital, and a headquarters and communications centre. These troops were separated into small camps that were difficult to secure. They slept in crudely constructed trenches in the sand with no electricity, little water, no fresh food and no washing facilities.³⁴

Gowthorpe recalled the moments after her arrival:

We... had some broken-down buildings to live in. Peeing in a bucket... The site we were placed in... was a former West German veterinary laboratory to look at things like brucellosis and other bacterial-borne diseases in cattle. And the buildings had the roofs ripped off of them and the copper tubing ripped out of the floors.... Those were the places they [the Somalis] would house their animals. Or where they would light fires etc. Our first task with very little water, we just had the water we had to drink, was to clean up this mess and create some sort of order so we could have a medical facility.

And you know what? Our medical platoon was 52 people. There was a surgical team, there were the medics and assistants [medical assistants and physician assistants] who worked with the Airborne Regiment as part of their unit medical station. Together we had to create a space to work in and to live in. ... We were able to set up a medical clinic and a small operating room.³⁵

³³ Rebecca Patterson, Interview with Isabel Campbell, 8 November 2021.

³⁴ *Dishonoured Legacy*, Volume 1, p. 285. Note that Lieutenant (Navy) Rebecca Gowthorpe was one of the Commission’s witnesses.

³⁵ Rebecca Patterson, Interview with Isabel Campbell, 8 November 2021. The text in the square brackets in the last paragraph above indicates an explanatory addition made by the Rear-Admiral on 31 October 2022.

While that quote reinforces earlier work on the medical team's accomplishments, she went on to discuss how few women were deployed and the specific work they did:

I was one of seven women with the Airborne Regiment. There were three nurses, two of us were women. There were some women medics. There was a woman clerk [and a woman combat engineer]. And we eventually had a woman corporal with the helicopter squadron after they arrived. Very small group of people. We were there to support the Airborne Regiment...

We worked at the local hospital... three mornings a week. And we tried to help them establish some sort of [basic] health care. I worked with the nurses on the ward...Teaching and training and basic hygiene. I tried to do something about biomedical waste. It used to be thrown out just in the courtyard. It was a very rewarding time.³⁶



“I am second last on the left, standing in front of the armoured vehicle: this is the officers of the CAR. This gathering was mentioned in the Inquiry. Col Labbe and LCol Mathieu are pictured.”

³⁶ Rebecca Patterson, Interview with Isabel Campbell, 8 November 2021. The information in the square brackets indicates explanatory information added to the quote by the Rear Admiral on 31 October 2022.

(Credit: Rear-Admiral (retired) Rebecca Patterson)

At this point in her interview, the Rear-Admiral focused on how her gender came into play in this cultural environment where men and women were more segregated than in Canada. Notes of enthusiasm and excitement resonated in her voice as she recounted the following:

As a woman, I was able to talk to the women nurses as well. Something that my medic male counterparts were not necessarily able to do ... They [the Somalia women] found it really fascinating that I was going to get married when I got home. They wanted to share their lives with me... I had a bunch of wedding magazines that had been sent to me. I wanted to share the stuff that I had. Other little treats that I used to get... And we used to have that kind of relationship. Through an interpreter... but being able to bond as women was *quite interesting*.³⁷

Her oral testimony adds to our understanding of this deployment by discussing contrasting aspects of femininity that were overlooked in earlier studies. Through sharing visual images from glamorous wedding magazines and by providing valued self-care gifts, this nurse overcame the barriers of language and different cultures to create positive connections with her Somali female nursing counterparts. Feminine caregiving created common ground. While some military men performed care-giving behaviours, in Somalia, the female body itself created special restrictions and opportunities different from those in Canada. Earlier studies ignored all the advantages women might provide, perceiving only the limitations.

The Rear-Admiral acknowledged both aspects:

The care we provided. There were some wards where we were absolutely not welcome... It tended to be on the men's ward where we were not welcomed. I was allowed to work on the children's ward and on the surgical ward.³⁸

However, when I asked if these restrictions were mainly about gender, the Rear Admiral explained that other factors also came into play.

There was a lot of control by the local clans. Some were for us being there and some were against us being there. We were always trying to be

³⁷ Rebecca Patterson, Interview with Isabel Campbell, 8 November 2021.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

conscious of what we were doing so we didn't step on any toes... The clinical staff [were] only there for half days. The remainder of the days [care of the patients] were given to the families.³⁹

Thus, she learned and respected local Somali customs, working closely through an interpreter with Somali families regarding the care of their family members. This testimony reinforces the later UN studies that praise women peacekeepers for collaborative work with local communities. Because of their gender, these few CAF members could bond with Somali women and children in a way that men could not.

And, at other times, Gowthorpe had to perform duties outside the standard nursing practices in Canada. She recounts:

There was an incident in town. The security situation started to deteriorate.... Shots were being fired in the street outside... Casualties were coming in. We were trying to triage them...The Canadian surgeon comes out of the operating room to realize something's going on here. I had been working on trying to save this badly injured young Somali...

There was no Somali anaesthetist at the hospital. And our surgeon knew he needed to operate on him regardless. And so, I took on that role to provide some sort of anesthesia for this dying person...They didn't intubate. They didn't have oxygen. Due to the lack of proper surgical capability, the Somali anesthetists basically ... [treat] sedated patients with medication only, valium and ketamine. Intravenous fluids and whole blood if need be. While the surgeon was trying to operate and save his life, I'm trying to manage his breathing and medication and fluids on the other end...

I passed our patient into the hands of his family to be cared for. There was no other choice. He was still unconscious and we had to leave for safety reasons. Can you imagine? ... I couldn't wait to go down the hospital the next day. To my immense relief, the young man was alive and conscious and went on to actually leave the hospital.⁴⁰

This particular story illustrates the extraordinary efforts the medical team made to save Somalis, while the combat soldiers were primarily responsible for humanitarian supplies, such as food. The medical team faced danger, but as the earlier scholarship highlighted, combat was not the purpose.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Rebecca Patterson, Interview with Isabel Campbell, 8 November 2021 with revisions to the original quote by the Rear Admiral, 31 October 2022.

Having trained medical people who could handle this sort of risk was a key CAF capability, something that was not sufficiently addressed in most of the Somalia studies.



“Me unloading medical supplies to donate to the local hospital just prior to us heading home.”

(Credit: Rear-Admiral (retired) Rebecca Patterson)

I asked her if this case increased her confidence as a nurse because she had done so well in a role well beyond the norm. She explained:

I was always comfortable as a critical care nurse, but I was aware of the Canadian standards. You wait for orders to give those types of medication and blood products, for example. When those orders didn't come, I had to... just tell the surgeon what I was giving in terms of dosage and just go for it. So I had to absolutely have confidence.

Some of my confidence as a young woman and a nurse came because of that same surgeon. In a very different way. Some of his practices didn't sit well with me. I have to be careful what I say.⁴¹

The Rear-Admiral then described the issues she faced, her professional nursing ethics, and her determination to ensure that all members of the Airborne Regiment and Somalis were treated with respect and the highest possible standard of care. She continued, speaking about the surgeon's interactions in the field.

Didn't sit well with me ethically... I was a new naval lieutenant and he was a major, but I talked to him. I call it a toe to toe. He wasn't to treat my medics or patients poorly. That wasn't something I would put up with... It was very hard to speak up, I had sweaty palms, but it could have caused harm if I was to let it go. Overall, it was a very challenging environment, but I found I thrived in that environment!⁴²

After she returned to Canada, this young officer:

Was asked to participate in many, many aspects of the Somalia inquiry... It was a very difficult time in my life....

I happened to be sent back to university... doing a medical ethics course. We had to write an ethics paper... So I picked a feminist ethical construct to assess one of the cases that was eating at my heart about a small Somalia girl that I felt hadn't been treated very well...

Writing that paper was almost like personal therapy because there was no such thing as this type of therapy when I had finished my time in Somalia. We didn't recognize trauma for what it was. And I remember finding that process very cathartic. ... The... thing I got out of it was what I would never do again... What I believed in... My never again. And I think it made me a stronger officer.⁴³

Later in the interview, the Rear-Admiral recalled the little girl's name "Arda" and how the little girl's face remained etched in her memories forever. Her case was a transitional moment.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* At no point did the Rear Admiral identify the surgeon by name.

⁴² Rebecca Patterson, Interview with Isabel Campbell, 8 November 2021 with revisions to the original quote by the Rear Admiral, 31 October 2022.

⁴³ Rebecca Patterson, Interview with Isabel Campbell, 8 November 2021 with revisions to the original quote by the Rear Admiral, 31 October 2022.

Several points are worth emphasizing here. Patterson completed her Bachelor's degree even before the government implemented university degrees for all officers in 1997. In her particular case, feminist ethics reinforced her professional confidence and her judgements about appropriate medical treatments. Yet, few officers in the CAF studied feminist ethics or considered that women like Patterson might have a skill set that could improve the CAF's performances. As Duval-Lantoine pointed out in her 2022 work, top defence leaders during the late 1990s obstructed women's participation in the CAF because they assumed women were less capable. Patterson represented only a small minority of officers with progressive feminist views. As a result, although the number of women in the regular forces has increased to 16 percent total (with officers at 20 percent), the CAF is still short of its goal to reach 25 percent female participation by 2026.⁴⁴ Feminist equality is a long way off.

Importantly too, the quotes above reveal the lack of CAF expertise with regard to trauma. The earlier Somalia studies described above did not sufficiently address this lack. Patterson's experiences increased her awareness of this issue. Further, her nursing courses helped her understand trauma and become more determined to challenge masculine authorities and practices as she had already done. After completing her degree, she began an influential career in health services operations, including training and management of large teams. This testimony shows that because of her Somalia experiences, the CAF gained a confident healthcare leader more aware of the importance of treating trauma before the CAF faced combat in Afghanistan. She also was willing to speak out on ethical matters and then lead cultural changes in the CAF – drawing upon past experiences and a professional caregiving ethical framework.⁴⁵

Although she found the Somalia deployment and its aftermath very hard, she became a self-assured and determined officer who thought deeply about the core issues plaguing the CAF. When she returned to Ottawa after the deployment, she became a head nurse at National Defence

⁴⁴ Duval-Lantoine, *The Ones We Let Down*, pp. 19-21. She draws upon ground-breaking studies by Karen Davis, Rosemary Park, as well as the reports of Chief Review Services. The National Defence April 2022 figures show: 20.20 percent of regular force officers are women; 14.40 percent of Regular Non Commissioned Members are women; 16.70 percent of primary reserve officers are women; and 17.10 percent of Primary NCMS are women. The Army has the lowest percentage of women at 13.80, with the Air Force at 20.10, and the Navy at 20.20 see: [Statistics of women in the Canadian Armed Forces - Canada.ca](#) Accessed 19 January 2023.

⁴⁵ Rear-Admiral Rebecca Patterson, Director General Culture Change, *Canadian Defence Review*, August 2022, p. 32. She continued her membership in the College of Nurses of Ontario and on the Board of Directors for Soldiers Helping Soldiers.

Medical Centre. She had to see “Clayton Matchee, who attempted to hang himself after killing the young Somali, Shidane Arone... on the elevator every day.” She continued:

There was no real recovery... but it was a time for growth in retrospect. I can say that. As a young nurse, but you’ve got to look for the good. Right?
...

And it - that personal growth- set me up for the rest of my career. I did receive a CDS [Chief of Defence Staff] commendation for saving the life of that young Somali [see the first story about the young Somali man above]. I wear the gold bar on my uniform... It was written by the Airborne Regiment. That huge paradox of all that was being reported about them... They respected me... They actually valued what I brought to the table for them.⁴⁶

These quotes demonstrate that her actions spoke volumes. She became valued and acted as positive role model for others. Patterson exemplified an officer who cared about the Somalis and the soldiers and was willing to stand up against wrongdoing, while Matchee, regardless of his combat skills, became an example to avoid. The CAF could (and did) draw upon feminine expertise to improve its performances as above, but previous scholars of the Somali crisis did not recognize how gender and caregiving skills intersected and precisely provided the cultural values the CAF needed to improve its operational performances.

In retrospect, Patterson recognized that Matchee’s crime occurred because of the CAF’s failings and not just issues in that one regiment. Her words strengthen the earlier studies which focused on the deep-seated cultural issues in the CAF in the following quote:

⁴⁶ Rebecca Patterson, Interview with Isabel Campbell, 8 November 2021 with revisions to the original quote by the Rear Admiral, 31 October 2022.

It was not a bad apple scenario. It was a warped barrel scenario. It was something that existed within the Canadian Armed Forces, but unfortunately, it was particularly profound in certain parts of the Regiment. [2 Commando].⁴⁷

Apart from her condemnation of the treatment of Somalis, she also addressed the harms to members of the Airborne Regiment. “And the other story is... Corporal Mike Able.”⁴⁸ Able had been accidentally shot by a member of his own unit in one of many negligent discharges of weapons in Somalia. The Rear-Admiral never forgot the tragic results of that continued carelessness.⁴⁹

In her words:

I remember when he [Mike Able] was brought in... We couldn't save him. I'm running around our compound to... find our Catholic priest... to make sure that he [Able] had that Grace... and I ran right into the leadership of the Airborne Regiment, sitting with the poor person whose negligent discharge had taken the life of his friend.

Talk about marker events in your life. I come in and they have no idea that he's dead... It was chaos, they all stopped talking and... They are like: did he make it? I sat down on the picnic table and told them he didn't make it. Watching grown men cry....

And I'd like to forward track 25 years if I may. And so now Corporal Mike Able's mother, Mrs. Diana Able, has been designated the Silver Cross mother in 2017.⁵⁰ A friend of mine, Derrick Nearing, was deeply touched by Mike's death. He... asked me to join him to meet with Mrs. Able and family after the National Remembrance Day ceremony. We thought there'd be others from our tour join us... there were only three of us there... all from the medical team in Somalia... His sister wanted to know if he suffered. His mom wanted to know did he say anything. And I could actually tell them all that I knew... it's an obligation to remember and a permanent memory. It's a keeper.⁵¹

⁴⁷ Rebecca Patterson, Interview with Isabel Campbell, 8 November 2021 with revisions to the original quote by the Rear Admiral, 31 October 2022.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ These negligent discharges warrant further separate study.

⁵⁰ Michael Darpack, “Silver Cross Mother remembers Mission Canada would rather forget”, *CBC News*, 10 November 2017. [Silver Cross Mother remembers mission Canada's military would rather forget | CBC News](#) . Accessed 18 October 2022.

⁵¹ Rebecca Patterson, Interview with Isabel Campbell, 8 November 2021 with revisions to the original quote by the Rear Admiral, 31 October 2022.

These quotes speak volumes about compassionate leadership and follow-through in action. As Bercuson and others had identified in their earlier studies – the CAF officer corps had neglected the welfare of their members. Decades later, only a few medical people took the time to comfort Able’s family in person. His family mattered to them. And so did countless others. As the Rear-Admiral explained:

I felt passionate about the Somali community on return... It fed two pieces in me. The need to do the development work and the need to be in the military and be given the opportunity to contribute to the greater good.⁵²

She also recounted how her fiancé, a logistics officer, deployed with the Canadian Forces Movement Team to Nairobi, Kenya, visited her in Somalia and met with “the wonderful people I worked with. One of those people... I’m friends with him still... was my medic and he went on to be a physician’s assistant. My friend Derrick Nearing. I’m very proud of him.”⁵³



⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.* Lieutenant-Colonel Shane Patterson married Rebecca Gowthorpe in September 1993, shortly after their African deployments. Together they raised two children, while often separated on postings.

“My then fiancé - Capt Shane Patterson. In Somalia to recover a downed Canadian helicopter and was stationed in Nairobi Kenya, as part of the transport and supply teams.”

(Credit: Rear-Admiral (retired) Rebecca Patterson)

The above quote reinforces the importance of lifelong bonds but also provides us with clues about how at least a few women successfully negotiated their way through the masculine culture of the services. Particular men - husbands, friends, and coworkers - believed in them. And they supported each other during the toughest times. These relationships were different from a patronizing masculine protectiveness of feminine weakness. Rather, they were rooted in respect for feminine strength.

When I questioned the Rear-Admiral about these lifelong bonds she explained that in the wider CAF, there were qualifiers.

Within the surgical team, where the friction points were, were along the lines of traditional culture in the Canadian Armed Forces and definitely in the Health Services Group. So, there were medics and physician’s assistants who considered me competition and someone to crush, at least at the beginning.

Oh yes. Oh yes. Oh yes. In the Gulf and also in Somalia. And I mean they took no prisoners when it came to nurses. Fortunately, the majority of the younger medics and physician assistants ... they got to see who I was and what I was about. And we formed a really good and tightly bonded team. Some of the older ones were... well, yeah, no. Too much history with nurses –or was it with women – anything they could do to make my life difficult. They went out of their way. Oh yeah. Be under no illusions there.

⁵⁴

This testimony speaks to the warped barrel scenario – the pervasive toxicity that Duval-Lantoine described so well in her work. If some men made life bearable, others opposed women, no matter what their qualifications. I asked the Rear-Admiral if she handled these critics with “sheer competence” and she replied

Yeah and maybe, I used positional power at times. And again, in the domains that were mine. Do not challenge me on nursing... you have to push back and counter resistance because ultimately it’s about the

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* Here, by “takes no prisoners,” the sense is that the older physician’s assistants and medics were ruthless. She is *not* referring to actual prisoners of war.

outcomes for patients. And also not being disrespected because I was a nurse because, you know, I was supposed be (?) to an officer and other officers were not treated that way. Don't disrespect me. It wasn't perfect... With the junior medics on my team... we respected that everyone had a valuable role to play and we cared for each other. I don't mean to make it sound all bad. It was more the older guard.

As she was an officer, she could pull rank if required. The medics closer to her own age were receptive to women and the worst offenders were older members of the forces. The Rear-Admiral observed generational improvements as well as specific attitude changes when people were deployed and relied upon each other to achieve specific operational goals.

It added an extra level of stress to the deployment. Really, there was enough stress to go around. You don't need the insider attacks getting at you. When I think about my experiences, I was able to establish myself. I did have military skills; I mean military leadership skills before I arrived on this tour. I knew that because my Airborne counterparts told me I did.

I asked the Rear-Admiral about the specific leadership skills she had at this early stage which helped her succeed as an officer.

Having humble curiosity when I didn't understand something... Being confident when I could be, asking questions when I didn't know something. Intellectual curiosity coupled with humility was beneficial. Where I could be confident and caring. That's what I did. I knew how to work with small teams to get the best out of them. Something I learned in nursing. I was able to figure out the best in people.

I realized how belittled the skill of nursing was. We are not just poorly trained physicians. We have our own scope of practice and contribute uniquely to the well-being of people... And by protecting my medics when I needed to.⁵⁵

This extensive testimony adds to what Duval-Lantoine exposed in her 2022 work, nuancing our understanding of the varied CAF cultural issues. Patterson drew upon wide ranging skills and determination to challenge discriminatory attitudes towards women and towards the nursing profession within the CAF. Even towards the end of her career, a few high-ranking men made derogatory remarks,

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

reflecting mistaken assumptions that her awards and promotions came only because of her gender. These individuals failed to appreciate the extra barriers women (and others) in the CAF faced during their careers.⁵⁶ Throughout her career, she proved herself over and over again.

Yet Somalia was a turning point for her. She and others on the medical team gained acceptance by their actions. As she explained:

Recce Squadron [Canadian Airborne Regiment] took me, two women medics and our [male] anesthetist, rappelling out of a helicopter. That boosted my street creds [credits]. I genuinely wanted to do it. Well. We don't expect the nurses to do that, do we? Oh yeah? I'm rappelling out of a helicopter one hundred feet to the ground. Straight down a rope. No problem. It was very cool.⁵⁷

She and others faced difficult tasks with enthusiasm. In the quote above we see how a few women (and caregiving men) in the CAF created a more versatile and effective operational capability. They were not weak points or liabilities in the field. This oral testimony counters the Somalia scholarship regarding women's upper body strength as particular issue and implies that men were naturally more suited to combat. By rappelling well, she and other women demonstrated their physical prowess and ability to excel and they impressed the toughest of troopers with their actions.

Further, this officer demonstrated the ethical leadership combat forces require to function effectively in environments like Somalia. Skilled women, like this nurse, protected and saved combat soldiers as well as vulnerable people. Over the course of her career, her appreciation of the importance of gender and the need for diversity within the CAF grew. This retrospective reveals lifelong learning and adds to our understanding of what transpired in the Somalia desert three decades ago. The earlier scholarly studies of the Somalia Crisis missed the deep intersections between gender performances and improved operational capabilities. These 2021 interviews reinforce our appreciation of

⁵⁶ Rebecca Patterson, Interview with Isabel Campbell, 14 December 2021. In "Sex, Gender, and Cultural Intelligence" Davis observed that senior women deal with perceptions about their gender as much as leadership style, also pointing out how a gendered lens challenges the binary categories of male and female. The Rear-Admiral discussed differing gendered performances in the CAF in her later interviews, but did not raise it with respect to the Somalia related segments or with respect to her own identity as a woman.

⁵⁷ Rebecca Patterson, Interview with Isabel Campbell, 8 November 2021. Here the Rear-Admiral is referring to the Reconnaissance Platoon commanded by Captain Rainville because the CAR units had been downsized shortly before deployment. The Royal Canadian Dragoon reconnaissance personnel were located to the south.

the important United Nations calls for more female participation in armed forces and Canada's initiatives to reduce the barriers facing women in peace keeping operations.⁵⁸ A few women made a difference in Somalia, but it took three decades for us to see it.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ The United Nations conducted many such studies as have most nations, including Canada. Other academic studies such as Caroline Leprince and Casandra Steer (eds). *Women, Peace, and Security. Feminist Perspectives on International Security*, (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's Press, 2022) contain cutting edge studies that reinforce these arguments; Department of National Defence, "Department of National Defence and Canadian Armed Forces Release Elsie Initiative Barrier Assessment Identifying Barriers for Women in UN Peace Operations," *News Release*, 31 August 2022, [Department of National Defence and Canadian Armed Forces Release Elsie Initiative Barrier Assessment Identifying Barriers for Women in UN Peace Operations - Canada.ca](https://www.canda.ca/en/news-releases/2022/08/31/department-of-national-defence-and-canadian-armed-forces-release-elsie-initiative-barrier-assessment-identifying-barriers-for-women-in-un-peace-operations). Accessed 11 October 2022.

⁵⁹ I am grateful to scholars like Karen Davis and others whose path-breaking work has helped me understand better how gender analysis might be applied to historical topics. I acknowledge the helpful comments of Dr. Dara Price, Dr. Steve Harris, and Major (retired) Stephen Miller. This paper represents my own views and not the official views of National Defence.

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