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**Hillier: A soldier's general**

Former general's autobiography gives praise, respect to serving members

By John Boileau



*Then chief of defence staff Gen. Rick Hillier fields questions at a news conference at Kandahar airfield, Afghanistan, in June 2007. His autobiography is called *A Soldier First*. (STEPHANIE LEVITZ / The Canadian Press)*

RICK HILLIER was unquestionably the most active, engaged and well-known chief of defence staff that the Canadian Forces have had since the position was created in 1964. The deep passion that Hillier feels for the men and women of the Forces comes through on every page of his autobiography, *A Soldier First*. It was his love of and respect for these sailors, soldiers, airmen and air-women that influenced many of his decisions and subsequent actions, not only as chief of defence staff from 2005 to 2008, but throughout his entire 35 years in the army.

Hillier was driven by many other factors during his military career, including a strong desire to improve the public's view of the military, obtain better funding for the services — especially for salaries and equipment — and create a better command and control system within the Forces. That he was so successful in many of these initiatives — and unquestionably left the Forces the better for his time at the top — is testimony to his single-minded strength of purpose.

That's not to say that his stint as chief of defence staff was a bed of roses — or met with universal support from politicians, pundits or the public. Hillier usually gave as good as he got and is merciless in his opinions of the United Nations ("couldn't run a one-man rush to the outhouse") and NATO ("reached the stage where it is a corpse, decomposing").

One of the most publicized of Hillier's opinions concerned politicians. His "decades of darkness" statement in a speech at the Canadian Defence Associations annual conference in Ottawa in 2007 referred to the budget, personnel and equipment cuts to the Forces in the 1990s. When Denis Coderre, the Liberal defence critic, took exception to this remark (most, but not all, of the reductions had occurred under the Liberals), Hillier termed Coderre's views on the issue "dumber than dirt."

Hillier is also critical of officers he did not respect. As director of Operations for the UN in the former Yugoslavia in 1995, Hillier's boss was French Lt.-Gen. Bernard Janvier. Although English was the working language of the headquarters, Janvier could not speak it. This caused him problems in trying to deal with his top subordinate commanders, British Gen. Rupert Smith and American Adm. Leighton Smith.

Completely frustrated in teleconferences with them, Hillier writes that afterwards Janvier "would then take out his frustrations on us, screaming because he didn't understand what was going on and had essentially no way of

influencing what was happening."

He later describes German Gen. Gerhard Back as "a typical Cold War bureaucrat" and a "control freak" who "had bullied his way through those who did not agree with him" and was interested in "attention to details and micromanagement." When Hillier commanded the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan in 2004, Back was Hillier's immediate boss at NATO's Joint Forces Command in Brunssum, Netherlands.

At one stage, Hillier and Back ended up in a long-distance shouting match over the telephone. As Hillier describes it, "He told me it was his job to ensure that I knew how to obey orders, and I told him that as soon as I received some intelligent ones, I would."

The relationship went downhill from there, based on Hillier's view that there was no distinction between military and non-military tasks for ISAF, but simply a job to be done. "If half of the things that Back deemed non-military jobs had not been done, the mission would have failed. So we ignored him and continued to do what we felt was necessary to ensure success."

Interestingly, Hillier does not mention the name of his first unit's commanding officer after he was commissioned into the armoured corps in 1976. When he arrived at the 8th Canadian Hussars in Petawawa as a troop leader, he quickly became disheartened by what he saw. "The regiment had no direction," he writes. "There was no focus on operations; there was no focus on physical fitness; there was no focus on cohesion or morale in any way, shape or form."

Hillier felt that the biggest problem was "a distinct lack of leadership, so much so that it was invisible — the commanding officer and his senior officers, with a few, rare exceptions, seldom, if ever, went out to see their soldiers at work, and it was even rarer for them to actually talk to them." There was also little communication within the regiment, its senior leaders seemed to be uncomfortable in their roles and could not relate to their subordinates, and often came across as bureaucratic and pedantic and articulated questionable values.

Hillier and his wife, Joyce, considered his options and debated whether or not he should leave the army. Fortunately, a new CO arrived the next summer — Bob Billings, an exemplary leader, who changed Hillier's mind about his future. Why Hillier does not mention his first CO is strange in light of his naming others, although it is easy to find out who he was.

Hillier made his presence felt wherever he served, even as a junior officer; those who served with him during his early postings marked him as destined for greater things. His rise through the ranks was meteoric; culminating in promotion to general and appointment as chief of defence staff at only 50 years of age.

Despite its length, *A Soldier First* is an easy read, helped considerably by Hillier's straightforward approach and the writing assistance provided by Chris Wattie, a former National Post journalist and army reservist. Wattie should have wielded his editorial blue pen a little more frequently however, and varied Hillier's continuous overuse of certain words, particularly incredible, amazing, great and awesome when describing the men and women in the forces.

Mind you, these are exactly the words Hillier uses when he speaks about service personnel, so they are completely in character.

One final criticism: Hillier should know that the Battle of Vimy Ridge occurred in 1917 and not in 1916.

*Although their careers in the armoured corps overlapped for 26 years, John Boileau and Rick Hillier never served together.*