

THE BERMUDA REGIMENT – ROLES, PERSONNEL & MANNING

(An analysis by nine ex-commanding officers of the Bermuda Regiment, Lt Cols CE Raynor, Brendan Hollis, David Gibbons, Brian Gonsalves, William White, Gavin Shorto, Patrick Outerbridge, Michael Darling and Allan Rance)

What use is the Regiment?

The Bermuda Regiment will have spent 50 years in service to Bermuda on 1 September, 2015, the anniversary of the presentation of its Colours at the National Stadium by the late Princess Margaret.

It is an odd organization, in that the public sees it performing almost only on ceremonial parades, which it mounts several times a year. It rarely performs the principal functions for which it trains – helping the Police in times of civil unrest, helping the community deal with hurricanes and other natural disasters and providing such help internationally. Yet its work in those areas, when it has been needed, has been of high value to the country.

There are some who would like to think that in Bermuda, we have put civil unrest behind us. However, the extreme, technology-spread violence in England in August of 2011 strongly suggests that the threat is never completely absent, no matter how advanced and civilized the country. That unrest is acknowledged by the Commissioner of Police to have been a wake-up call for the Service which, like others, had dared hope civil unrest was fading into the past. Our incidence of gang violence and the possibility of other kinds of civil disturbance add to the danger.

Hurricanes are an ever-present threat, and no one who has seen at first hand the workload shouldered by the Regiment at such times would suggest that any other organization in Bermuda could duplicate it.

The ability to call on the Regiment in time of need is built into the operating expectations and procedures of every service likely to be called upon to help in an emergency, from the Police Service to Works and Engineering.

The Unwritten Role of the Regiment

Those Bermudians who have served as leaders of men in the Regiment – and there are hundreds of them now, nearly 50 years after the Regiment was formed – know there are roles it plays that aren't listed in the Defence Act, which are just as important to the community as supporting the police, or helping with hurricanes.

Bermuda has no social mixing machine like the army. Rich and poor, black and white, privileged and underprivileged all work together. They wear the same clothes, sleep next to each other, eat the same food, and share the same experiences.

The aim of much of the training conducted in the army is to increase self-reliance. Very few in that batch of new recruits that runs into Warwick Camp every January have been taught how to stand on their own two feet by their families.

Old soldiers believe the anger young Bermudians sometimes exhibit stems from that lack of knowledge. They are sometimes disrespectful because they don't know how to be respectful. Above all, they have no idea what they are capable of doing, because they have never needed to try very hard to do anything, and think that is good enough. In this small, insular island, the easy lifestyle of young Bermudians is subverting their ability to succeed in the world.

The Regiment does not claim to be a panacea for Bermuda's social ills. There are some who serve who get nothing from the Regiment. But the great majority who do military service will agree that their service benefitted them by raising their horizons, by making them more self-reliant and by teaching them how to work in a team. Some will acknowledge that the Regiment has dramatically changed their lives for the better.

More to the point, most employers in Bermuda understand that Regiment experience produces young people who understand the value of obeying rules, who can think outside the box and who have learned the all-important value of being members of a team.

It is also worth mentioning that the Band and Corps of Drums is the largest 'school of music' in Bermuda. Its loss would be keenly felt.

There is no other educational institution in Bermuda that teaches such things. The Regiment makes a tremendously valuable contribution to the strength of Bermuda's social fabric, one we suggest the country cannot afford to lose.

The Facts About the Size of the Regiment

Manpower, in any military organisation, is a question central and vital to what it is capable of doing.

No ordinary army expects a soldier, no matter how highly trained, to be able to operate on his or her own. Normally, the smallest unit the military will deploy to carry out a task is a Section – which consists of a section commander and seven or so men. There are generally three sections in each Platoon, and three Platoons in each Company.

When the Regiment agrees to take on a task – guarding the Cabinet Office, for example – it cannot simply add up the number of sentries it might need at any given time and settle on that as the number of troops needed. It has to factor in the need for 24-hour coverage, command, communications, transport and a quick reaction force to deal with trouble on the Cabinet Office grounds.

The range of tasks the unit is expected to be able to carry out in an emergency is substantial. Much depends on the specific situation, but the most common jobs the Regiment has been called upon to tackle in times of civil unrest include guarding Key Points like the Cabinet Office, Belco, the airport and many others,

patrolling areas both on foot and in vehicles, providing crowd control units for the police to call upon, manning road blocks and helping with traffic management.

In addition to the troops who perform that kind of task, a large support element is needed, to provide food, equipment, transport and liaison with the Government and others involved in any operation. Manpower needs in any kind of operation are substantial, and it should be pointed out that the Regiment needs to be able to operate 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

The Regiment at the moment is 400-strong. That is considerably fewer than the 700 it was at the end of the 1990s, and it makes the Regiment undermanned for the kind of concurrent taskings it knows are likely during civil unrest and in hurricane clear-ups.

The Regiment has always had a “can-do” attitude by virtue of its service ethos. Nonetheless, there is a very real risk that The Regiment might become unfit for its primary role if its strength drops. An armed unit that fails at its job is, we suggest, a dangerous thing.

Four hundred is the smallest number of men the Regiment needs to be capable of fulfilling its roles. If it were to shrink further, its roles would have to be altered, and altered significantly. The only role that could be cut to achieve a substantial savings in manpower would be the Regiment’s requirement to assist the Police during civil unrest.

Would the Police on their own be able to deal for a sustained length of time with unrest? Will the British, or some other country, be able to quickly send troops to help? We suggest the answer to both those questions is no.

How Can the Regiment Sustain its Strength?

The Regiment’s experience is that it needs 120 - 130 recruits each year to keep its strength at 400. This represents nearly 50% of all Bermudian male births annually. If it fails to keep up that strength, not only is its size compromised

quite quickly, but the all-important cadres of officers and non-commissioned officers fall beneath critical mass. Recovery becomes a difficult and lengthy process.

Persuading 50% of all Bermudian births to volunteer for the Regiment will be a big challenge, even with an increasing percentage of women participating.

There has been a reliance on compulsory military service to sustain military strength for over 60 years. Conscripts bring with them their own set of problems, so it makes eminent sense to actively encourage Government to introduce policies designed to encourage more persons to volunteer.

But past lessons should not be forgotten. There have never been enough volunteers over the past 60 years, despite considerable effort having been made to recruit them. Not only do young Bermudians not volunteer in great numbers, but there is a high rate of attrition among those who do.

As said before, introducing policies that induce 120-130 people to volunteer annually will be an extraordinary feat. It would be a dramatic achievement in one year. But if the Regiment is to move to an all-volunteer system, this extraordinary feat must be achieved year in, year out, or the Regiment will become unable to perform.

Can a larger full-time element in the army make up for the lost manpower? It's easy to show that a small, full-time army will cost quite a lot more than the Regiment does now. Will cash bonuses produce the required level of manpower? Perhaps they might, but we must observe that that these are very expensive solutions to a problem that need not be created in the first place.

Our recommendation

We agree that Government should implement policies to raise the number of volunteers. We are prepared to help Government to the extent we are able in order to do this.

But we strongly recommend that Section 4 of the Defence Act (which demands that the ranks of the Regiment be filled first with volunteers, then by conscription if the number of volunteers is not sufficient) should be left as it is.

If it is agreed that we wish to retain a Regiment that is fit for its roles then it must be accepted that the Regiment has to be at least 400 strong. Given demographic trends and a poor history of volunteerism, the risk that the strength cannot be sustained by volunteers is very high.

If the number of volunteers falls below the required level, compulsory military service should remain a backstop to guarantee the Regiment gets the number of recruits it needs annually, to keep its strength at the level needed for it to be able to fulfill its roles in the community.

A longstanding criticism of the present system of conscription is that it allows many to escape service completely, whether for medical reasons, for educational reasons or by virtue of some other type of unfitness for military service.

It may be that a system of National Service, requiring all our young people to take part, but allowing them some choice as to what type of service is performed, will be thought a fairer way. The idea has been raised before, but it has never been taken beyond the concept phase, because it would be highly complex to set up and administer.

If a system of National Service is thought to be the best solution to the manning problem, then until the details of how it might be implemented are settled, we are clear that compulsory military service must continue in order to maintain the Regiment's ability to do its job for the community.

Illustrations of what will happen to the Regiment in a variety of volunteer-number scenarios follow. The risk is plain to see if compulsory military service is abolished.





