
THE CANADIAN RANGERS 1947-1952: CANADA'S ARCTIC DEFENDERS?

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The defence of the Canadian Arctic in the immediate post-Second World War period proved to be a difficult task for the Army. As the Cold War between the communist Soviet Union and the capitalist nations of North America and Western Europe grew tense, both the American and Canadian governments looked with concern to the vast and undefended Arctic territory. Lying directly between the two competing superpowers, this area was a potential future battlefield. In order to provide some military capability and defence in the North, the Canadian Rangers, an irregular reserve militia, were created in 1947. However, the Rangers only provided the illusion of defence during the period of 1947-1952. They received no formal military training and insignificant equipment, yet were expected to be a functional and effective organization. This very loosely organized group of men were to watch over Canada's vast Northern and coastal areas, aid in search and rescue, and defend against enemy raiders or saboteurs.¹

The entire Ranger system suffered from many "teething pains" in the late 1940s and early 1950s when the potential threat to the North was highest. The most important problems stemmed from one very serious flaw in the Ranger concept: the idea that the government could get something for nearly nothing. Until the Korean War in 1950, Canadian defence policy was determined by the budget allotted to the Department of National Defence.² The Army, Navy and Air Force all wanted as much funding as possible, which stretched the budget very thinly. For the Army, cheap solutions to large problems allowed each dollar to go further. The Rangers provided a cheap solution, but as with everything in life, you get what you pay for. By removing nearly everything necessary for the Rangers to be an effective force, the Army could afford to have widespread representation in Canada's North. However, this economy led to problems of organization, communication, equipment, training and recruitment.

This article will examine the first five years of the Rangers, from 1947 until 1952. The rationale for this limitation is that after 1952 advances in nuclear weaponry and long-range delivery systems created the possibility of total nuclear destruction. From the perspective of ground forces, this possibility decreased the strategic importance of Canada's Arctic significantly. Further research into the Rangers during the early Cold War would require consideration of many international as well as domestic political issues outside the scope of this article. Topics such as Aboriginals in the military and Canadian Arctic sovereignty have been covered by other works. P. Whitney Lackenbauer's two books *Aboriginal Peoples and the Canadian Military: Historical Perspectives* and *Aboriginal Peoples and Military Participation: Canadian and International Perspectives* are both excellent resources on the former.³ Shelagh D. Grant also provides a thorough examination of the political aspect of the latter in *Sovereignty or Security? Government Policy in the Canadian North, 1936-1950*.⁴

Defining what constitutes *the Arctic* of Canada is difficult. Some definitions include anything north of Churchill, Manitoba as part of the Canadian Arctic.⁵ This is an acceptable compromise between geography and demographics, but is not quite complete from a military point of view. The Rangers were intended to fill in areas that did not have sufficient population to support Army Reserve units. The low population density of Canada meant that almost any area north of the 50th Parallel could not support a Reserve unit, aside from some portions of the Yukon and Northwest Territories.⁶ The result was a void, running through the north of the large provinces and most of the Northwest Territories, in which there was no military presence. Some of these areas may not be considered *the Arctic*, but they certainly were in the North and thus fell under the purview of the Rangers.

The Beginning: Pacific Coast Militia Rangers

The concept of a northern irregular force grew out of the successful wartime Pacific Coast Militia Rangers (PCMR). Concerns over the possibility of Japanese raids or invasion had been widespread in British Columbia in early 1942. Many men unfit for military service because of age, occupation or physique, had wanted to do their part for the defence of their homes.⁷ The idea behind the PCMR was that it would attract outdoorsmen who knew how to shoot and track and who also had intimate knowledge of the local landscape. Should the Japanese invade, the members of the PCMR would conduct a guerrilla war against the enemy. Lieutenant-Colonel T. A. H. Taylor, the staff officer in charge of the PCMR, likened the organization to the Soviet defence in depth, where citizens took up arms and acted as partisans behind enemy lines. The PCMR were to fight on even if the Army retreated.⁸ The idea gained traction in the military and the Pacific Coast Militia Rangers came into being on 3 March 1942.⁹



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Arm band worn by No. 29 Coy, PCMR, Fraser Valley Rangers

The PCMR recruited ten thousand individuals in only four months.¹⁰ These volunteers were not paid for their service, and as a result, the PCMR cost very little to operate. A minuscule budget of \$120 000 was used to cover training, operational and administrative costs.¹¹ This was just a drop in the wartime budgetary bucket. Officers could resign at any time and other ranks could obtain a discharge after thirty days' notice.¹² Ranger companies were formed based on location. Men organized into companies not only by where they lived but also by where they worked. Frequently, the employees of a cannery, iron foundry or other place of employment formed a Ranger company together.¹³

The question of how to arm the new members of the militia soon arose. Ross rifles left over from the First World War had been sent to Britain for home defence. The Canadian Army still carried the same No. 1 Lee Enfields that had replaced the Ross in 1916. Whatever rifles were left in stocks had likely been earmarked for the new members of the Army proper, not a militia unit made up of trappers, farmers and old men. The Rangers were eventually armed with American First World War M-17 Enfields in .30-06 calibre, various .30-30 carbines and one hundred Sten guns with a thousand rounds each of ammunition.¹⁴ Issuing several different calibres of firearms created problems with the supply of ammunition. This was corrected with the Canadian Rangers, all of whom were, and still are, issued No 4 Lee Enfield rifles with 200 rounds of ammunition per year.

Fortunately, the PCMR was never tested in combat. It is possible that if the Japanese had invaded British Columbia, the PCMR would have offered some resistance for a time. The real effect that the PCMR had was on morale. The surprise attack on Pearl Harbor, the loss of Hong Kong and the rapid successes of the seemingly unstoppable Japanese military made Canadians living on the Pacific coast very nervous.¹⁵ The US Navy, which for all practical purposes protected Canada's West Coast, had been dealt a huge blow in December 1941. With Canada's long and barely defended coastline, it is easy to understand the impetus behind the creation of a militia unit for home defence. The Japanese invasion and occupation of the Aleutian Islands of Kiska and Attu in June of 1942 certainly did little to ease fears of attack. That, however, was the high water mark of Japanese expansion.

In 1945, the Japanese started launching incendiary balloons into the jet stream, allowing them to float over the ocean to North America in an attempt to set forest fires. The PCMR helped locate and track the balloons on several occasions and also collected pieces of the devices for analysis.¹⁶ This was their last service. The Army disbanded the PCMR on 15 October 1945, exactly two months after the surrender of Japan.¹⁷

Towards Northern Security

Shortly after the dissolution of the PCMR, the Cold War started to ramp up. On 20 February 1946, the Soviet Union admitted to spying on Canada. Three weeks after that, Churchill made his famous “iron curtain” speech. By the summer of 1946, military commanders had begun to consider the creation of a militia unit similar to the PCMR. This new Ranger organization “would be confined to the sparsely populated areas of Canada along the coasts and along the fringe of the northern limits of population. Personnel belonging to this organization would be trained to act as guides and scouts, to increase their knowledge of the surrounding country and to act as guerrillas if required.”¹⁸ This new force would operate from coast to coast to coast, instead of only along the Pacific as the PCMR did. The Canadian Rangers seemed to be an acceptable solution to the rather tricky problem of securing the Arctic against the developing threat of the Soviet Union.

American pressures on Canada to protect the North likely prodded the government towards action. The Americans did have a policy of intervening militarily in Canada if they “had good reason to believe that invasion or occupation of the Canadian Arctic by a foreign nation were [sic] imminent... with or without Dominion consent.”¹⁹ The best way to protect Canada against her protectors was to provide some level of security in the North, a role the Rangers helped to fill, if only in appearance.

Northern sovereignty was of concern to the post-war Canadian government. During the Second World War, American military personnel had operated on Canadian soil for a variety of projects. After the war, several air bases still remained in American hands. Some of these underwent renovation and expansion in 1948, and there were plans for further construction in the works.²⁰ Continued construction in the North of air strips and radar stations created more potential targets needing protection from possible Soviet attack. Instead of allocating scarce Canadian Army resources to guard Arctic outposts or allowing more Americans to operate on Canadian soil, a different solution was needed. The Rangers helped to alleviate some of the pressure on the Army to defend the North simply by having bodies in uniform. However, the Rangers were ill-suited for the task of Northern defence because of their irregular nature and fixed locations.

The necessity of a military presence in the Arctic is questionable. The idea of a full-scale invasion of North America by the Soviet Union via Canada’s north in 1947 was highly unlikely, if not impossible, due to technological constraints and the huge distances involved. This did not stop many officers in both the Canadian and American militaries from fearing such an possibility.²¹ As the Canadian Army conducted more operations in the North, the realities of Arctic movement and warfare became clear. Movement was difficult, and much time was spent by each individual simply trying to survive. Exercise LEMMING in 1945 demonstrated the importance of solid supply lines when operating in the North,²² something that would be difficult for a large Soviet force thousands of miles from base to maintain. It was thought that instead of a large invasion force, the most likely scenario would revolve around Soviet airborne forces capturing airbases in the North, such as those in Whitehorse, Churchill and Goose Bay. These airfields could then be used as refuelling sites for bombers on their way to major cities in Canada and the US. In such an event, the Rangers were expected to put their local defence plans into action and, after 1949, wait for the Mobile Striking Force (MSF).

The MSF consisted of three battalions of paratroopers, supposedly capable of being inserted into the North to combat an enemy raid or invasion.²³ Sub-units of the Princess Patricia’s Canadian Light Infantry (PPCLI) started training for the new MSF role in early 1948.²⁴ Notwithstanding, the Rangers were to be the first line of defence against any Soviet

action, should it occur. The documents do not show if the delaying action the Rangers were expected to fight would have been only in the form of guerrilla tactics, or if it was to have included some form of static defence.

Canada's vast Arctic territory is even larger than that of Central Europe, if one includes the many islands of the Arctic Archipelago.²⁵ The shortest route from North America to the Soviet Union is over Canada's Arctic. However, the North is not just a vast, frozen wasteland. Forests exist in the sub-Arctic, and summer temperatures can be quite agreeable.²⁶ The problem of defence was not just the vast size of the Arctic, but the small size of the Canadian population and tiny numbers in the military. Many larger cities had reserve units, but cities in the North were few and very far between. The Army had suffered severe cutbacks in manpower because of rapid demobilization after the Second World War and the desire of Canadians to get on with their lives. The Active Force strength in mid-July 1947 was just under 14 000 with a Reserve of only 33 704.²⁷ Sending the few regular Army soldiers available to sit in the Arctic and watch for Russians would have been both terrible for morale and very expensive. Until the formation of the Rangers, little thought had been given towards enlisting the help of Canada's most northern peoples, generally First Nations and Inuit, into defence planning. In comparison, the Russian Arctic had a far greater population density, and the Soviets had spent decades integrating their Northern people into the country and thus their defensive network.²⁸ To the Canadian Army, Canada's northernmost people offered a cheap, if ineffective, solution to surveying and defending vast swaths of land.

Lieutenant-General Charles Foulkes, the Chief of the General Staff (CGS) and other top Army officers discussed at some length the form that the new Canadian Rangers should take. The PCMR served as the template upon which the new militia organization would be formed. In light of the military's budget, which had dropped significantly once the war ended, the Rangers looked like an excellent bargain. Questionnaires went out to each of the Army's geographical Commands asking for opinions on the proposed Ranger organization. Canada was divided into five territorial Commands, each with a General Officer Commanding (GOC) his designated area. Western Command covered British Columbia and Alberta; Prairie Command controlled Saskatchewan and Manitoba; Central Command and Quebec Command covered Ontario and Quebec, respectively; Eastern Command was responsible for the Maritimes.

The views expressed in the surveys by each Command displayed an uneven interest in the Ranger idea. Western Command essentially wanted to recreate the popular PCMR, whereas Eastern Command was not overly enthusiastic about the whole idea. Western Command wanted to train the Rangers "in rescue work, preparing a basic plan for the protection of vulnerable points, arranging a system of communication between pre-arranged points and participating in Active and/or Reserve Force exercises." By comparison, Eastern Command was not sure if they could come up with a training plan that would sustain local interest in the Rangers. The three remaining Commands, Quebec, Prairie and Central, advocated only the most minimal training in map reading and possibly the occasional exercise. When asked how the Rangers should be reimbursed, all but Eastern Command felt that they should be unpaid except for out-of-pocket expenses. Western Command stated that "the PCMR took pride in the fact that they were an unpaid body," and they wanted to continue this tradition. The only reason Eastern Command suggested the Rangers be paid was to keep people interested in participating.

This difference of opinion from coast to coast is understandable. Western Command had had a good experience during the war with the PCMR. Eastern Command apparently had enough trouble organizing Reserve units, and did not want another militia organization to add to its burden.²⁹ Once most of the details had been agreed upon, the Governor General ordered the Canadian Rangers into being on 15 April 1947.³⁰ The General Staff released Policy Statement No. 26 on 12 August 1947, outlining how the Rangers would be organized and operate. In wartime, the Rangers would have several duties to carry out under this policy. They were to guide troops within their area and watch Canada's coasts, if applicable. They were to give assistance to the Royal Canadian Mounted Police in the

“discovery, reporting and apprehension of enemy agents or saboteurs”³¹ and the reporting of suspicious activity. Rangers were also to assist in search and rescue operations for downed aircraft. These duties are straightforward and within the power of most citizens, but the Rangers also had orders to defend their territory.

The Canadian Rangers

The policy stated that in time of war the Rangers were to conduct “immediate local defence against sabotage, against small enemy detachments or saboteurs, and to assist and augment civilian protective arrangements against saboteurs...”³² In peacetime, the Rangers were to carry out similar duties and prepare for the defence of their locations. This seems reasonable enough, but as the Cold War intensified, more and more was expected of the Rangers in this capacity, even though they were not given the tools and training for the job.

Before the Canadian Rangers could accept any of their duties, the formations had to be organized and the men recruited. Even though international tensions were high and getting higher, volunteers did not flock to the Rangers as they had to the PCMR. The Rangers had an authorized strength of five thousand all-ranks from coast to coast, but reaching anywhere near that target proved to be difficult. Most of the people living in the Northern areas of concern were First Nations, Inuit or Métis, groups which had not traditionally had an interest in joining the Canadian military. Only 2.5 percent of the Aboriginal population had served in the military during the Second World War.³³ Enlisting their support for a military formation, particularly when many were considered to be second class citizens or worse, would not be easy. Racism, uniforms and lack of pay all had some impact on the slow start. Huge problems with communications made organizing the men who had been recruited difficult at best. The Hudson’s Bay Company (HBC) stepped in with some solutions to these problems, lending the support of its vast northern networks and experience to the Army.

The first two phases of the birth of the Rangers entailed the selection and approval of company and platoon locations.³⁴ Several factors came into play in this selection process, including the strategic significance, supporting population, accessibility and the proximity to Reserve Force units. In northern areas, units were to be located at points that “would provide some measure of protection to localities where, in the majority of cases, it would not be desirable or economical to station operational troops in the event of an emergency.”³⁵ Likewise, those along key areas of the coast were to conduct an observational role over Canadian waters. The Ranger units slated for the interior were tasked with protecting lines of communications and strategically important locations.³⁶ The Rangers looked to recruit men who would not generally be involved with the Army due to age, physical condition, occupation or personal preference. The Army did not want the Ranger units to take men into their ranks who could otherwise become Reserve or Active Force members.

Once the locations had been decided, the third phase of organization required commanders at the company, platoon and section levels. There seem to be no records explaining the officer selection process until the entrance of the HBC into the equation, which will be discussed later. Each section was to be commanded by a Ranger Sergeant, each platoon by a Ranger Lieutenant and each company by a Ranger Captain. None of these ranks held any power outside of the Ranger organization. Administrative duties above the company level were to be the responsibility of a staff officer in each of the respective Commands. Finally, the fourth phase stipulated the recruitment of Rangers up to the authorized strength for each Command.³⁷ In order to set up Ranger units in remote areas, senior officers visited each of the proposed locations to gauge interest and start the



Cap Badge of the Pacific Coast Militia Rangers

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organization process. Due to the lack of roads, Quebec Command enlisted the use of a Royal Canadian Air Force amphibious plane to fly to twelve proposed locations over three weeks for the purpose of Ranger recruiting.³⁸



Combat Camera 1996.005.206

Three Rangers heading out on patrol wearing the typical uniform of the PCMR

By December 1948, only forty-four officers and fifty-seven other ranks were part of the Rangers.³⁹ Aside from these figures, no statistics regarding the actual strength of the Rangers during the time period examined seem to exist. The annual reports issued by the Department of National Defence skilfully avoided disclosing how many Canadians were members of the Rangers. One report states that “Since its formation in 1947... the Canadian Rangers have undergone a gradual expansion. This process has, of necessity, been slow, owing to the large area covered by the organization and the nature of existing communications.”⁴⁰ Other reports simply state how many new Ranger companies or platoons had been authorized, not whether they had any actual members.

Part of the reason for the slow recruiting was that the early Cold War did not have the same sense of danger and urgency that drove so many men into the ranks of the PCMR.⁴¹ Even though relations between the West and the USSR were getting worse, there was still no imminent, credible threat to Canada’s territory. In 1947, the Soviets tested the Tu-4 bomber, a copy of the American B-29 with sufficient range to make a one-way flight to major North American cities.⁴² However, the Tu-4 did not enter into service until 1949, the same year the Soviet Union detonated its first atomic bomb. Until delivery systems and bombs increased in number and capability, it was thought that the main showdown would likely be in Europe and not over North America.

Most of the men targeted for recruitment into the Canadian Rangers were Aborigines. Racist views towards First Nations had an impact on the Ranger organization. Views differed amongst commanders, ranging from condescension to those who felt that they were nearly useless. Major General F. F. Worthington, Honorary Colonel of the Rangers and GOC of Western Command, wrote that “they are not easy people⁴³ to handle at any time and unless you know the type very well, they are not apt to be very responsive.”

Worthington suggested writing a letter “containing the usual platitudes but with the object of gaining” the confidence of the new company commanders.⁴⁴ Major General Christopher Vokes, commander of Central Command, felt that white men would be the only people to make good Rangers. When replying to the CGS regarding the creation of a Ranger unit along the Cochrane-Mooseonee railway line, he replied:

The population is for the most part Cree Indian, some with Scotch names and blue eyes who exist by trapping and guiding for goose and duck hunters in the autumn. They are most indolent and unreliable and born lazy. Hunger is the only motivating force, plus the propagation of their race, at which they are very adept... I doubt the value of these Indians in a para military organization... You could never train them for anything except to fit into an early warning system or observer corps.⁴⁵

While, historically, aboriginal participation in the military was low, those from this area had an impressive record during both world wars, a fact Vokes seemed to overlook.⁴⁶ This attitude certainly did nothing to aid the recruiting process. Vokes preferred to choose locations where the local white population was sufficient to fill the ranks of the platoons.⁴⁷

Practical problems also hampered recruiting. Under the framework laid out by the General Staff, the Rangers received no pay but got an armband and a rifle similar to the PCMR. Reimbursement for out of pocket expenses was slow to materialize and hampered the efforts of local commanders trying to recruit members.⁴⁸ Patriotism alone was expected to fill ranks of a volunteer militia unit in sparsely populated areas during times of peace, and so the Army offered the barest of incentives.⁴⁹ The issued Lee Enfield, although an old design, was perfect for hard use in all sorts of weather. No one objected to the rifle and ammunition allotment, but some generals felt that the arm band was useless and insufficient. The PCMR had at least received helmets. During wartime an armband had been acceptable because of the need to conserve, but in peacetime it spoke only to budgetary constraints. Suggestions came in for uniforms of a practical nature for the territory the Rangers would operate in: green flannel shirts, parkas, winter cap and “a well designed, fairly large sized badge of good quality heavy white metal or silver to be worn on the outer garment as an indication of authority and duty.”⁵⁰ However, this was not to be and in the fall of 1948 the cheap red armbands were issued.⁵¹ Thus, the unpaid militia was to defend the vast Arctic against a potential enemy with literally nothing more than a rifle and an armband.

Evolution and Integration

Communications problems plagued the Rangers during its first five years of existence. The problems of communicating and recruiting people in the north stemmed from both practical and technical problems. The long distances between the various Command headquarters and the proposed Ranger locations presented one hurdle to be overcome. Intertwined with this problem was the nature of the people with whom the Army tried to communicate. Trappers and hunters did not spend much time in cities, towns or other hubs of communication. The HBC stepped in to make this communication process more effective through the use of their trading posts and employees.

The HBC had only found out about the creation of the new militia unit when Colonel A. Fortescue Duguid, the former Army historian, visited with his old school friend and HBC Governor, Sir Patrick Ashley Cooper in mid 1947. Considering their northern expertise, “Cooper was somewhat surprised and possibly mildly disappointed that he had not yet been approached by the CGS for assistance to or cooperation with the Canadian Army in the North.”⁵² Dr. Omond Solandt, chairman of the Defence Research Board, also had a chat with Cooper, the latter reiterating his interest in assisting the Canadian Rangers.⁵³ Realizing the benefit of using the northern network, knowledge and relationships that the HBC had already set up, Foulkes decided to take full advantage of Cooper’s help.⁵⁴ The Rangers did not have any issued means of communication, and so relied on the police, weather stations and HBC posts to keep in touch with their Commands.⁵⁵ Still, even when these stations were available, communications were poor. Many trading posts could not communicate directly with each other and relied on a series of relays.⁵⁶ This was still preferable to the

other available communication options: in the winter, dog sleds were the only means of travel and communication between trading posts and in the summer, rivers and some trails were available. In some areas, mail deliveries were made only once a year to trading posts. Quebec Command wanted to issue wireless sets to the various Ranger headquarters, but there were insufficient numbers to do so.⁵⁷ While use of the HBC communications networks was a vast improvement over dog sled communications, it was nowhere near the required level of efficiency. The lack of reliable and suitable infrastructure in the areas where Ranger companies were organized resulted in slow and ineffective communications.⁵⁸

On 13 December 1948 Prairie Command issued a report suggesting how to integrate the new militia organization into the Army. Many of the abovementioned benefits played prominently. The HBC's 215 trading posts across Canada's north acted as "the hubs of a wheel from which trappers and guides work out into the surrounding areas, like spokes. These men know every inch of the ground in their area, are expert riflemen and travel over the area frequently."⁵⁹ The report suggested closely integrating HBC employees with the Rangers, to the point of making senior managers Majors or Lieutenant-Colonels and trading post managers Captains and Lieutenants. The logic behind this was that because the HBC kept a close eye on its employees, they were expected to be trustworthy.

Piggybacking the Rangers onto the existing HBC network and hierarchy made sense from an economy of effort point of view. A hierarchy as well as supply lines were already established. This would save the government money; and therefore, make an already incredibly inexpensive organization even cheaper. Of course, such a close partnership could have political consequences, as "the plan as a whole has the appearance of setting up a private Hudson's Bay Company 'Army' which might possibly be used at some time as political capital for the purpose of embarrassing the Government."⁶⁰ After some consideration, Foulkes allowed the integration to go ahead with some small changes. The Army was to retain "complete control over Ranger appointments. In other words the holding of a certain position in the Hudson's Bay Company cannot be regarded as the sole prerequisite for a particular appointment."⁶¹

The Canadian Rangers were not to receive any kind of formal military training.⁶² No drilling, marching or small unit tactics were to be taught. The members, due to their occupation, were expected to already be expert marksmen. The individual Commands decided what, if any, training was necessary depending on the terrain and climate of the area under Ranger observation. In 1948, for example, the training focused on intelligence and communications.⁶³ Considering the problems of communications listed above and the lack of any radios on which to train, Ranger training was essentially whittled down to little more than map reading. The issued ammunition was supposed to be used for target practice, but because many Rangers were professional hunters and trappers, it was mostly used for hunting.⁶⁴ For the observation and search and rescue duties, the Rangers needed little by way of training, except perhaps in first aid. However, the Army seemed to feel that the qualities innate in Northern woodsmen would allow them to carry out their defensive mandate without instruction. This attitude changed in a few years as the Cold War progressed.

By November 1952, the Korean War was almost two and a half years old, and the Army started examining the possibility of expanding the role of the Canadian Rangers.⁶⁵ During the intervening five years between the creation of the Rangers and the detonation of the first hydrogen bomb by the United States, the potential Soviet threat to North America had increased. The successful Russian nuclear test in 1949 led to an expanded nuclear program, as well as the development of delivery systems. Long range bombers capable of delivering nuclear payloads across the Arctic Circle were being developed by both the Americans and the Russians. The Tu-4 was quickly becoming obsolescent as both the Tu-95 Bear and Tu-16 Badger conducted their maiden flights in 1952. Once the Bear, with its extremely long range, went into service, the Soviets no longer needed to capture airbases in the Canadian North to launch nuclear attacks. Around the same time as the Badger's first flight, the American B-52 took to the skies. It would be several years before any of these bombers became operational, so although the threat to Canada's North remained, it became increasingly unlikely.

An undated report on defence of the Canadian Northwest suggested the creation of specialized guerrilla units to be used in conjunction with the MSF. The report suggested that the enemy would invade Alaska and advance southwards along the Alaskan Highway. The time required for the MSF to respond to an enemy lodgement in the North was expected to be two days. This was fast but not fast enough. By the time the MSF responded, the Soviets might have accomplished their task and extricated themselves, the report argued. What exactly the Soviets would accomplish by marching down the Alaskan Highway—outside of a full-scale invasion—was not described. However, the report suggested that the long lines of communications stretched along a single highway would be perfect for guerrillas to hit, thus slowing the advance and allowing the MSF and later the American military to respond.⁶⁶



Combat Camera 1996.005.205

Members of 29 Coy, PCMR

Guerrillas must operate with a high level of endurance and the ability to live off the land, and the report indicated that professional trappers were the most adept and best suited to this. The proposed guerrilla company would be members of the Active Force: in a way, a professionalized version of the Rangers. The Rangers are described in the report as “potentially effective but... widely dispersed and their efforts uncoordinated.”⁶⁷ The author hinted at changing the role of some of the Rangers to fit into the guerrilla framework espoused in the report, by stating that:

The majority are ex-service personnel and work in and around the various settlements. The minority actually live in the bush. It is understood that the role assigned to them is, in general, of a static and defensive nature. It is considered that those more accustomed to making their living away from civilization would be misemployed in such a role. *Their temperament and chosen way of life would fit them much better in a more mobile and offensive role.* [author's italics]⁶⁸

A permanent guerrilla company would not likely find sufficient trappers and woodsmen to fill its ranks. To work in the proposed organization, members would have to formally join the Active Force and go through all the requisite training. Part of the reason the Rangers were formed and organized the way they were was to make service more appealing to those who did not want to do regular military training. Changing this would go against the “citizen soldier” idea behind the Rangers.⁶⁹ The Rangers remained as they were, and the formation of an effective guerrilla force was not realized.



Right: Lt. Col. A.L. Coote (CO of Lower Fraser Valley Area) and left: Lt. C. Casey Wells (Adj. of 29 Coy, PCMR)

The General Staff Officer (Operations and Plans) for Western Command made a similar appeal for forces located around strategic points that could react faster than the MSF.⁷⁰ He was “convinced that the local male inhabitants of northern installations if armed and trained for a specific defence role, could put up a good show; could delay the enemy in the accomplishment of their mission and could harass the enemy until the MSF could be launched.”⁷¹ Whether the “specific defence role” would rely on guerrilla tactics or static defences was not discussed. Some of the strategic defence points for which the Rangers would be responsible were Whitehorse, Fort Nelson, Norman Wells and Fort Radium. Maj.-Gen. Vokes agreed with this proposal. He also understood that the Rangers symbolised the Army’s intention to protect those in the northernmost fringes of Canadian population:

There is a requirement for some type of local defence force which would be effective in a limited manner against any real or supposed threat to communities in our sparsely settled coastal and northern regions. It is agreed that there may not be a real threat against many of these communities. However, the views of the local inhabitants do not necessarily coincide with this fact. Experience during the war 39-45 has shown that the demand for some form of local defence can well be so great as to cause the maldeployment of considerable numbers of regular troops.⁷²

Vokes understood not only the military but the political importance of the Rangers in northern communities. In times of uncertainty, war overseas and the potential of nuclear war, Canadians wanted to feel that they were protected. The Rangers helped fill this need, even if it was illusory.

Western Command continued the push for more training of Rangers and set up a short guide on how they were to operate when behind enemy lines. For example, the Rangers were to “always be psychologically maddening to the enemy and able to fight another day.”⁷³ A list of training films indicated the type of combat for which Western Command hoped to prepare the Rangers. Films on close-quarter fighting, booby traps, six films on explosives and demolitions, and Donald Duck as “The Vanishing Private” were marked off along with many other titles on low level tactics and basic military training.⁷⁴ The records do not show if this broader defensive mandate was ever adopted. Nevertheless, the desire to increase the training of the Rangers demonstrates that at the time they were unprepared to carry out basic defensive measures.

In a hypothetical situation where the Soviets did launch an attack on Northern Canada, there would be many practical problems that the Rangers would face. The Red Army would not send second or third rate troops into any action in North America. Even if the nuclear capabilities of both sides were ignored, the outcome would likely not be positive for the Rangers. The organization was well suited to the tasks of observation, search and rescue and guiding military personnel on Arctic exercises, but not for defence against any serious threat. A handful of Rangers with rifles would not be able to hold up an attacking force of superior quality and weaponry for long. Harassment by a few Rangers might make an enemy pause, but it was unlikely that the Rangers could have held them up for the two days necessary to launch the MSF. They were not even issued hand grenades, machine guns or mortars, weapons necessary for creating a good defensive position. It could also be expected that any attacking Soviets would run into only a handful of Rangers because the small force was spread over such an incredibly large area. The PCMR had up to fourteen thousand members to observe only the Pacific coastline, and yet the Rangers had just a small fraction of this to watch over nearly the entirety of Canada's coast. This hypothetical situation assumes, of course, that the Rangers would have been able to respond. The problems of communications laid out earlier, along with the nature of the occupations of many Rangers meant that it would take some time in order for word to get out to the individuals. Once the Rangers met, they would have to observe and identify the enemy, and then put their defensive plan into action. The odds of this process working quickly and efficiently were not good.



Combat Camera 1996.005.202

PCMR members providing support to civilians workers in the Chilliwack, B.C. area.

Conclusion

The creation of the Canadian Rangers in 1947 was the result of a cash-strapped Army trying to provide some token of defence in the vast Canadian North. The Soviet threat was possible but improbable, particularly as time went on and nuclear weapons systems progressed in both range and yield. However, American pressure and the concerns of Canadians pushed the Army to do something. The tasks of search and rescue and guides for Army operations fell easily within the abilities of the Ranger organization. Where defence was concerned, the lack of funding, weaponry, communications, organization and training meant that against an actual threat, the Rangers would likely have fared poorly. The citizen soldiers, armed with rifles and responding to the call to defend their country, were expected to handle more than they were capable of in defence of Canada's North.

Endnotes

1. Library and Archives Canada (LAC), RG-24, vol. 2440, file C-604-18, General Staff Policy Statement No. 26, 12 August 1947.
2. David Jay Bercuson, *True Patriot: The Life of Brooke Claxton, 1898-1960* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), 164.
3. P. Whitney Lackenbauer and Craig Leslie Mantle, eds., *Aboriginal Peoples and the Canadian Military: Historical Perspectives* (Kingston: Canadian Defence Academy Press, 2007). P. Whitney Lackenbauer, R. Scott Sheffield and Craig Leslie Mantle, eds., *Aboriginal Peoples and Military Participation: Canadian and International Perspectives* (Kingston: Canadian Defence Academy Press, 2007).
4. Shelagh D. Grant, *Sovereignty or Security? Government Policy in the Canadian North, 1936-1950* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1988).
5. Lester B. Pearson, "Canada's Northern Horizon," *Foreign Affairs* 31, no. 4 (1953): 588.
6. Library and Archives Canada (LAC), RG-24, vol. 2440, file C-604-18, map outlining ability for areas of Canada to support Army Reserve units.
7. Kerry Ragnar Steeves, "The Pacific Coast Militia Rangers, 1942-1945" (Master of Arts, University of British Columbia, 1990), 15.
8. Directorate of History and Heritage (DHH), 322.009 (D24), Lt-Col Taylor to Col Duguid, 4 April 1945.
9. DHH, 112.1 (D35) "Pacific Coast Militia Rangers—Organization."
10. Steeves, 23.
11. LAC, RG-24, vol. 2440, file C-604-18, "Historical Background of the Pacific Coast Militia Rangers and the Canadian Rangers," 3 July 1947.
12. DHH, 112.1 (D35) G. C. 320 "Pacific Coast Militia Rangers—Organization."
13. Steeves, 24.
14. DHH, 112.1 (D35) "Provision of weapons for Pacific Coast Militia Rangers" 1 June 1942. The military had also considered using rifles confiscated from enemy aliens, or asking the owners of some seventy-five thousand .30 calibre rifles across the country to lend or sell them to the Department of National Defence.
15. Steeves, 14.
16. John Moses, Donald Graves and Warren Sinclair, A Sketch Account of Aboriginal Peoples in the Canadian Military, (Department of National Defence, 2004) 77. Available: http://www.dnd.ca/hr/dhh/downloads/Official_Histories/sketch_e.pdf
17. LAC, RG-24, vol. 2440, file C-604-18, "Historical Background of the Pacific Coast Militia Rangers and the Canadian Rangers," 3 July 1947. In recognition of their service, former Rangers could buy the rifle that they had carried from the Department of National Defence for five dollars. Of the 6224 .30-30 carbines and 3265 M17's issued to the PCMR, 3585 were sold to former Rangers complete with sling, pull through and oil bottle. DHH, 322.009 (D24) Lt-Col Taylor to Company Commanders, PCMR, 6 December 1945. LAC, RG-24, vol. 2440, file C-604-18, "Historical Background of the Pacific Coast Militia Rangers and the Canadian Rangers," 3 July 1947.
18. *Ibid.*, Lt-Gen. Foulkes to GOC's, All Commands, 17 June 1946.
19. Quoted in Grant, 159.
20. *Ibid.*, 215.
21. Kenneth Charles Eyre, "Custos Borealis: The Military in the Canadian North" (PhD Thesis, University of London, 1981), 165-166.
22. DHH, 746.083 "Cold Weather Trials & Exercises Ex. 'Lemming'—CAORG [Canadian Army Operational Research Group] Rept. No 25," 25 May 1945.
23. Eyre, 167-168.
24. Bercuson, 177.
25. Ron Huebert, "Canadian Arctic Maritime Security: The Return to Canada's Third Ocean," *Canadian Military Journal* 8, no. 2 (2007): 10.
26. Moira Dunbar, "The Arctic Setting" in R. St. J. Macdonald, ed., *The Arctic Frontier*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1966), 13-15.
27. J. L. Granatstein, *Canada's Army: Waging War and Keeping the Peace* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 316.
28. P. Whitney Lackenbauer, "Canada's Northern Defenders: Aboriginal Peoples in the Canadian Rangers, 1947-2005" in Lackenbauer, *Aboriginal Peoples and the Canadian Military*, 178-179.
29. LAC, RG-24, vol. 2440, file C-604-18, "Canadian Rangers Questionnaire," 3 October 1946.
30. *Ibid.*, "Appendix A -Order-" 15 April 1947.
31. LAC, RG-24, vol. 2440, file C-604-18, General Staff Policy Statement No. 26, 12 August 1947.
32. *Ibid.*
33. Moses, 67.
34. LAC, RG-24, vol. 2440, file C-604-18, General Staff Policy Statement No. 26, 12 August 1947.

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35. Ibid., Director of Military Operations and Planning (DMO&P) to CGS, 15 September 1947.
 36. Ibid.
 37. Ibid., General Staff Policy Statement No. 26, 12 August 1947
 38. LAC, RG-24, vol 2441, file C-604-18, "Organization of Canadian Rangers Quebec Command" 15 July 1948.
 39. Ibid., Adjutant-General branch Army HQ to Maj.-Gen. Penhale, 3 December 1948.
 40. *Report of the Department of National Defence for the Fiscal Year Ending March 31 1950* (Ottawa: Edmond Cloutier, 1951) 46.
 41. Steeves, 32.
 42. Randall Forsberg, ed., *World Weapon Database: Volume II Soviet Military Aircraft* (Brookline, Mass: Institution for Defense and Disarmament Studies, 1986), 82-86.
 43. Worthington never wrote the word Indian or Native specifically, but from the tone and other language used it is likely that "these people" referred to are indeed Aboriginals. It is entirely possible that this meaning has been misconstrued, and that he was simply referencing northern people in general, including whites. If that is the case, then the feeling that Canadians in the North are somehow different from other Canadians certainly would not have helped recruiting either.
 44. LAC, RG-24, vol 2441, file C-604-18, Maj.-Gen. F. F. Worthington to Lt.-Gen. Foulkes, 29 November 1948.
 45. Ibid., Maj.-Gen. C. Vokes to Lt.-Gen. C. Foulkes, 9 December 1948.
 46. Lackenbauer, "Canada's Northern Defenders," 177.
 47. LAC, RG-24, vol 2441, file C-604-18, Maj.-Gen. C. Vokes to Lt.-Gen. C. Foulkes, 9 December 1948.
 48. Ibid., General of Western Command to Lt.-Gen. Foulkes, 30 December 1948.
 49. Lackenbauer, "Canada's Northern Defenders," 180.
 50. LAC, RG-24, vol 2441, file C-604-18, General of Western Command to Lt.-Gen.. Foulkes, 30 December 1948.
 51. Ibid., telegram General Staff to Army Winnipeg, 14 September 1948.
 52. Ibid., Maj.-Gen. N. E. Rodger to Maj.-Gen. C. C. Mann, VCGS, 22 October 1947.
 53. Ibid., Dr. Omond Solandt to Lt.-Gen. Foulkes, 23 October 1947.
 54. Ibid., Lt.-Gen. Foulkes to Brig. R. O. G. Morton, 30 December 1947.
 55. Ibid., DMO&P to DSigs, 1 November 1948.
 56. Ibid., Maj.-Gen. R. O. G. Morton to DMO&P, 7 December 1948.
 57. Ibid., Brigadier BGS (Plans) to CGS, 7 February 1949.
 58. Ibid., Maj.-Gen R. O. G. Morton to DMO&P, 7 December 1948.
 59. Ibid., "Appreciation—Organization Canadian Rangers," 13 December 1948.
 60. Ibid., Brigadier, BGS (Plans) to CGS, 7 February 1949.
 61. Ibid., Lt.-Gen. Foulkes to GOC Prairie Command, 14 April 1949.
 62. LAC, RG-24, vol 2440, file C-604-18, General Staff Policy Statement No. 26, 12 August 1947.
 63. LAC, RG-24, vol 2441, file C-604-18, Maj.-Gen R. O. G. Morton to Lt.-Gen Foulkes, 17 December 1948.
 64. Ibid.
 65. DHH, 327.009 (D207), Brig. T.G. Gibson, Acting Vice CGS to GOC Western Command, 7 November 1952.
 66. Ibid., "Proposed Long Range Company For Canadian Northwest," undated.
 67. Ibid.
 68. Ibid.
 - Author's italics.
 69. P. Whitney Lackenbauer, "The Canadian Rangers: A 'Postmodern' Militia that Works," *Canadian Military Journal* 6, no. 4 (2005-2006), 52.
 70. Ibid., Maj. W. W. Coward to Colonel General Staff, 20 October 1952.
 71. Ibid.
 72. Ibid., Maj.-Gen. Vokes to Army Headquarters, 7 November 1952.
 73. Ibid., "Canadian Rangers" memo, June 1953.
 74. Ibid.