



The

Patriot

An outspoken, determined, and caring leader, Gen.

Rick Hillier seems as solid as the Rock he was born on

By Peter Feniak

In July 2005, a fiery Newfoundlander made his point about international terrorists this way:

“These are detestable murderers and scumbags. I’ll tell you that right up front. It doesn’t matter whether we are in Afghanistan or anywhere else in the world. They want to break our society. They detest our freedoms, they detest our society, they detest our liberties.”

That was General Rick Hillier, Canada’s Chief of Defence Staff. With Canadian troops heading into the danger zone in Afghanistan, the blunt soldier wanted to shake up Canadians. He did.

And he added a few more words that signalled change:

“We’re not the public service of Canada. We’re not just another department. We are the Canadian Forces, and our job is to be able to kill people.”

With a healthy ego and a belief that you “never waste a good soapbox,” Hillier welcomed his role as a lightning rod for comment and criticism. His words stirred up anger and debate. But he had zeroed in on an important

truth. The September 11, 2001, attacks on the United States were a grim reminder that the world faced a new kind of war. Cold War tensions had ended, but the new threat from stateless terrorists was deadly and real—and the Canadian Forces would meet that threat.

It's been two and a half years since Gen. Hillier stepped down as Canada's top soldier. From Ottawa, it's as a grandfather that he looks around his home office and chuckles at how he and his wife, Joyce, childproofed it for the holidays:

"It's actually relatively tidy here. We sort of 'de-decorated' for Christmas. We're just putting everything back in place. Our older son and his wife and their two little kids just left for New Brunswick. We had a great visit. Our heart goes out every time they go away. They're two cute little boys, two and six. They inspire me every day. They look at you and they're not worried about whether you were a general or a soldier or whatever. They just wonder, 'Hey, can you lift me up higher than you did yesterday?'"

"We Had Lost Our Pride"

Gen. Hillier doesn't show that softer side too often. For many Canadians, he's a polarizing figure, whom some see as far too aggressive in his views. But few disagree that his passionate leadership invigorated our military and brought the Forces new respect and support. After what Hillier calls a "decade of darkness," in which bases were closed, military spending deeply slashed, and a horrified nation was repelled by the "Somalia Affair" of 1993—when a few brutal and out-of-control soldiers brought disgrace to a humanitarian mission—Canada and its politicians seemed to care little for its military. As for the Forces, Hillier says, "we had lost our pride in being soldiers and sailors and airmen and airwomen."

Attitudes began to change after a Hillier-led brigade from Canadian Forces Base Petawawa travelled into Manitoba in 1997 to help fight the angry, fast-rising waters of "the Flood of the Century." The soldiers left to cheers from a grateful citizenry. Then in 1998, Hillier led the military mission to restore order and rescue citizens after a hugely destructive ice storm crippled Eastern Ontario and

Quebec. Canada began to think differently about its skilled, disciplined men and women in uniform and their leaders.

Hillier says he was no born leader. But experiences with both great and poor commanders drew it out of him. He began his career with the 8th Canadian Hussars (Princess Louise's) in Petawawa, ON, then became a tank commander with the Royal Canadian Dragoons in both Canada and Germany—ultimately commanding the regiment. He was the first Canadian appointed Deputy Commanding General of III Corps at the massive U.S. army base in Fort Hood, Texas, then became a

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commander for NATO, first in Bosnia-Herzegovina, then in Kabul, Afghanistan. He served as Canada's top soldier—Chief of Defence Staff—from February of 2005 until July 1, 2008. He left the Forces, as CBC's Brian Stewart noted, as Canada's "most influential and popular military leader in generations."

Hillier remains in the public eye, speaking out on our military and its missions, and plenty of Canadians are eager to hear what he has to say. His 2009 memoir, *A Soldier First: Bullets, Bureaucrats and the Politics of War* (HarperCollins, Toronto), was a number one bestseller detailing his life in the military and his battles against what he saw as micro-managing Ottawa bureaucrats and uninterested, penny-pinching politicians. His second bestseller, *Leadership* (HarperCollins, Toronto, 2010), is loaded with anecdotes from his life in uniform and "50 Points of Wisdom for Today's Leaders."

Given profile, popularity, energy, and relative youth (he turns 56 this year), many won-

der what's next. As columnist Don Martin wrote in the *National Post*: "a man of [his] uniquely charismatic leadership, common-sense views, and unshakeable personal values would be an instant standout if he entered Canada's wimpy political world." Hillier preaches leadership. Could he practice it in Canadian politics? Speculation is ongoing.

"It's All About People"

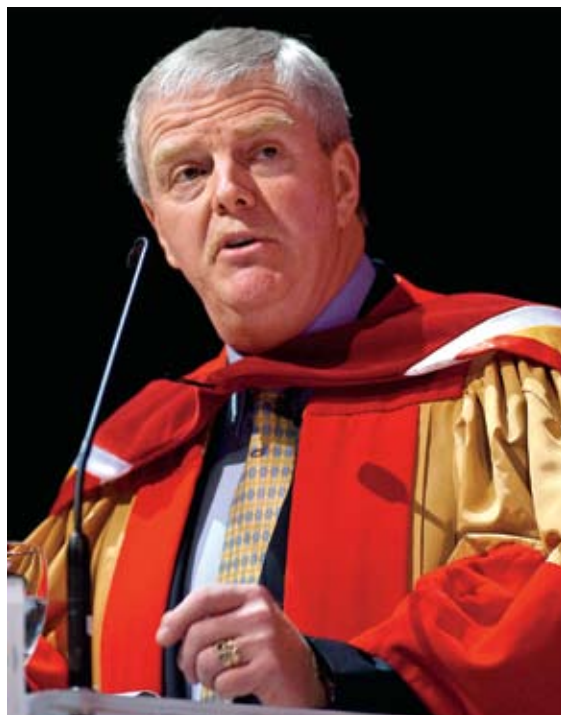
This special Canadian comes from a special place—the small community of Campbellton, an hour north of Gander on Newfoundland's northern coast, near the waters of Notre Dame Bay. The only son of Myrtle and Jack Hillier (a mechanic and jack-of-all-trades), he grew up with five sisters, in a house "where you had to chop wood and haul water."

A neighbour, Smokey Elliott, lent him books on military history, which Hillier devoured as a boy. And he was fascinated by the story of his great-uncle, John Clark of the Royal Newfoundland Regiment, who died in the trenches of the First World War. ("Almost every family in every community across Newfoundland lost someone," Hillier has noted.) Pride in our military history matters to Gen. Hillier, as it does to many Canadians.

In conversation, he still speaks with the starch and crispness of someone giving a military briefing, but he warms to the subject of his upbringing:

"Whether you're a city boy or an outpost Newfoundland and Labrador boy like I was, you're shaped by the environment in an incredible way. We were blessed with a strong father and a strong mother who believed in family and in education and working hard and giving back and being part of the community. That shapes you. And in Newfoundland and the outports there's an independence that's just inculcated in you as you grow up—being out on your own in boats, in the woods, in dirty weather, learning to depend on yourselves, learning to have a sense of humour that, when you're wet and cold, icy and freezing, you can still crack a joke, still laugh. You develop an independence and a 'get-on-with-it' attitude that follows you for the rest of your life."

Independence of mind ("sometimes referred



to as stubbornness," Hillier acknowledges) is part of his makeup. He knew early on that he would be a soldier. He took a science degree under the Regular Officer Training Plan at Memorial University in St. John's, and graduated in 1975. (Hillier met Joyce there and is now the University's Chancellor.)

By the time he became Chief of Defence Staff, he had strong views on what the Forces needed and pushed hard for them, often to the displeasure of politicians and Ottawa mandarins. Hillier knew, though, that some soldiers were taking part-time jobs to feed their families; others lined up at food banks or were unable to pay their rent. His impact on Forces morale was unmistakable. "He's incredibly popular with our soldiers because he stands up for us," one Canadian soldier put it on CBC's website.

Hillier looks back on his "stubborn" campaigning this way: "I tried to do the best I could. I gave it my all. I'd get up in the morning and say to myself 'I did not take the appointment of Chief of Defence Staff to maintain the status quo.' The status quo was failure for the Canadian Forces and that was unacceptable. I wanted to be able to speak what I knew, what I believed in. That was important. But secondly, those folks in the military, those folks supporting the military, already knew the truth of

what was happening. Underfunding, over-tasking, putting off recruiting, had sapped the very vitality and energy from the Canadian Forces. For me to stand up and say anything different would have caused me to lose credibility in the extreme. The centre of gravity for a leader is his or her credibility and I was not about to do that. Plus, we were tired of people who were really bureaucrats in the most negative sense of the word getting up there and saying a whole bunch of things, but really saying nothing.”

In his writing, Hillier has been scathing towards “bureaucracies [where] risk avoidance is the culture, [where] process actually becomes the product,” and where people are “managed and not led.” “Never forget,” he states often, “it’s all about people. (He reserves special loathing for the term “human resources.”) Real leaders inspire people with a vision of a vibrant and worthy long-term goal. Or, as he puts it:

“Building that network of people inspired to work with that longer-term view, getting them onside, and empowering them [to use] their imaginations and their talents and their experience. That’s what makes leaders successful.”

Hillier stepped down as Chief of Defence staff amid speculation that he had become too outspoken, and perhaps too popular, for the Prime Minister’s liking (they both deny it). He remains close to the Forces:

“No, I’m not at arm’s length at all. And I wouldn’t want to do anything but support the

present Chief of Defence Staff, Walt Natynczyk, who is not only a good friend but probably the best officer and leader I've ever worked with."

A man of strong faith, he remains active in fundraising for military families and deeply concerned about the Canadians in Afghanistan. More than 150 Canadians have lost their lives there—the most in any mission since the Korean War—and much of the country remains dangerous, unstable, and under the Taliban's brutal control. Hillier still believes the mission will succeed in the long term, but, as he told a reporter late in 2009, "when you have young men and women in combat operations and they lose their friends, one thing you quickly learn not to be ashamed of is tears."

"Perception Is Reality"

Much of Hillier's life now is spent in the nation's boardrooms, where his knowledge of international matters and his leadership are valued. He's an adviser with the Toronto-Dominion Bank and the international wing of the Gowlings law firm and sits on several other important boards. As a celebrated Canadian and bestselling author, he is also much in demand as a public speaker across the country.

"I love being a Canadian," he says. "I was delighted for 35 years, three months, two days, and some hours to wear that maple leaf on the left shoulder of my uniform and represent our country. I want the country to be even stronger than it is. I want it to take its rightful place in that G-8 membership and as a founding member of NATO and the UN and be seen to make a difference around the world. And I was at times just chagrined and irritated that we tended to be thinking smaller."

Do the current divisions that have emerged in Canada—urban versus rural, east versus west, left versus right—concern him?

"Yes," he replies. "You just have to accept that there are going to be different points of view and be able to assimilate those points of view into one greater point of view. The partisan politics and the vitriol that we see, particularly in Parliament, is a major factor in turning off much of the population towards the political debate and the issues of our country. I think that's dangerous for a democracy.

"What troubles me more is a lack of vision for our country. I have not heard it from any of our political leaders. 'Thinking long' is a leader's job and it's tough. I know that, but 'thinking long' is what people want in a leader. And if it's only going to be 'When is the earliest date for the next election?' that's discouraging."

What, then, is Hillier's vision? Does he have answers Canada needs for its future? Or are his views better suited to the more ordered and black and white world of the military?

He keeps his cards close to his vest: "Where do we go from here? I have many views, but I'm not in the political realm right now as a national leader."

In his writing about leadership, though, he argues that "perception is reality," and many Canadians already perceive Hillier as a leader, someone with energy and ideas and a destiny—perhaps as a successor to his friend Danny Williams as Premier of Newfoundland and Labrador, perhaps in the challenging federal arena. Is that perception reality?

He pauses for a moment, then laughs: "Oh my gosh, you've trapped me in my own words there. I sure didn't think about that. But I said when I retired that I had no intention of going into politics. At this point I have seen no reason to have to change what I said then."

That's a careful answer. It may not be final. Among the photos that surround him in his home office ("the entire family—my mom and dad, my wife and our two sons (Chris and Steven) and our daughter-in-law and our future daughter-in-law and two little grandsons who just left") there's another of a leader he esteems highly—Winston Churchill. Leadership is part of Hillier's DNA.

"I think in this awesome country we have advantages that the rest of the world only dreams about," he says, "incredible rights and freedoms...security and stability...the standard of living and the luxury that we enjoy. It's just an awesome country with opportunity for everybody. And, yeah, some get left further behind than others, but compared to the rest of the world we live a good life. I'm optimistic that this country's going to continue to be strong. But," he adds, "it does require leadership." ■