

Personal Experience Paper

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“Development of the New Zealand Light Armoured Vehicle Company”

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Abstract

This personal experience paper relates to my involvement in the development of the New Zealand Light Armored Vehicle (NZLAV) Company. Change will always be something I will be wary of; however, change can be good, and if managed carefully can positively affect all who are involved. The introduction of the NZLAV meant a series of changes were to occur in our army, from the formation of new units, the combining of others, and eventually integration and disbandment. As the Company Sergeant Major (CSM) NZLAV Company, I had a leading role in the development of the unit that would operate the NZLAV. My role in the development of this unit was to ensure all the soldiers were properly trained in team tactics and build unit cohesion. This is my story.

In 1983, I joined the New Zealand (NZ) Army and on completion of my basic training, posted to Queen Alexandra's Squadron, Royal New Zealand Armored Corps as a trooper. The projected service life of the scorpion light tank was 15 years and in 1998, they were removed from our inventory and not replaced. Armored personnel carriers (M113A1) remained in service for about 30 years; they were removed from our inventory in 2003, after serving our country well in Bosnia and East Timor. I had served all of my 20 years in the NZ Army using only the Scorpion and M113A1 and looked forward to the new generation of personnel carriers coming in to service. At this point in my career, I had been promoted from the rank of trooper to the rank of Warrant Officer Class One (WO1), which is the highest enlisted rank in the New Zealand Army.

With the aging M113 fleet becoming too expensive to maintain, the NZ Army Hierarchy sought funding from the NZ government to purchase a replacement vehicle. The government granted approval, which enabled working groups to be formed to discuss and debate options from replacing the M113. This process took many weeks to reach a consensus. The main issue debated was track versus wheeled vehicles. The reason for this debate was that most of my peers and I had only served with track vehicles. Imagine our apprehension when the army presented a wheeled replacement as the preferred armored vehicle, although as a professional soldier and a Senior Non Commissioned Officer (SNCO) I would support the decision of the majority vote. After the writing of vehicle specifications, international tenders were invited. The Canadian Light Armored Vehicle III (LAVIII) was the successful tender as it came closest to meeting our user requirements. The NZ government endorsed the proposal and the Army was to purchase 105 generation III LAVs that we renamed the NZLAV.

To prepare for the arrival of the NZLAV into service, personnel were selected to undergo training in Canada on all aspects of LAV's capabilities. These personnel included senior armored crewmen, mechanics and armourers. The armored crewmen would become our „train the trainers“. This meant establishing a new unit, the Transitional Training Team. The people who formed this unit had the responsibility to transfer their knowledge and skills to all newly assigned NZLAV crewmen. This unit was expected to take three years to complete the transformation from M113 to NZLAV. The responsibility for training new crewmen would then return to the School of Armour and operational units assigned the new vehicles.

Previously all armored vehicles had belonged to armored units, but with the purchase of NZLAV 51 vehicles now belonged to the infantry. There was now a need for a LAV Company within an infantry battalion manned by armored crews. I received a phone call from Military Career Management Branch and asked if I would consider fulfilling the appointment of inaugural Company Sergeant Major (CSM) of the LAV Company. My first thoughts were “no way I'm armored, why would I want to work in an infantry battalion”? That thought was short lived as I quickly realized that I was being offered an opportunity to shape the future of the NZ Army. This would allow me to lead, manage, and mentor young soldiers. In November 2003, with my position announced officially, I took responsibility as the CSM of the LAV Company. I then met up with Major King, the Officer Commanding (OC), to sit down and plan the future of our Company. We had a one month to stand up the unit, and because of this, we had many face-to-face meetings and phone calls to the battalion and armored units in order to get the unit operational.

The OC and I had been entrusted with the mission of successfully integrating a LAV Company into an infantry battalion. We had many issues to face; inexperienced NCOs, because

the more experienced NCOs were assigned to the Transitional Training Team. The immediate issue I faced was the young armored crewmen accepting that they were now part of an infantry battalion. The OC and I would have to display strong leadership and carefully manage our Company. We quickly realized that we needed to be proactive in our approach if we were to be successful in convincing 120 soldiers they were now part of an infantry unit because of their strong attachment to the armored corps. I had to make them see that they were now a part of creating new culture. This was no easy task as I was soon to find out. The mindset was now to establish ourselves as a unique unit by creating our own identity. We were also able to retain some of our previous identity by the wearing of our armored corps hat badge. This helped with the transition efforts. We took opportunities to build camaraderie and instill a sense of pride and belonging. We did this by participating in competitive team events. We were able to win many of the competitions, which helped establish our new identity. We developed effective training packages for the NCOs to ensure that the impact of inexperience was minimal.

After a few months, we had our first course-qualified gunners, drivers and crew commanders. The next step was to train as crews, sections, and as a platoon. We also had to introduce the infantry to the new vehicles and get them trained. If this was not enough, the NZ Army wanted to send a LAV Platoon, a rifle Company, and Company HQ to Australia to participate in a major exercise, „Predators Gallop 04“. The feelings I had at the time was that we were like live bait being cast out to the predators. I did not imagine the LAV Company's first test being an overseas exercise. Our crew commanders had completed their required courses just four days prior to deploying even though they had never worked with their crews before. The OC and I decided to brief the platoon on our expectations, to reinforce how important it was to perform at the highest level of proficiency. We also ensured that they knew it was an opportunity

for them to develop and enhance their individual skills, test our tactics, techniques, and procedures.

When we deployed to Australia as part of a battalion group for two months we had opportunities to practice the platoon and integrate the infantry and their tactics. This enabled us to conduct live fire training on a moving target range. We also got all crews through to individual and section battle runs. The exercise culminated in a combined arms live fire attack involving Leopard Tanks, NZLAV, M113A1, Artillery and Infantry units. The NZLAV crews performed exceptionally and received well-deserved praise for their efforts. As a result of this success, the LAV Company cemented its place and gained acceptance within the battalion.

Although the deployment was successful, it highlighted some shortcomings that still needed addressing. These shortcomings were the shortage of spare parts and NZLAV qualified mechanics. To reach our objective for successful introduction into service, we needed to address our logistic problems. As a result of a comprehensive „after action review“, these problems were addressed and solutions were implemented. The LAV Company continued to move forward successfully.

In November 2004, the OC and I were called to the Commanding Officers briefing room by the adjutant. The only reason I could think of for calling us was a rumor we heard that the company was disbanding and integrating of the LAV into the rifle companies, which proved to be accurate. At the time, I had feelings of both disappointment and resentment. This was our company and it had come a long way in the last 12 months. The Commanding Officer gave us his reasons for disbanding our unit and integrating into the rifle companies. After considering his reasons, I provided him with feedback, however I knew I had to be selfless and give something up in order to move forward. To disband my Company was like having my arms cut

off. All of the hard work that went into establishing the company, the building of esprit de corps, and the trust and respect that had been earned would be put to the test, for now our job was to brief the company on this decision. We knew we were about to walk into a room full of soldiers and disappoint them. I felt like I was letting my soldiers down, because we had spent a year building our team and achieving all tasking we were set. Many of my NCOs requested to meet in private with the OC and myself to discuss the impending changes. After hearing, the plan in more detail they understood the reasons and approached the change in a professional manner. A small percentage of soldiers that could not come to terms with the change and they left the service because of this. Even though soldiers and NCOs are a valuable asset, when they do not share the same vision as their unit, it is better to let them go. The thing about change is that it is inevitable and if you are to remain an asset to your organization then you must be prepared to adapt.

In the last 17 months since the LAV Company's disbandment, I cannot help but look back and reflect on the changes that occurred during that time, and some of the things that well and the things that we learned that affected all of us. I was fortunate to work with a great bunch of soldiers who for 12 months shared same vision, which was the successful introduction of the NZ LAV to service. From the training grounds in New Zealand to the outback in Australia, my company put the NZLAV through its paces and stood up to all of the challenges placed before us. The NZLAV is now firmly entrenched within the battalion and is an integral part of New Zealand's Army. This success is a tribute to the soldiers who made it happen. "I am proud to have worked along side such professionals whose efforts are now recorded in the history of the New Zealand Army" (James Dawson, 2006). *Ake Ake Kia Kaha* (Forever and ever be strong).