Networked operations, which are based on the concept of Network-Centric Warfare (NCW), are at the heart of many ongoing transformation initiatives in Western militaries. While terms like NCW are frequently used in discussing both how operations should be conducted in the current and future security environments as well as how Western armed forces should be transformed, these terms are used by different people to mean different things. These differences in meaning result from the confusion in many circles as to what the concept of NCW actually entails. Therefore, it seems timely to address the concept of networked operations, especially as it relates to transformation, by focusing on its origins and how it relates to other concepts, like the Revolution in Military Affairs, operational art, manoeuvre warfare, Rapid Decisive Operations, and Effects-Based Operations. Without a clear idea of the context of the networked operations concept, decision-makers and military professionals may not understand the implications of their decisions and actions in planning and implementing transformation initiatives.

The genesis of this book was a meeting called by Carol McCann at Defence Research and Development Canada (DRDC) – Toronto in March 2005 to discuss the implications of the concept of networked operations, particularly NCW, for Canadian Forces (CF) operations in light of the increasing prominence of a Canadian version of networked operations – Network-Enabled Operations, or NEOps. Those attending the meeting were military officers, academics, and retired officers who were now in the academic community, all of whom had detailed knowledge of some aspects of networked operations.
Two of the authors of this book, Allan English and Howard Coombs, participated in the meeting, and it was apparent to us that the other participants were using terms like Effects-Based Operations and NCW in different ways. This demonstrated that there were different interpretations of these and other terms that came under the networked operations umbrella. When asked by some defence scientists whether there was a theory of NCW to give some coherence to the various interpretations of networked operations, we replied that there wasn’t, but that it would be worth documenting different interpretations of the terms in use so that people studying the issue would be aware of some of the pitfalls of unconditionally accepting networked operations as one of the principal concepts of CF transformation.

This book began as a study of networked operations for DRDC, and we quickly realized that besides joint interpretations of networked operations, we also needed to describe army, navy, and air force perspectives. Although we were comfortable with exploring the joint, army, and air force perspectives, we needed an expert in naval operations, especially Canadian naval operations, to explore naval perspectives. Therefore, we engaged our colleague and naval analyst Richard Gimblett in this study, who also traced some of the Canadian roots of NCW.

The result is this study, which aims to contribute to the literature on networked operations, particularly as it is being applied to transformation in armed forces in the Western world. The concept of networked operations is likely to continue to be influential in the security and defence communities. However, we believe that the theoretical and practical aspects of networked operations must be examined carefully and understood clearly before this concept is accepted unreservedly as the driving concept behind transformation.

Allan English, Richard Gimblett, Howard Coombs