

Forces to permit Natives to wear long hair

OTTAWA (CP) - Natives in the Canadian military will be allowed to wear their hair in braids under a policy to be announced in the new year.

One aboriginal sailor at Canadian Forces Base Esquimalt, B.C., has already been given permission to start growing his hair long so he can wear it in a braid in

keeping with his spiritual beliefs.

But there is no firm date in the new year when the guidelines will be issued Forces-wide, said Sheena Carrigan, speaking for the

Defence Department.

The policy, to accommodate aspects of a person's religion, was designed with the human rights and employment equity acts in mind. It could conceivably cover other religious groups and be applied to dress and other items, if they are considered an integral part of a person's faith.

"It's acknowledging that the (Canadian Forces) has to move with society if society changes," said Carrigan. "It's also acknowledging we're a more diverse military than we were five, 10 or 15 years ago."

"If it's a tenet of your (religious) faith and we can accommodate it, that's fine," Carrigan said.

When official, the new policy will allow for three styles of hair for aboriginal military members. They can either wear a single or double braid with a maximum

length to the top of the armpit, or long hair to the edge of the shirt collar.

Under the plan, a person would apply in writing to his commanding officer. The unit's padre would also be consulted to ensure that the request is an integral part of a person's religion. "Generally, if it's a tenet of faith and if it's not adversely affected in the working conditions then it would usually go through," Carrigan said.

However, if a soldier is transferred to a new unit or job or the unit's circumstances change, he would have to reapply for permission.

If a commanding officer turns down the request, the military member can follow a set grievance procedure or go to the Canadian Human Rights Commission.