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The Past, Present and Future of Canadian Military Air Power

John Ferris and Brad Gladman

In its centenary year, it is important for Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) leadership, as well as the academic community and the public, to look back critically over its hundred years with a view to understanding the factors driving the successes, failures, and state of the RCAF. This was the aim of the Defence Research and Development Canada (DRDC) Centre for Operational Research and Analysis (CORA) workshop with the University of Calgary's Centre for Military, Security, and Strategic Studies in September 2023. The workshop featured keynote addresses from Professor David Bercuson and Lieutenant-General (ret'd) Al Meinzinger and brought together leading experts on air power. This collection brings together high-quality material on a topic that has not received due attention – RCAF history and what that means for the future. It also seeks to demonstrate the value of partnerships between the academic community and the civilian and military parts of the RCAF to the benefit of both. It hopefully will encourage the RCAF to be more mindful of its history and to use that history to shape discussions about the future and an appropriate role for the RCAF moving forward.

Since 1990, the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) has passed through purgatory. Its fleets were rusting out, while procurement proved difficult, in some cases scandalously so. RCAF personnel required skill sets that were scarce and in high demand outside the service, which damaged recruitment and retention of the right people. Increasingly, its social and cultural norms were criticized, especially over the treatment of servicewomen, producing problems which require difficult solutions. Like the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) as a whole, the RCAF felt itself under siege. Though many problems remain, recently this situation has improved, particularly regarding the

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procurement of new equipment. With sound management, the RCAF soon may overcome its weaknesses and restore its position as an effective tool for Canada. It has set out an ambitious but achievable vision in its recent institutional strategy and is currently looking at developing the institution needed to deliver the future RCAF that Canada needs.

To understand where we are, it helps to know where we have been. The Quebecois politician, Lucien Bouchard, once said that Canada was not a real country. When it comes to foreign policy, he was almost right: Canada is not a normal country. Canadians never have had to be responsible for their own security. We have not needed to defend our vital interests through our power alone, nor could we ever have done so. Our military forces sometimes have been great but rarely, since the Riel Rebellion, have we used them in direct service to our narrow interests, not even in the emblematic case of 1939. Instead, we have loaned our power to some international organization, the British Empire, the United Nations or the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, to help it maintain a liberal political and economic order across the world. That is the Canadian way of war. We define our interests as being general, those of the world, but this is not entirely so. We have particular interests of our own. Though some Canadians believe that power is bad, and strategy is un-Canadian, these matters have been central to our survival.

Two fundamental challenges confront Canadian security and drive our strategy. One lies abroad, the other next door, and the combination creates a strategic dilemma for Canada which is unique among nations. The world can be dangerous, and cannot be ignored, as Canadians have learned to their cost. For over a century, Canada has been involved in the great struggles of power politics and war across the world. That involvement has taken different forms, but few Canadians have embraced a policy of neutralism, or believed that it could achieve our aims. Canada strained its resources for victory in the two world wars, but generally, it has pursued the cheapest means possible to secure a stable and liberal world. Canadians maintain small professional fighting arms, which are routinely deployed to hot spots across the globe, where they fight serious foes. Canadians have been more willing to pay the blood price, than a financial one.

Meanwhile, we are protected from external danger by the United States, which is our guardian and therefore our greatest threat. Americans would not pose such a threat in a military form, and we could not withstand it if they tried, but we are uniquely

exposed to a people of unparalleled power. American interests are not identical to our own. Their power can be a problem for us. The United States can be a danger even by being a friend, by trying to help us. Among our vital interests is the need always to protect ourselves against help, never to let Americans bully us on major issues or act from fear of them, and never to let ourselves become a security threat to the United States. We cannot let Americans think we are an avenue for anyone to attack them, or that they can disregard our interests. But that is simply to be a good neighbour—here, the right thing to do is the right thing. Americans have returned that favour. Though they regularly bully us on minor issues, like softwood lumber, they have been fair on matters of our security. If we are a mouse, the US would have been an elephant, not a cat.

The problem is not whether Americans are good or bad. It is less what they want than what they are: a far stronger power. To say that power is bad is like saying gravity is evil: yet still, the earth moves. In the world, Canada is strong, but we sit beside a superpower. The question is how best to manage these differences in power and interests. Americans will use their power to defend their interests the only question is what we must do about it. Some Canadian nationalists and internationalists prefer isolationism, which will abandon any leverage with Americans and force us to defend ourselves against them far more than ever before, necessarily requiring far greater military forces and expenditures. That policy will make the United States a cat, goaded by a mouse. Instead, Canadian governments have preferred to approach these issues through an active policy and a bilateral relationship. This multiplies our bargaining power by creating ground rules in normal times which will restrain actions during emergencies when politics are panicky. Such an approach assures Americans of their security and gives them modes of leverage over us to solve problems, channelling them away from a search for levers we may not like or be able to influence. This approach also gives Canadians some ability to influence American actions. It depoliticizes the situation, so far as possible, and puts the focus on relationships between bureaucracies with common duties, where we can find allies and solve our problems by helping Americans solve their own. This, incidentally, is the approach pursued by the other foreign states most influential in Washington, like Israel and Britain.

Since 1940, Canadian security has been linked to two distinct areas: continental defence, and the world order. Canadian governments generally have joined every

American effort at continental defence, because that protected us from external threats, and them. Such partnership let us keep the United States from compromising our interests, whereas to stand aloof was to lose any influence over actions they might well take anyway. In order to manage this bilateral relationship and to shape events in the world, Canadians turned to multilateralism. They approached these issues through a combination of realism, liberal internationalism, a colonial mentality carried over to the United Nations and the United States from experiences with Britain, and applied Christian idealism, the social gospel, which survives today in a displaced and secular form.

Until 1990, this approach met our needs. Indeed, the postwar order suited us admirably, because for the only time in our history, between 1940 and 1956, when our power was at its peak, Canadian governments effectively used it to serve our interests, and those of the world. They made the world safe for Canada and gave us leading roles in international diplomatic and strategic institutions, which we retained throughout the Cold War, even as our hard and soft power eroded. This happened in so indirect a way, however, that we often forgot what we were doing and why, or even that we had power and interests. These commitments were expensive, did not directly pursue national interests defined by Canadian politicians but rather defended international interests defined by other countries, and often were conducted primarily for political reasons. When it came to thinking about power, interests and strategy, and linking them, Canada had a comparative disadvantage compared to virtually any other advanced state. Because Canadians did not think in these terms, we let our foreign and military policies drift apart. We came to treat multilateralism not as a means but as an end. Groucho Marx said he would not belong to any club that would have him as a member. Canadians wanted to join every club that would. We liked the UN because it was a forum where we could pretend to be equal to the United States but better and differ from Washington over issues of process while supporting it in substance. We adopted a pose of moral superiority toward the United States on issues of power and interest but relied on their strength for our security.

After the Cold War ended, Canadian strategy drifted. The desire to minimize expenditures and commitments abroad grew, producing smaller forces with increasingly obsolescent kit, and a dramatic decline in Canadian activities in peacemaking and

peacekeeping. Yet Canadians also insisted on involvement in every major crisis confronted by the West, which mostly caused token commitments, but also led expeditionary forces to combat in Bosnia and Afghanistan. Since 1990 the CAF has confronted two decades of darkness, separated by a decade of bloodshed in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya. These actions were driven by a perception that the world order was liberal and stable, and did not confront any great threat. In the past few years, however, these ideas have capsized. Stability has been shaken, and NATO missions in Afghanistan and Africa have ended in failure. Great threats have reemerged to the liberal world order, and NATO is rebuilding its defences in Eastern Europe, where Canada is playing an unusually major role. Canadian military weakness has become a common topic on the editorial pages of leading American periodicals like The Washington Post and The Wall Street Journal, and even for debates within Canada. As major wars rage and China and Russia challenge the world order, western states are reexamining their strategies and armed forces. In examining the present and future needs of the RCAF, Canadians are in good company.

We must start from the first principles—why does Canada need the RCAF, and for what purposes? It is fair to say that air forces are a central feature of national defence and security, but that is only so if they have the necessary breadth and depth of capability suitable for the purpose. With that said, it is also clear they have some ability to define their own vision, despite that ability being hindered somewhat by a lack of direct control over certain elements. Defining that future vision is the role of an air and space power strategy, which the RCAF produced in February 2023. That strategy's vision will, in turn, force many difficult decisions about the need for evolutionary change to the structure, culture, and other sinews to deliver the RCAF institution capable of achieving its vision. Many of the required capabilities needed for that future RCAF have been addressed, but other challenging decisions remain regarding which existing capabilities may have to be paused or stopped altogether in the context of the strategy's call for the future RCAF to focus its force development (FD) on the defence of Canada, and by extension North America.

Other challenges stem from the RCAF's organizational structure and processes which no longer meet current challenges. Some of these are being addressed, such as the ongoing digital transformation (referred to by the RCAF as becoming "digital by

design"). There is an immediate need to increase the pace of this transformation as one of the key pillars that will enable the potential of the new capabilities being acquired. This digital transformation should be accompanied by an overhaul of the RCAF structure, to make it more responsive by defining roles and responsibilities more clearly. This will, in turn, reduce the duplication of effort across various parts of the RCAF structure that the personnel crisis can no longer support.

There are also a number of enduring personnel challenges which are more acute now, but which have long been a Canadian reality. The RCAF must continue to seek more innovative ways to attract Canadians into service by showcasing the future that is at hand. With its new fleets of aircraft, the supporting systems and digital infrastructure near the leading edge of military technology, it is possible to show a future more appealing to Canadians than the one currently depicted in the media. At the same time, continuing efforts to deal with issues of quality of life and quality of service for those serving members may help to staunch the flow of personnel out of the RCAF.

Arguably the most difficult personnel challenge to overcome is also the one that is the hardest to measure. A strong case can be made for placing sufficient resources behind reinvigorating the RCAF professional military education system. In particular, developing a better understanding of its own history, and the history of why air power mattered or did not in the past, should be a central feature of that system. Through a sensitivity to history, officers will better understand the unique characteristics and enduring advantages of air power. These efforts will develop a future RCAF with the necessary intellectual capital – a resource with which to develop what 19th-century Prussian military theorist Carl von Clausewitz called the commander's *coup d'oeil*, something based on a "sensitive and discriminating judgment…a skilled intelligence to scent out the truth"[1] and thus pierce the fog of uncertainty that will continue to cloud warfare in different ways in the future.

The specifics of how all of this and other required changes should be sequenced and resourced over the next few years is the job of a campaign plan and its supporting business plans, which are the means through which the strategy's vision will be implemented. That campaign plan should seek to take the strategy's recommended actions, currently broadly stated and grouped into strategic objectives, and develop a series of activities for each. Those, in turn, should become the targets along each line of

effort, with each sequence in the context of annual funding and personnel limitations. In this way, the institution can be shifted in a coherent way from where it is to where it needs to be.

Even more, one must explain to Canadians why these issues are problems which require solutions. Any such explanation must combine both strategy and history. Canadians know little about their air history, and that is largely through myth. When they think of Canadian military air power, Canadians remember its outstanding contribution to both world wars, while ignoring the rest of its history, which has been dominated by different issues. Even people with special interests in Canadian military history know little about the RCAF after 1945. The RCAF itself seems to have little interest in its history. Both the RCAF, and Canadians, need a better sense of Canada's history with power politics, and of how air power has shaped that process. Ideally, a continuous narrative will explain where we are and why we are there.

Fortunately, this aim is being met. The centenary of the RCAF has driven much new and good writing, including David Bercuson's forthcoming single-volume history of the service, and the chapters in Randall Wakelam, William March and Peter Rayls, *On the Wings of War and Peace, The RCAF during the Early Cold War*. The chapters in this present compilation aim to match the standard of these contributions and to give readers easy access to serious studies of the historical experience of Canadian military air power. They will illustrate where the RCAF has been and presently stands, and the characteristic problems and solutions which it has faced over its existence.

This collection starts from history. In "An Orphan Air Force", Dr. David Bercuson of The University of Calgary addresses the key issues for the RCAF and Canada. His broad and synthetic account of the history of Canadian military air power emphasizes how Canada has developed an independent and professionally able air force, but one always stymied by the unwillingness of the country and government to spend much on defence and overstretched in its missions. Through a stuttering process, Canada rarely maintains air power suited to hard cases and scrambles whenever the latter emerges. This situation has never quite been fatal but causes constant embarrassment. His pessimistic analysis that good times are rare for the RCAF illuminates a time like this when the government stutters into unusually large expenses to overcome significant problems. The

rarity of such circumstances makes the effective use of opportunity even more important.

Professor John Ferris of The University of Calgary addresses the problems which confront the writing of air power history. In "Some Problems with Air Power History" Ferris emphasizes how that field has evolved over the past 50 years, and its strengths and weaknesses. In "Sitting Ducks and Strategic Change: The Air Division in Europe, 1959 to 1967", Dr. Isabel Campbell of The Department of History and Heritage, provides a revisionist and controversial study of the political and technical factors which shaped the RCAF's greatest element of the Cold War. In "Transformation of Canada's Fighter Capabilities: A Generational Perspective," Dr. Allan Stephenson of the Canadian Global Affairs Institute compares how Canada handled the transition between different generations of fighters in the 1980s, and over the past decade. In "The Royal Canadian Air Force and the Kabul Evacuation of 2021: Lessons from an *Ad Hoc* mission," Dr. Mike Becthold of Wilfrid Laurier University assesses a recent case of the use of Canadian air power during an emergency evacuation.

The collection then turns to one of the greatest issues concerning the RCAF, procurement. In "The Calculus of Procurement," Dr. Randall Wakelam provides a clear account of RCAF procurement over the past 40 years, while Dr. David Perry, a leading student of contemporary military procurement, outlines the present situation.

Finally, two papers assess the future of Canadian air power. In "Considerations for the Future of Canadian Military Air Power," Dr. Brad Gladman Head of Operations Research and Analysis at the RCAF Aerospace Warfare Centre says that the RCAF should seek to develop a force balanced for the defence of Canada, and by extension North America. In "Future of Air and Space (Aerospace) Power and the RCAF: An Exploration," Professor James Fergusson of The Centre for Defence and Security Studies at The University of Manitoba, assesses how the RCAF should approach one of the great developments in contemporary air power, its relationship with space and space power.