

An Orphan Air Force

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It had often been said that Canada was, in the first half of the twentieth century, an *air-minded* nation. In looking at the first hundred years of the Royal Canadian Air Force, especially the years 1924 to 1940, nothing is further from the truth. When the RCAF came into existence in 1924, almost no one in Canada's political ranks, or even its then-small military, had much of an idea of what an air force was for. Canadian pilots had performed extraordinary feats of airmanship during the First World War – there were lots of them and they did an outstanding job in helping to destroy the Kaiser's air force and battling ground forces in the last half of the war. But all these feats were performed by individual airmen in the Royal Flying Corps, the Royal Naval Air Service, or the Royal Air Force when it came into being in 1918.

Early signs that Canada might develop an air force of its own grew not from any strategic or even tactical consideration, but because of the immense Canadian effort in the air war (immense for a nation of Canada's size – even though Canada would not officially become a nation until 1931), led to the growth of nationalistic feelings in certain parts and groups in the country about a *Canadian* air force. These feelings began to manifest themselves during the war when Canadians rubbed up against Britons in the army and the flying services and began to see themselves as something other than Britons. When Prime Minister Robert Borden began conferring directly with Canadian Corps commander Arthur Currie beginning in late 1917, though neither was in the same chain of command, that was evidence of how much Canadian attitudes towards

themselves, and Britain had already changed before the end of the war. When Australia formed its own air force in 1921, The RAAF pointed the way to some Canadian political leaders and military men that Canada ought to follow suit.

But almost no one in Canada – including the large number of Canadian *aces* who had flown with the RAF and its predecessors thought of creating an air force for strictly military purposes. In fact, one of the most significant of the early Canadian air force supporters believed that the new Canadian air force ought to focus heavily on developing civilian flying tasks and skills as the Royal Navy of an earlier era had relied on British civilian sea men to staff the Royal Navy when it went to war. Thus, the RCAF was created in 1924 as a largely civilian establishment in what its tasks were and who its personnel were.

Historians can look in vain at the military journals of the time to read anything and theoretically developed in Canada as to the importance of airpower for Canada or tasks that air forces should do to add to the military capabilities of the nation. In other countries – the United States, Great Britain, and Italy to give the most prominent examples – airpower theorists looked at the lessons of the First World War and developed ideas about what air forces ought to consist of and what they should do in playing their part in a nation's defences. Between 1924 and 1939 small numbers of Canadian airmen (they were all men) attended RAF staff colleges in the United Kingdom and became aware of the various debates then going on about airpower – what it was and how it should be used in war. There was even a very odd article published in Canada that reflected these discussions. But for the most part, the RCAF was a civilian-oriented institution carrying out civilian tasks even after the civilian air services it performed were gradually moved to the Department of Transport in the late 1920s and the RCAF began to more closely a true “air force”.

Even when that happened, however, the RCAF was simply never given the financial resources it needed to become a nascent air force. It relied on hand-outs of obsolete RAF aircraft or purchases of virtually useless aircraft as trainers or even “fighters” such as the Siskin to keep its wings in the air. It was not until very late in the fall of 1939, with the signing of what Canada referred to as the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan (BCATP) that anyone really began to take the Air Force seriously. When Canada took on the responsibilities of establishing the BCATP in September 1939,

it is likely that very few people in the RCAF had any real idea how they were going to shoulder the tremendous weight they had assumed for themselves.

The government of William Lyon Mackenzie King decided that although Canada officially declared war on Germany on 10 September 1939 (a week after the United Kingdom), the Canadian war effort would be primarily one of supplying the allies – Britain and France. This would be a *limited liability* war effort in which aircrew trained through the BCATP, largely paid for by Canada. Grain, iron ore, foodstuffs and other raw materials were to be sent to the UK and France, but Canada would only send a limited number of fighting men, unlike the all-out effort of the First World War. Thus, one infantry division was sent to the UK in December 1939, No.1 Squadron, with outdated Hurricanes was sent in July 1940 while Canada's destroyers were kept close to home until France surrendered to Germany in June 1940. That date marked Canada's move to all-out war and it also coincided with the opening of many of the BCATP facilities.

There is no denying the tremendous accomplishments that Canada made in standing up the BCATP with a combination, at first, of civilian flying schools and newly established BCATP training bases scattered from coast to coast. Beginning in late 1940 and continuing until 31 March 1945, these schools poured out over 130,000 aircrews from pilots to bomb aimers and air gunners with more than 72,000 being Canadian-born. When all the different establishments from manning depots to Canadian-based Operational Training Units are taken into consideration, picture a small town of a few thousand in 1939 growing into a city of over 100,000 in just five years with all the barracks, command posts, airstrips, repair shops, radio and communications facilities spread out over 7,000 kilometres to understand what a tremendous challenge it was. Many very good graduates of the BCATP were kept back in Canada as flight instructors – much to their frustration – but eventually, BCATP graduates began to arrive in the UK in their thousands.

One of the key provisions of the BCATP agreement was that a number of Canadian graduates of the program are channelled into Canadian (RCAF) squadrons. But again, these squadrons would be paid for by the RAF because, Canada reasoned, much of the cost of the BCATP was being paid for by Canada. What Canada wanted, but was unwilling or unable to pay for in this early period of the war, was to build a Canadian air force within the RAF that would signal to Canada's allies that Canada too was fighting

the war as an independent nation and to show the Canadian people that Canada was not fighting this war as a colony of Great Britain. The concept became known as Canadianization and was a key objective of Ottawa and a not-so-keen concession by the RAF which believed that an imperial air force, undivided by nationality or any other ethnic or racial barriers, would give Britain an undivided air force with which to challenge the Luftwaffe. Canada pressed Britain to fulfill the Canadianization promises (Article 15 of the BCATP) but Britain kept dragging their heels. Partly there was very good reason for this – the British were busy fighting a war – and partly the British could not grasp the partisan political objectives of the Canadian government. There were some British political and military leaders who understood that the 1931 Statute of Westminster had finally bestowed on Canada and the other self-governing dominions, full independence, but others saw Canadian insistence on being treated as an independent nation as a technical matter standing in the way of a unified imperial war effort. Ottawa pressed Britain hard for the fulfillment of Article 15 but until Canada decided to pay for the new Canadian squadrons, progress was slow.

The Second World War abroad was the high point of the RCAF's first century. The Canadian squadrons formed under Article 15 fell under the administrative command of the RCAF Overseas. Thus personnel matters, for example, were decided by the RCAF and not by the RAF. But command decisions were issued to Canadian groups or squadrons by the RAF and not by the RCAF Overseas. That was fine for Prime Minister Mackenzie King. He did not want to get involved in any sort of war planning knowing that Churchill and Roosevelt were far ahead of him when it came to world affairs. He wanted *as Canadian a war as possible* for the same reason why he and his cabinet wanted definable Canadian groups and squadrons – to distinguish the Canadian war effort from that of the other United Nations and to serve national unity in ensuring that Canadians generally supported the war effort they were paying for, sacrificing family members for, and undergoing new hardships such as rationing.

One issue that was implicit in the different views of the British government and the Canadian government as to visible Canadian groups and squadrons was that of casualties. After the Ralston-Sinclair agreement, when many new Canadian squadrons were stood up in the UK, and especially after the initiation of No. 6 Group (RCAF) Bomber Command, a question that was implicit, but never actually expressed, was

whether or not Canadian insistence on separate identities held back the development of the Canadian air effort. To put it another way, if Canadian graduates of the BCATP had simply been inserted in RAF squadrons, instead of being reserved for new Canadian squadrons, would they have fought a better air war? After all, when a new Canadian Article 15 squadron was stood up, many of its pilots and aircrew were green. And although lots of those “Canadian” squadrons contained RAF and other commonwealth air crews – sometimes more than Canadians – yet the squadron was new and largely untested. The performance of No. 6 Group left much to be desired in its first fifteen months. Could part of that problem be rooted in Ottawa’s insistence that Canadians be inserted into Canadian squadrons? There has been precious little work done to answer that question; it is taken that Canada, as a newly independent nation, was merely exercising its right to ultimate control of its own armed forces even if that control was largely symbolic or political. And there is much to be said from that point of view.

In defending Canada, Western and Eastern Air Command faced two very different threats, yet were allocated roughly the same resources. EAC faced a present and dangerous threat from U-boat incursions in the Gulf of St. Lawrence and the coastal waters of Canada and Newfoundland. The Japanese threat to the Pacific coast paled by comparison and was, in any case, largely met by United States resources off the northwest coast and in Alaska. It is clear that politics – deep antagonism to Japan as a non-white nation – played a major part in this consideration. Such feelings were directly linked to the evacuation of Japanese Canadians from the West Coast and the seizure of their property. None of this was rooted in RCAF policies, but the waste of RCAF resources on Western Air Command can only be explained by this phenomenon.

One of the questions often asked about No. 6 Group is the extent to which the replacement of Air Vice Marshall G.E. Brookes with Air Vice Marshall Clifford *Black Mike* McEwen, known as a strict disciplinarian and an RFC ace in the First World War, had an impact on the group’s improving performance from the spring of 1944 on. McEwen was not a typical Bomber Command group leader. One ORB from early in his tenure has him listed as a crew member on a Halifax with the rank of Air Vice Marshall. Harris had no use for flying group leaders so only that one entry appears but there are too many stories of McEwan coming aboard as a gunner or some other nondescript crew member to ignore. In the USAAF, high commanders flew with the B-17s and B-24s all the time, as

they were expected to. But although No. 6 Group most certainly improved after McEwan took command, there are many other facts to consider. The campaign against the French and Belgian rail network prior to D-Day was much less demanding than bombing German targets. The crews were getting more experienced. The German fighter force – even the night fighters – was being worn to the nub by American escort fighters roaming German skies and destroying a large number of German fighters on the ground and in the air. After D-Day, when Oboe stations were transferred to the continent, night bombing accuracy greatly improved for all of Bomber Command.

The RCAF air war was extensive, intensive and broad. There is some disagreement on the number of RCAF squadrons serving *overseas* in action against the enemy. Some accounts mention 48 squadrons, others 47. But some squadrons which were intended to serve in Canada ended up with the RAF's Coastal Command, flying from eastern Canada for part of the war, or from Iceland or the British Isles for other parts of the war. Whatever the number was, it was a large one for a Canada with a small population and no appreciable air force in 1939. Fighter squadrons of all types – day fighters, night fighters, night intruders, fighter bombers, coastal command fighters and rocket-firing fighters who hunted Nazi shipping all played their part. Medium bombers such as the Bostons and heavy bombers such as the Halifax and Lancasters were all flown under the RCAF banner. Coastal Command squadrons, based in the UK, accounted for many German submarines, and one, in Sri Lanka (then Ceylon), helped to save the island from utter destruction by a powerful Japanese task force. Two transport squadrons in Burma played their part in the war against the Japanese armies there. The Pacific war was largely an American war but the RCAF could be found playing multiple parts in the war against Germany. The one observation that could be made is that as large and effective as the RCAF was, it clearly could have been larger and even more effective because too few RCAF squadrons were formed to accommodate all the Canadian graduates of the BCATP, and thus more RCAF aircrew flew in RAF squadrons than did in RCAF squadrons. The Canadian government spent prodigiously on the RCAF during the war but might have spent even more to create a truly national air force rather than an air force that merely followed RAF orders and procedures.

Could Canada have had a truly separate national air force? Probably not. To begin with, Prime Minister Mackenzie King was satisfied that Canada maintained political or

administrative control over its military and did not actually command its army, navy or air force. That gave him the political cover he needed to convince Canadians that they were fighting the war as an ally and not as a colony as they did in the First World War. Another reason was that the RCAF simply had no senior officers of the calibre that commanded the RAF right from the outbreak of the war. For a so-called-minded air-minded nation, the number of Canadian RCAF officers who knew anything about airpower theory, let alone command or logistics, could be counted on the fingers of one hand.

One final fact needs to be mentioned and that is although individual Canadians were welcomed in RAF squadrons, a clear gap opened between the RCAF high command and the RAF over issues such as *lack of moral fibre*, training of new personnel, and discipline. The class-conscious RAF did not easily accommodate the non-class-conscious demeanour of the RCAF. Once again, as in the First World War, Canadians discovered that they were not British and the British discovered that the Canadians – as empire nationalists as anyone during the war – were not Britons. These factors would have a significant impact on the willingness of RCAF officers to work alongside the RAF after the war as against their desire to work with the Americans.

If the Second World War was the high point of the RCAF's existence, the Cold War from late 1950 to about 1965 was a second peak of RCAF activity. When it appeared to Canada and other UN partners fighting in Korea in the late fall of 1950 that China might very well succeed in pushing the United Nations forces out of Korea – with all that that would imply for Russian aggression in western Europe – a second great mobilization began. In Canada the RCAF grew four times in three years and literally dozens of RCAF squadrons in France, Germany and across Canada were established with first-line fighters – the CF-100 and the F-86 Sabre – to provide a credible deterrence against Russian aggression in Europe. At this early point in time, the RCAF also decided that the obsolescent British Vampire jets it had purchased from Britain just after the war – and other British fighters such as the Meteors – were not comparable to US fighters and – no small factor – one of the two main RCAF missions after the war was continental defence with the US. This last defence task grew slowly after 1946 but speeded up after 1950 until the NORAD agreement was signed in 1957. By then the RCAF had a strong presence in western Europe and Canada to deter the Russians on two fronts.

The prime factor determining the size and direction of the RCAF in the early post-war years was the size of the defence budget. Unlike the Second World War, when after the surrender of France the government went all out in spending on the Canadian military, the post-war years were supposed to be years of peace and recovery. Canadians in general lost interest in defence issues (except for paying the bills for veterans' generous benefits) but the Cold War for Canada began in late 1945 with the revelations unveiled by Soviet cypher clerk Igor Gouzenko in Ottawa that a Russian spy ring was operating in Canada. Mackenzie King treated this information with his usual caution, and even after discussing the revelations with US President Harry Truman in Washington, showed no inclination to begin to ramp up defence spending. Canada was an original discussant with Great Britain and some European nations, beginning in early 1948, for what eventually became NATO, but even then, no one in Ottawa forecast any unusual increase in defence spending. And since the Canadian public was busy growing post-war families, enjoying veterans' benefits, buying cars, and washing machines with money pent up by wartime restrictions, and showing little inclination to spend on defence, the government was certainly not going to disturb them from their slumber. One of the conditions imposed on the Americans during the early construction of the DEW line was that US aircraft flying north with supplies avoid major Canadian population centres so as not to get Canadians upset with the massive project.

The Korean War changed all that when China intervened in late November 1950 and Canada and other NATO nations suddenly feared that all of Korea would be lost to the Communists giving the Russians an incentive to attack Western Europe as North Korea had attacked South Korea. Then the spending floodgates opened for what eventually became the largest peacetime military mobilization in Canadian history and, of course, much of the new spending was directed at the RCAF. From 1951 until about 1965/66 Canadians once again noticed the military, the USSR, the nuclear threat, Civil Defence and the threat posed to Canada by the chance that the Cold War would suddenly become hot.

The Air Force grew rapidly with modern jet fighters, new transports, helicopters, anti-submarine aircraft and new training facilities. At one point in the early 1950s, Canada's air presence in Europe was second to none while Canadian squadrons under the command of NORAD could be found from coast to coast flying the all-Canadian CF-

100 all-weather interceptor. Later, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, after Diefenbaker was removed from power and Canada's nuclear role became clearer, Canada's CF-104 interceptors in NATO took on a nuclear strike role. As unsuitable as the -flying high-flying, very fast aircraft was for a low-level strike role, it gave the RCAF striking power that it had never had before or since.

At the end of the 1950s recession gripped Canada and suddenly the sky was no longer the limit and Canadian governments began to cut back their military spending. The decision to kill the Avro Arrow was the correct one. Still, the mess that followed – the acquisition of the BOMARC and the building of two ultimately useless SAGE bases, and also the refusal of John Diefenbaker to make a decision about nuclear weapons, brought military questions to the fore but showed how reluctant the public was to spend on the military. When Pierre Trudeau became prime minister in 1968, all foreign policy options seemed to be on the table, even neutrality. It was then that Canadian military spending – and spending on the air force – began that was slow at first, but more rapid later on. For the RCAF, the one exception to the gradual descent was the acquisition of the CF-188, known in Canada as the CF-18 Hornet. The competition and the eventual choice were a model of what military procurement should be. A model is often not followed in the matter of acquiring aircraft. With some exceptions, aircraft acquisitions have been mired in years of partisan bickering, swollen budgets, constant delays, and falsehoods told to the Canadian public by governments and the media. Some sole source purchases, such as the CC-177 (Boeing C-17) Globemaster, initiated by the Harper government in its last year, the Lockheed Martin Hercules C-130 J model, the Boeing Chinook CH-147F heavy lift helicopter and even the CP-140 Aurora, purchased from Lockheed in the early 1980s, went off flawlessly. But when military acquisitions became the target of partisan political attacks – the EH-101 helicopter and the F-35 fighter – the result has been a disaster. Also, Canada's penchant for rebuilding old airframes to extend the life of many of the RCAF's most prominent aircraft has kept the Air Force a constant step behind first-rate air forces such as those of the United States, Great Britain, and France.

One area where the RCAF did not shine was in the successful integration of women into the Air Force after Canadian law made clear that gender segregation had no further place in Canadian federal institutions. From the early 1950s the Air Force once

again began to take women into its ranks but discrimination, and worse, continued. When the Human Rights Commission opened all jobs in the RCAF to women, including combat pilots, the job discrimination officially disappeared, but harassment and worse continued. Now, with the recommendations of a special commission headed by my former Justice Louise Arbour to finally tackle the bad treatment of women in the Canadian Armed Forces, it will be interesting to see if Canada has any more success in this matter than the US, Australia, Israel and other democratic countries have had in guarantying women true equality and dignity in its ranks.

Although airpower has long been the first sword drawn from the scabbard when diplomacy collapsed into war – the Second World War, the Korean conflict, Vietnam, etc., - Canadian airpower has most often followed other manifestations of military power. First in Korea were three destroyers. First in the Gulf War was a small fleet of obsolescent warships. First in Afghanistan was a light battalion of the army, etc. As Canada – mostly under the conservative governments of Brian Mulroney and Stephen Harper, and the Liberal government of Jean Chretien – began to slowly enter the small wars of the 1990s and Afghanistan, Canadian airpower was drawn more and more into conflict. Afghanistan did not readily lend itself to airpower after the initial stages of toppling the Taliban were over, but other nations were quick to send helicopters to accompany ground troops in both the ground attack role and in air evacuation, except Canada! In the Canadian effort in Afghanistan, helicopters were not deployed until Canada was well into the conflict and close to withdrawing.

The effort of the Canadian Armed Forces, led by ministers of national defence Doug Young, Art Eggleton and John McCallum, after the Somalia affair, to reform the Canadian Armed Forces – and in particular the army – had repercussions for the air force too. The new order endorsed by Prime Minister Chretien in late 1999 that all officers serving in the Canadian Armed Forces would be required to hold a bachelor's degree kicked off a decade of phenomenal growth in the intellectual capacity of the Canadian military. Because if a lieutenant needed to have a BA or a BSc, what did a colonel or a major general need to have? Suddenly graduate education in its many forms expanded rapidly among the officer corps. In the Air Force, there was a clear realization that the use of aircraft in war always had a strategic component as well as a tactical one. Because even in an air force such as Canada's where most of the operations carried out by Canadian

aircraft and Canadian personnel were tactical, they always take place within a larger strategic context and Canadian personnel will – as was the case with the Libyan air operation of 2011 – sometimes even command a multinational operation. Thus, was established the Royal Canadian Aerospace Warfare Centre in 2005 with all the papers, journals, studies, conferences and other *academic* gatherings that flowed out of it.

Up to today the history of the RCAF has been a story of ups and downs. Of new equipment and of making do. Of apathetic Canadians and Canadian governments apathetic about defence, and of governments which realized that Canada has an obligation to protect Canadians, Canada, and Canadian interests. This latter group of governments – and there have not been many – have recognized Canada's obligations as a democratic nation that must trade to help more populous and more powerful nations who see the world largely as we do, to help hold the thin red line. The RCAF has tried mightily since 1939 at least to do that. Sometimes the greatest obstacle that the RCAF has had to overcome in its first century has been no less than the Canadian government. Failing a change in Canadian attitudes to the defence of Canada and the need to deter bad actors in the world growing more dangerous than it ever was, except perhaps at the height of the Cold War, that situation will not change in the next hundred years. Except for the Second World War and the first decade and a half of the Cold War, the first century has been an arduous journey for the RCAF. In the meantime, the mission continues.