A Bird’s Eye View:
Three Senior Officers’ Perspectives on the Cold War RCAF/AIRCOM

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In the years immediately following the end of the Second World War, the United States and the Soviet Union emerged as the dominant players in what was to become a new and uniquely polarized world order. Victorious and vanquished nations alike struggled both to recover from the physical and economic ravages of the conflict, and to establish their place in this new order that had divided the world into opposing American and Soviet spheres of influence. Canada, sharing both a border and a similar ideology with the US, was by default incorporated into the American camp. Despite Canada’s relatively friendly relationship with the US, major questions remained as to the part it was to play in her alliances.

A central focus of the Canadian postwar search for a meaningful role in this new world order was the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF). Rapidly expanded during the Second World War and almost as rapidly reduced in the immediate postwar, the RCAF found itself subject to the whim of Canadian politicians and foreign policy makers, both before and after the integration of the Canadian Forces in 1968. As Canada helped create and secure its membership in defensive alliances such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 1949 and the North American Aerospace Defence Command (NORAD) in 1958, the RCAF became one of the country’s greatest military assets. By the late-1960s, however, domestic political opinions of these alliances and Canada’s role in them had shifted dramatically, and this had the effect of relegating RCAF to the backburner of the government’s plans and, subsequently, its budgetary allowances. These periods of wavering national will to maintain Canada’s place in the Cold War alliance

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1 The RCAF was integrated into the Canadian Forces (CF) in 1968, and re-designated the Air Command (AIRCOM) in 1975. For the purposes of this essay I will use RCAF/AIRCOM interchangeably. Larry Milberry, ed., Sixty Years: The RCAF and CF Air Command, 1924-1984 (Toronto: CANAV Books, 1984), 367.
system not only affected the RCAF/AIRCOM itself, but also led to a steep decline in the amount and quality of historical literature being produced regarding its contributions both in Canada and abroad.

Written history is decidedly lacking in both the breadth and depth of its coverage of the RCAF/AIRCOM during the Cold War. Historical works such as Joseph Jockel’s *No Boundaries Upstairs* and *Canada in Norad 1957-2007*, and James Eayrs’ series *In Defence of Canada* make only limited mention of the roles played by the RCAF both domestically and internationally. Larry Milberry’s *Sixty Years: The RCAF and CF Air Command, 1924-1984* provides readers with a general outline of Cold War RCAF/AIRCOM operations, but is effectively limited in its scope, covering the period of 1945-84 in just 260 pages. In order to fill some of the blanks in the written record of the RCAF, this essay will turn to the oral histories of its servicemen. This essay will utilize the testimonies of three former officers of the RCAF/AIRCOM -- Lt. Col. Robert Huot (Ret.), Col. Michael Zrymiak (Ret.), and Brig. Gen. John Neroutsos (Ret.) -- to provide individual perspectives on the issues faced by the RCAF/AIRCOM during the Cold War. In particular, I will examine Canada’s changing relationship with the US, the RCAF’s contribution to NATO, and the Cold War experience of the RCAF/AIRCOM Reserves between 1954 and 1985.

**Canada-US Relations**

As the closest ally of the US, both culturally and geographically, Canada’s role in the Cold War was largely shaped by her southern neighbours. Prior to the invention of the

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2 This works out to just under 7 pages dedicated to each year of RCAF/AIRCOM operations. Milberry, ed., *Sixty Years*, 196-456.
Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM), the primary threat from the Soviet Union existed in the form of nuclear-capable long-range bomber aircraft launched from the USSR over the North Pole. In order to challenge this threat, the Canadian government entered into serious talks with the US in order to coordinate a system of integrated continental defence. These talks were to culminate in the construction of the Pinetree, Mid-Canada, and Distant Early Warning (DEW) Lines of radar installations from 1949-57, and the creation of NORAD in 1958.³ Shortly after the formation of NORAD, Canadian Prime Minister Diefenbaker cancelled the CF-105 Arrow program, which had been Canada’s attempt to produce a cutting-edge supersonic interceptor aircraft.⁴ In lieu of the CF-105, Diefenbaker elected to purchase the US-made F-101 Voodoo aircraft, as well as the Bomarc antiaircraft missile, both of which were designed to employ nuclear warheads.⁵

This strengthening of the alliance with the US led to furious debate among Canadian politicians and scholars, many of whom viewed the acquisition of F-101s, Bomarcs, and the influx of United States Air Force (USAF) personnel into Canada for the manning of the DEW Line radar stations as a direct threat to Canadian sovereignty. Canadians also feared that the US was placing substantial pressure the RCAF to accept nuclear warheads on Canadian soil. As a result, US-Canadian political relations suffered a decline in the early 1960s, exacerbated “by the now-legendary mutual dislike of Diefenbaker and [US President] Kennedy.”⁶ Contemporary Canadian nationalists, such as Michael Barkway, attacked this closeness with the US, claiming that “[n]early everything

⁵ Ibid., 48.
⁶ Ibid., 53.
done in Canada in the name of air defence is now done for the United States,” and that the policies put in place to defend Canada acted only to provide the US with a larger buffer zone against the Soviets.⁷ Later on in the same article, Barkway, a Canadian political theorist, refers to the RCAF as the USAF’s “compliant supporter,” arguing that its fighting strength had been all but erased by a commitment to manning the “pathetic” DEW and Mid-Canada radar systems.⁸

Despite the portrayal of poor relations between Canada and the US in written history, the testimonies of RCAF officers suggest that these tensions existed only on a political level. According to Lt. Col. Huot, then serving alongside the USAF in the RCAF No.2 Fighter Wing in Europe, the day-to-day relationship of the two forces remained one of “cooperation and admiration on both sides.”⁹ He goes on to add that “Military to military, I don’t think there has ever been a problem between the USAF and the RCAF... there’s a lot of mutual respect.”¹⁰ With regards to Canadian involvement in NORAD, Lt. Col. Huot believes that “NORAD itself was an excellent venue for integration and for contact between [the RCAF and the USAF] and...the Americans appreciated the fact that the Canadians were there on more than one occasion.”¹¹

Echoing Lt. Col. Huot’s sentiments towards the USAF and Canada’s contributions to NORAD, Col. Zrymiak recalled little tension between the two forces during this time, and asserted that despite the contemporary political disagreements, “[NORAD] was a cooperative thing from both sides, we each had about the same amount

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⁷ Barkway, *Canada’s Changing Role*, 110.
⁸ Ibid., 108.
⁹ Lt. Col. Robert Huot (Ret.), interview by Cameron McKeigan, 4 March 2011, Victoria, BC.
¹⁰ Ibid.
¹¹ Ibid.
to gain… from being part of this program, which served both countries equally well.”

Col. Zrymiak served at the NORAD Northern Headquarters in North Bay, ON from 1963-65, where he was tasked with coordinating the visits of ranking NATO officials from all over the world. As such, he was a first-hand witness to the degree of cooperation between the NATO countries and their staff.

Brig. Gen. Neroutsos, an RCAF Reservist for the duration of his career with the RCAF/AIRCOM, had significantly less contact with the USAF due to the domestic nature of his postings, but nonetheless reflects positively on his experience with Canada’s neighbours to the south. When recalling the annual conferences between AIRCOM and the USAF that he attended at the Homestead Air Force Base in Florida, Brig. Gen. Neroutsos noted that “[AIRCOM] had a very good working relationship with the American Air Force…. On a personal level, it was great…” While it is worth noting that Brig. Gen. Neroutsos attended these conferences during the 1980s, well after the political tensions between the US and Canada had cooled, his comments echoed those of Huot and Zrymiak from an earlier period of the Cold War.

In summation, oral histories collected from three officers within the RCAF seem to counter much of what written history suggests about the nature of Canada’s Cold War partnership with the United States. Instead of a strained relationship with their American counterparts, the RCAF/AIRCOM and the USAF operated on a basis of cooperation and mutual respect. Any tensions that may have existed between the two nations remained in the political realm, having little effect on the functional operation of their respective air forces. Nowhere in the testimonies given by the three officers was there any mention of a

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12 Col. Michael Zrymiak (Ret.), interview by Cameron McKeigan, 5 March 2011, Victoria, BC.
13 Michael Zrymiak, Leaving a Contrail (Renfrew, ON: General Store Publishing House, 2011), 68.
14 Brig. Gen. John Neroutsos (Ret.), interview by Cameron McKeigan, 12 March 2011, Victoria, BC.
perceived threat to Canadian sovereignty from the US, or a deliberate American attempt to weaken Canada’s armed forces. Those accusations, it would appear, were better left to the nationalists and politicians of the age.

**Canada’s Contribution to NATO**

The written history regarding Canada’s aerial contribution to NATO generally takes the standpoint that despite significant contributions in the early years of its existence, by the late-1950s Canada’s military focus had shifted away from Europe and found new emphasis on the air defence of North America. In his chapter in the book *Warrior Chiefs: Perspectives on Senior Canadian Military Leaders*, Jeff Noakes’ chapter, “Air Force Architect: Air Marshal Wilfred Austin Curtis, Chief of the Air Staff, 1947-1953” asserts that in 1952, “Canada’s two fighter wings, one in England, one in France, provided…what was the Alliance’s most effective defence against Soviet aircraft.”¹⁵ *Sixty Years* also sings the praises of the European contingent of the RCAF in the early 1950s, stating that “[t]here is little doubt that Canada’s formidable Air Division had a sobering influence on the Soviets,” who were deterred from regular harassment of US airbases near Munich by the deployment of an RCAF F-86 Sabre squadron there in 1953.¹⁶

In 1955, however, the Canadian government began a large-scale downsizing of its air force in Europe, replacing some squadrons’ F-86 Sabre aircraft with the new CF-100

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¹⁶ The period of 1950-54 is often referred to as the ‘Golden Years’ of the RCAF. Milberry, ed., *Sixty Years*, 270.
fighter, and simply disbanding others.\textsuperscript{17} Mirroring this downsizing, the volume of written history directly concerning the RCAF after 1955-56 drops off drastically as well, creating the impression that the RCAF’s NATO contingent had all but disappeared from Europe by the late 1950s. Overall, the absence of published histories of this period seems to suggest that after the mid-1950s, Canada had stopped contributing to NATO air power in any significant way.

This, however, is not the case. In 1958 Lt. Col. Huot received his posting as a Sabre pilot with the RCAF No.2 Fighter Wing in Grostenquin, France. He was quick to point out that he was “fortunate to get the F-86 posting… at that point…. [The RCAF] wasn’t assigning that many people to F-86s, they were putting a lot of them onto CF-100s or transport…”\textsuperscript{18} In this sense, Lt. Col. Huot’s experience corresponds with the written history, but where it differs is in his description of the contributions Canadians made to NATO during his posting from 1958-62: “The name of the game was to be very good at what you do in air fighting… your gunnery skills had to be very good… and Canadians were particularly good at it…to the point where other [NATO] countries banned their aircraft from [practicing air-to-air combat] with us…” during training exercises\textsuperscript{19} He later recalled that during his time in Europe, the RCAF used to consistently “walk away with” the Guynemer Trophy, awarded to the NATO air force with the most accurate aerial gunnery.\textsuperscript{20} In more general terms, Lt. Col. Huot summed up his belief that “Canada

\textsuperscript{17} James Eayrs, \textit{In Defence of Canada, Vol.4: Growing up Allied} (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980), 229.
\textsuperscript{18} Huot, interview by Cameron McKeigan, 4 March 2011.
\textsuperscript{19} Other NATO aircraft would often engage in war games with the RCAF to keep their interception and dogfighting skills keen, even when flying aircraft that were not designed for dogfights. As a result, NATO nations were forced to ban their pilots from engaging the RCAF for fear of pilots pushing their aircraft past their operational limits. Ibid.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.
played an extremely important role [in Europe]; we very significant in our presence. Everybody knew we were there… it was a lot of fun, and I say fun because we never fired a shot in anger… but we made our presence felt.”

Despite his uplifting outlook on the RCAF during the 1960s, Lt. Col. Huot recalls this as an era of “huge reduction.” As more and more RCAF squadrons were disbanded through the 1960s, some Canadian airmen that did not find employment in commercial flying “went military, to other [NATO] countries. In one country in particular in the Middle East, they were very sought after, because of their air fighting experience – of course I’m talking about Israel.” That Canadian pilots were sought after by their ally is a testament to the daunting presence of the RCAF in Europe, one that extended well beyond the mid-1950s.

The RCAF in Canada also continued to make significant contributions to NATO air defences well after the ‘golden years’ had come to an end. From 1956-58, Col. Zrymiak was responsible for the training of several pilots from a host of NATO nations. Posted to the air force base at Moose Jaw, SK, he recalls this as a time when “the NATO training program was in force, and we had everything from Germans, French, Turks, Danes, and Norwegians.” Though he was only posted in Moose Jaw for three years, Col. Zrymiak considers it a “highlight” in his air force career, and acknowledged that the training programs continued long after he had left the base.

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21 Huot, interview by Cameron McKeigan, 4 March 2011.
22 Ibid.
23 Ibid.
24 The period of 1950-54 is often referred to as the ‘Golden Years’ of the RCAF. Milberry, ed., Sixty Years, 270.
25 Zrymiak, interview by Cameron McKeigan, 5 March 2011.
26 Ibid.
From 1965-68, Col. Zrymiak was posted as a flight instructor for a second time, this time in Portage la Prairie, MB. During his posting he was again tasked with the training of foreign students, this time Tanzanian. Although not a NATO contract, the RCAF training of the Tanzanians, according to Col. Zrymiak, took place because “the world knows that the British Commonwealth air training plan gave [the RCAF] a lot of expertise in pilot training, and so countries could rely on Canada to provide good training for their people.”

The experiences of Lt. Col. Huot and Col. Zrymiak simultaneously support and challenge the written history of the RCAF/AIRCOM. While both officers agree that the RCAF presence in Europe did in fact begin to decrease after 1955, their personal stories suggest that Canadian contributions to NATO continued long after the end of the ‘golden years.’ Though very little written history exists to document the Canadian contribution to NATO’s air forces after 1955, the oral testimonies of these officers attest to a continuing role for Canada in this period. Canadian presence in NATO continued to be felt long after the history books stop their documentation of the RCAF’s role in the alliance. Col. Zrymiak, in discussing the RCAF/AIRCOM’s role in NATO, offers an excellent assessment of his country’s Cold War contribution:

Let’s face it, the ultimate reason why [the Soviets] were kept in check was because of the nuclear capabilities of the Americans, and everything else played its small part. [The RCAF/AIRCOM] played our small part, but we played it well. Whatever it was we had to do, we did it well.

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27 Zrymiak, interview by Cameron McKeigan, 5 March 2011.
28 Ibid.
The RCAF Reserve

If written history has somewhat overlooked the Regular element of the RCAF/AIRCOM, it has practically ignored the Reserve force, which has received little historical recognition for its efforts during the Cold War. Due to its fundamentally domestic nature of its taskings during the Cold War, the RCAF/AIRCOM Reserves had little opportunity to participate in international events and alliances, and has consequently been largely passed over by written history. Lt. Col. Huot, Col. Zrymiak, and Brig. Gen. John Neroutsos all served with the Reserves at some time over the course of their careers, and during interviews each of them reflected positively on the experience while also providing information and perspectives not found in the history books.

Perhaps one of the most important roles of the RCAF Reserve during the early years of the Cold War was the defence of Canadian airspace against the Soviet bomber threat. In the early 1950s, the RCAF had devoted the entirety of its Regular forces and interceptor equipment to its air division in Europe, leaving Canadian skies undefended. To compensate for this, the RCAF created Auxiliary squadrons out of the Reserve, equipped with De Havilland Vampire and F-86 Sabre jets. These aircraft were tasked with defending Canadian airspace. Career Reservist Brig. Gen. Neroutsos, then serving with the 483 Reserve Squadron in Montreal, described the Auxiliary as “a parallel operational group, much like the Regular... and a stage up from the pure Reserve.”

Auxiliary squadrons served as Canada’s primary aerial defence units until the late 1950s, when a sufficient number of pilots and CF-100s had returned from Europe to allow the Regulars to assume the responsibility.

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29 Neroutsos, interview by Cameron McKeigan, 12 March 2011.
30 Ibid.
Following the return of the RCAF Regulars to Canada in the late 1950s, the Auxiliaries and the Reserves were reintegrated, and began to take on a less operational and more logistical role within Canada. Brig. Gen. Neroutsos, then the Commanding Officer (CO) of 411 Squadron in Toronto, was responsible for coordinating “communications flights… provid[ing] an aircraft and a crew to take…light cargo or people…from A to B, just like an airline. We’d range as far as from Winnipeg, down to Gagetown, to Halifax, all within Canada.”

Brig. Gen. Neroutsos served as CO of 411 Reserve Squadron until 1967, when he transferred to Montreal and became CO of 401 Reserve Squadron, which also was regularly called upon for communications flights until the unification of the Canadian Forces at the end of the 1960s.

In 1968, Canadian Minister of National Defence Paul Hellyer enacted his policy of integration and unification, effectively combining Canada’s army, navy, and air force into a single entity, the Canadian Forces. Unification, pushed through by the Liberal government in power, was aimed at streamlining the military budget and is often considered by Canadian servicemen to have been a disaster from the start. Serving in the Regulars as a flight instructor at Portage la Prairie at the time of unification, Col. Zrymiak recalled:

There was a huge loss of morale in the services… It was obvious [unification] was going to be a disaster, and it was... [It] destroyed the morale of every organization. As a unit, you felt that you were without focus…and a proper command and control system.

As detrimental to the Regular Force as unification was, its impact on the Reserves was even more profound. As CO of 401 Squadron in Montreal, Brig. Gen. Neroutsos watched as the Reserves “went down to a total of about 750 people… and six squadrons

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31 Neroutsos, interview by Cameron McKeigan, 12 March 2011.
32 Zrymiak, interview by Cameron McKeigan, 5 March 2011.
in total,” down from a pre-Unification strength of 5700 people and 12 squadrons.\textsuperscript{33} To make matters worse, the University Reserve Training Plan, a system that had once provided a steady flow of Reserve officers prior to unification, was discontinued to cut costs, jeopardizing the command structure of the Reserves. According to Brig. Gen. Neroutsos:

It was a sad time for the Reserve… the period of 1968-70 was very abrupt. The Reserve only stayed [active] because of two individuals, [Reservists] Group Captain Berry Howard and Group Captain Bill Draper… they went to bat up in Ottawa, because [the government was] going to cut the Reserve out totally.\textsuperscript{34}

Thanks to the efforts Gp. Capts. Howard and Draper, the Reserves endured, and continued to serve domestically, all the while fighting for its survival.

For the remainder of the Cold War era, the Reserves continued to operate almost exclusively within Canada, constantly constrained by both a minimal budget and a lack of manpower. Despite these constraints, the Reserves expanded their operations, and were employed in a wide range of tasks. Lt. Col. Huot, serving with 401 Reserve Squadron from 1969-79, participated in “tactical support for ground troops… we’d pick up paratroopers, bring them up to 8,000ft, and they’d all jump out, we’d do message pickup… we did search and rescue, and other tactical support roles… be it supply, communications…”\textsuperscript{35} Lt. Col. Huot was personally involved in photographic mapping operations based out of Baffin Island in Canada’s Arctic. The areas were so remote that they could only be reached by air, placing the logistics of the entire operation squarely in the hands of the Reserves. During these mapping expeditions, Lt. Huot recalls that “on

\textsuperscript{33} Neroutsos, interview by Cameron McKeigan, 12 March 2011.
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{35} Huot, interview by Cameron McKeigan, 4 March 2011.
one occasion… our cartographers… moved an island almost a kilometer,” a mistake that was only corrected by aerial photography.\(^{36}\)

Col. Zrymiak’s time with the Reserves was spent in Winnipeg as the Deputy Chief of Staff from 1982-85. There, he was tasked with revitalizing the Reserves by incorporating them into the CF Total Force concept. This concept, which would train the Reserves to combat standards allowing them to be utilized in times of protracted conflict, presented them with a new *raison d’etre*, something they had lacked in the eyes of many Regulars since unification. As Col. Zrymiak explained, prior to the Total Force concept the Reserves were not kept up to combat standards because the RCAF/AIRCOM was preparing “to fight the proverbial three-day war…with the Soviet Bloc…. It was going to be a nuclear war, and you cannot train Reserves quickly enough, so why spend too much money on them?”\(^{37}\) In this context, “the Reserves lost confidence in being useful… and it wasn’t until there were some interesting people that showed up and [realized that] there is value to the Regular force in a number of ways.”\(^{38}\) Only then did the Reserves once again become a priority to the government. The initiation of the Total Force concept in the 1980s allowed the AIRCOM Reserves to become a valuable “resource…that can do a job…at much less cost…and is closer to the community,” a vital characteristic in “a nation that is sort of ambivalent towards its military.”\(^{39}\) Nearly thirty years after the initiation of Total Force, the Reserves continue to be an invaluable resource to AIRCOM, and are employed in a variety of high-profile operations, including overseas missions in

\(^{36}\) Huot, interview by Cameron McKeigan, 4 March 2011.

\(^{37}\) Zrymiak, interview by Cameron McKeigan, 5 March 2011.

\(^{38}\) Ibid.

\(^{39}\) Ibid.
Afghanistan and elsewhere.\textsuperscript{40} Despite their diminished budget, and having to struggle for survival during the period of 1960-1985, the Reserves did not fail to have an impact on the airmen who served with them. In summing up his service with the Reserves, Lt. Col. Huot expressed his fondness for the organization:

I have to take my hat off to the Reserves. I served ten years in the Regular forces, and ten years in the Reserves, and I love them both dearly, but I admire the people in the Reserves for giving up the family time, a great sacrifice sometimes, and not doing it for money… people didn’t do it for [money].\textsuperscript{41}

The perspectives of Lt. Col. Huot, Col. Zrymiak, and Brig. Gen. Neroutsos on the Reserves do not add colour to an existing historical narrative – but only because no narrative has yet been truly established. Instead, their testimonies offer what could become primary sources in the writing of a history of the RCAF/AIRCOM Reserves during the Cold War.

When writing on a subject not particularly well covered by written history, such as the Cold War RCAF/AIRCOM, the value of oral history becomes self-evident. Though it has been argued that oral history is less reliable than written sources, as historian Russell G. Hann has pointed out, “[o]ral history is not history at all, but a legitimate technique for generating a primary source from peoples’ memories.”\textsuperscript{42} To disagree with this concept is to remove the historical merit from the words of those who actually experienced the events that historians wish to study, a foolish mistake. The seeming preference for written sources over those created from oral accounts is largely unfounded. Biases, omissions, and honest mistakes are equally as likely to occur within the pages of written sources as

\textsuperscript{40} Zrymiak, interview by Cameron McKeigan, 5 March 2011.
\textsuperscript{41} Huot, interview by Cameron McKeigan, 4 March 2011.
they are within the minutes of an interview. In the case of this essay, the insights and individual narratives of three senior officers of the RCAF/AIRCOM have helped to provide additional perspectives on the very few sources that exist on the matter. These interviews have indeed become useful primary sources, as Hann suggests, and have perhaps contributed to filling some small gaps in the history of Canada’s air forces during the Cold War.
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