

PATHFINDER

AIR POWER DEVELOPMENT CENTRE BULLETIN



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CANADA'S EVOLVING AIR FORCE IN AFGHANISTAN

Note: In Canada, the Air Force operates all aircraft in the Canadian Forces, including maritime and land force helicopters.

Within a few weeks of the 9/11 attacks on the United States in 2001, Canada committed military forces, including air force personnel and aircraft, to the Middle East, Persian Gulf/Arabian Sea and Southwest Asia regions as part of the US-led coalition campaign against terrorism. In 2010, the Canadian Air Force continues to provide many crucial air power capabilities to operations in those regions. Some have evolved significantly over this period and some, which did not reside in the Air Force inventory in 2001, have been introduced to address capability gaps or unanticipated requirements. The nature of, and circumstances surrounding, Canada's evolving air force contributions to operations in this theatre and the importance of organisational agility provide important lessons for middle power air forces employing air power in dynamic military operating environments.

The initial Canadian Forces mission, Operation APOLLO, was predominantly a maritime operation in support of the U.S. led Operation ENDURING FREEDOM although it did include the deployment of an army battle group to southern Afghanistan from February to July 2002. The Canadian Air Force provided embarked CH124 Sea King maritime helicopters, CP140 Aurora (P-3) long range patrol aircraft, and strategic/tactical airlift using the CC150 Polaris (A310) and the CC130 Hercules aircraft. The Canadian Forces established an air bridge to the Middle East and Southwest Asian theatre, basing the Theatre Support Element (TSE) at Camp Mirage in the Arabian region.

Operation ATHENA, Canada's military contribution to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in

Afghanistan, began on 17 July 2003, with a Canadian Army battle group forming part of ISAF's Kabul Multi-National Brigade. For Operation ATHENA, the Air Force continued to operate the TSE from Camp Mirage, providing airlift support to Canadian Joint Task Force Kabul, and handling such tasks as transport of personnel into and out of theatre, resupply operations and other equipment maintenance and administration support.



A Canadian CU170 Heron is prepared prior to launch at Kandahar Airfield. The Heron, used by both the Canadian and Royal Australian Air Forces in Afghanistan, provides ISR support to ISAF forces.

In August 2005, Canada altered its focus in Afghanistan, forming a whole of government Provincial Reconstruction Team in Kandahar and moving its battle group and army-acquired CU161 Sperwer Tactical Uninhabited Aerial Vehicle (TUAV) unit from Kabul to Kandahar to consolidate the majority of Canadian diplomatic, development and defence efforts in that province. A detachment of the Canadian Tactical Airlift Unit (TAU) from

Camp Mirage subsequently moved to the Kandahar Air Field (KAF) to provide on site C-130 support to Canadian operations and ISAF coalition partners.

On 4 September 2006, a significant event took place during a battle group level offensive operation, when a USAF A-10 close air support aircraft being controlled by a Canadian ground-based forward air controller mistakenly strafed a Canadian infantry company just west of the city of Kandahar, killing one soldier and wounding many others. A significant air-land integration issue identified by the subsequent Canadian Board of Inquiry was related to the lack of a properly manned Tactical Air Control Party (TACP) in the Canadian area of operations, at regional command (brigade) or task force (battle group) levels.

To improve the integration of air power into joint force operations in Afghanistan, the Canadian Air Force went from deploying one brigade air liaison officer, to continuously deploying six air force officers and up to six NCOs, split between TACPs at the brigade and battle group levels. These TACPs have proven to be invaluable

additions to joint operations. Additionally, the Canadian Air Force has committed to permanent force structure changes, including forming three brigade TACPs and creating five additional battle group TACPs.

By mid-2007, the Canadian AF had increased its support to the deployed Canadian joint task force with the introduction of the CC177 (C-17) Globemaster III transport aircraft capable of flying large payloads directly into KAF. At roughly the same time, the Canadian Government commissioned an “Independent Panel on Canada’s Future Role in Afghanistan”, which produced a very influential report commonly known as the “Manley Report”. The “Manley Report”, released in January 2008, led to a motion in parliament to extend the Canadian military mission (combat operations) until July 2011, but made this extension conditional on providing additional support to Canadian troops in Afghanistan which included tactical helicopter transports and more robust intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities.

To meet these new requirements, the Canadian Air Force and the Canadian Expeditionary Force Command (ADF JOC equivalent) rapidly acquired and/or fielded:

- Six CH-47D Chinooks purchased from the US Army to provide tactical rotary wing air mobility.
- Eight Canadian Air Force Griffon armed utility helicopters (Bell 412/CH146) equipped with an EO/IR sensor to provide escort, convoy overwatch and light transport capabilities.
- Heron Medium Altitude Long Endurance UAVs (CU170) to provide an increased ISR capability.
- Civilian helicopter support to transport cargo to isolated Canadian forward operating bases.
- An air wing headquarters to manage these new capabilities.

These air power additions significantly increased Canadian Air Force contributions to the Canadian Joint Task Force Afghanistan (JTF-Afg) and Regional Command (South). Over the past year, the Chinooks and Griffons have flown

over 26,000 passengers, while the Heron UAV has flown well over 5000 hours since being introduced.

In summary, the Canadian Air Forces’s air power contributions to joint operations in Afghanistan have



Canadian Air Force CH146 Griffon and CH147 Chinook on a mission in southern Afghanistan.

evolved over time to meet the dynamic political, strategic, operational and tactical environments. A significant number of air capabilities currently being employed by Canada’s Air Force in Afghanistan did not reside in its inventory prior to Operation ATHENA. The rapid acquisition of these capabilities required an appreciable amount of organisational

agility and innovative short-notice staff work by dedicated air and joint force personnel to bring these capabilities into being. Additionally, the Air Force has initiated organisational structure changes to improve long-term air-land integration and to capture TACP effectiveness lessons acquired during operations in Afghanistan.

- *Canada’s air power contributions to operations in Afghanistan have evolved over time in reaction to the dynamic mission.*
- *Significant events like air-to-ground fratricide and the Manley Report had dramatic effects on the types and numbers of air capabilities deployed.*
- *The development and employment of TACPs has significantly improved Canadian air-land integration in joint operations.*

The most important thing is to have a flexible approach.... The truth is no one knows exactly what air fighting will be like in the future. We can’t say anything will stay as it is, but we also can’t be certain the future will conform to particular theories, which so often, between the wars, have proved wrong.

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