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AIR FORCE OFFICER DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM NEEDS MORE INTERACTION

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AIM

1. This service paper for the Commander 2 Canadian Air Division (Comd 2 Cdn Air Div) will discuss and recommend changes to the Royal Canadian Air Force's (RCAF) Developmental Period Two's (DP2) education – the Air Force Officer Development (AFOD) program. Although specific details on content of the course will not be addressed herein, a proposal advocating less solitary distance learning (DL) in favour of a more interactive learning environment will be made.

INTRODUCTION

2. In *Projecting Power: Canada's Air Force 2035*, the Canadian Forces Aerospace Warfare Centre (CFAWC) describes a Future Operating Environment (FOE) where the battlespace is controlled by highly advanced network-enabled command and control (C2) structures. This technology will allow for real-time data analysis that will require real-time decision making. Central to this process is the human dimension that needs to evolve with the technology:¹ “Superiority in the cognitive or human dimension *will* be essential.”² In order to ensure that RCAF commanders of the future are prepared to operate in this FOE they must be given appropriate training and adequate education.

3. Current Professional Development (PD) programs are guided by the Canadian Forces Professional Development System (CFPDS) rooted in its four pillars: Training, Education, Self-Development, and Work Experience.³ Of the five Developmental Periods

¹ Royal Canadian Air Force, D2-247/2009E-PDF, *Projecting Power: Canada's Air Force 2035*, (Trenton: Canadian Aerospace Warfare Centre, 2009), 38.

² *Ibid.*, 48.

³ Department of National Defence, A-P1-002-DP1/PC-D01, Qualification Standard: Air Environmental Requirements, Developmental Periods 1 to 5, (Ottawa: Chief of the Air Staff, 2011), 1-1.

(DPs) that officers need to complete in order to progress, the first two rely heavily on training and education whereas the priority is put on self-development and work experience for the final three. To establish a concrete foundation of RCAF doctrine, ethos, and knowledge in novice RCAF officers, the initial training and education must be exceptional. Key to this education is the AFOD program offered in DP2; however, in its current state there needs to be less solitary DL and more interaction with other RCAF students and experienced members to maximize its value.

4. In the following paragraphs, the pros and cons of the current AFOD program will be analyzed. Arguments will advocate changes to the curriculum to include more discussion time with students and the Directing Staff (DS), more in-house learning in a central location, and to synergize this centralized learning by incorporating courses offered by other RCAF institutions. After a background of the AFOD program is complete, specific characteristics of the program will be explored highlighting where improvements can be made. A comparison with the Canadian Army's DP2 course, the Army Operations Course (AOC), will be conducted to draw out applicable features that would benefit the AFOD program. Finally, a rough proposal of the new AFOD program will be made taking associated challenges into consideration.

DISCUSSION

5. Over the past eight years, the Canadian Forces School of Aerospace Studies (CFSAS) has worked hard to create the AFOD program. It is broken down into five Blocks: Block one entails initial classification training up to an officer's operationally functional point,⁴ Blocks two to four involve the DL portion of the program, and Block

⁴ Jamie Davidson and Rainer Wosnitza, "The Air Force Officer Development Program: What's It All About?" in *The Canadian Air Force Journal*, Vol. 2, No. 1, (Winter 2009), 57.

five is conducted over two weeks in location at CFSAS, Winnipeg. The following paragraphs will primarily focus on Blocks two to four and Block five will be briefly discussed further in paragraph eleven.

6. A student enrolls in one Block at a time and once enrolled, students are given three months each to complete Blocks one and two, and six months each to complete Blocks three and four. In order to advance to the next Block a student must successfully complete challenges (on-line exams). On top of these challenges, an oral presentation and a personal development program are required in Block two, and a briefing note is required for Block four. The next four paragraphs will discuss how the AFOD program is lacking in feedback and discussion time, how the test-out option needs refinement, and the difficulties of balancing full time jobs with this critical professional development.

7. *Feedback.* The AFOD program is “student-guided”⁵ whereby the student’s immediate supervisor and a DS (member of CFSAS) are required to provide feedback. The supervisor recommends enrollment and assesses deliverables (based on guidance from CFSAS) and the DS monitors progression and facilitates the challenges. Throughout this DL portion of AFOD, it is conceivable that a student would get feedback only on his or her deliverables as described above. Providing the student clicks through the on-line information and completes the pass or fail challenges in time there is no other requirement for formal feedback. If a student falls behind in the recommended timeline, they are prompted by the DS to keep pace. Certainly not the norm, but it has been observed that students are able to get through the material last minute and pass the

⁵ A term used to describe how the student controls how much work to perform and when within the given timelines associated with each Block.

challenge just prior to the courses' end date.⁶ Although this type of learning can allow for successful completion of the course, it does not promote a deep learning – students read to memorize, not to understand.⁷ In order to promote a deeper level of learning and understanding, there needs to be discussion and analysis which is not adequately facilitated in the DL portion of this program. The AFOD “general information” provided to the supervisor does make mention of avoiding this “Let’s get it over with” approach,⁸ but as a student-guided program with no incremental deadlines within each Block, it becomes easy for a student to procrastinate.

8. *Discussion.* As students complete individual sections of each Block, they are encouraged to post comments on the AFOD website’s forum. The intent is to provide their own feedback and analysis on what they’ve read and combine it with their own experiences to further solidify the on-line information. Each student has the opportunity to provide their own comments in solitude or contribute to other discussions. On-line discussion permits students the time to digest material and smartly craft their thoughts before presenting them to a group. This increases the quality of contribution, but the problem is that there is no obligation for students to post on this forum. A student that comments will receive the same pass or fail as a student that hasn’t commented. Time for this course should be allotted to mandatory group telephone conferences whereby topics and questions can be discussed and debated to induce critical thinking. Initially, the DS would lead these discussions, until such a time when a student would facilitate them;

⁶ Observation made by author through own completion of training, as well as the work done by peers and subordinates.

⁷ Rafid Alkhaddar, Thomas Wooder, Begum Sertyesilisik, and Ashley Tunstall, “Deep Learning Approach’s Effectiveness on Sustainability Improvement in the UK Construction Industry,” in *Management of Environmental Quality: An International Journal*, Vol. 23 No. 2, 2012, 128. (126-139).

⁸ Air Force Training Centre, “AFOD General Information,” <http://17wing.winnipeg.mil.ca/cms/en/aftc/winginfo/CFSAS-home/Courses/AFOD/GeneralKnowledge.aspx#admin>, last accessed 24 January 2016.

giving them the opportunity to lead as well as learn the material. Participation in discussions should be included as part of the grading criteria.

9. *Test-Out Option.* Understanding that RCAF officers may join the AFOD program at different experience levels, it offers a “Test-Out Option” whereby a student can take challenges without studying the material. CFSAS “[is] not concerned with how you learn the mandatory information, only that you do learn it.”⁹ This option is excellent to get junior officers through the program as quickly as possible and has merits with not wasting valuable time. But students that typically choose this route are the ones that can offer a great deal of experience and knowledge to the on-line forum (or future telephone conferences). Their early departure from the program will be the loss of other more junior students. Another argument can be made that educational PD is not about getting the “ticks in the box”, but rather solidifying one’s understanding of information.

10. *Time and Balance.* Students are required to enroll in AFOD while carrying out their primary job. In lieu of attending an institution to complete Blocks two to four, supervisors are asked to give students appropriate time to complete the work.¹⁰ And in some cases supervisors may authorize students to take special leave to complete their studies.¹¹ It does provide flexibility for a student to complete the program; however, it takes away focus as one’s job remains primary over the education. Contained within the “Block Survival Guides” is the recommended time allotted to complete Blocks two to

⁹ Air Force Training Centre, “AFOD General Information,” <http://17wing.winnipeg.mil.ca/cms/en/aftc/winginfo/CFSAS-home/Courses/AFOD/GeneralKnowledge.aspx#admin>, last accessed 24 January 2016.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Department of National Defence, DAOD 5031-8, *Canadian Forces Professional Development*, Ottawa: DND Canada, 2012, 4.

four.¹² This total time amounts to 175 hours; equivalent to 25-30 working days.¹³ A proposal that will be discussed in further paragraphs is the notion of giving students the recommended time away from work to complete all or most of the AFOD program at once.

11. *Block five.* This portion takes place over two weeks at 17 Wing, Winnipeg. Prior to arriving in Winnipeg a student is required to prepare for their student challenge where they advocate an institutional change. Also included in these two weeks are guided discussions, guest institutional leader presentations, and an Operational Planning Exercise (OPEX). It is the aim of Block five that students use the knowledge gained from the first four Blocks to further develop their understanding of being better tactical leaders and preparing them for leadership at the institutional level.¹⁴ Block five eliminates the challenges discussed in paragraphs seven to ten, but the time allocated to Block five, as is part of the argument of this paper, is too limited. As will be proposed, students need to spend more time within the structure of Block five.

12. *AOC.* The Canadian Army's (CA) equivalent DP2 course is conducted over 20 weeks.¹⁵ Seven weeks are dedicated to DL with the remaining dedicated to in-house learning at Kingston, Ontario. Before attending the AOC, there are pre-requisites courses (which also include DL and in-house education), but the focus here will be on the AOC. Comparing the AFOD program and AOC there are three major differences:

¹² Air Force Training Centre, "AFOD General Information," <http://17wing.winnipeg.mil.ca/cms/en/aftc/winginfo/CFSAS-home/Courses/AFOD/GeneralKnowledge.aspx#admin>, 26 January 2015.

¹³ Calculation done by author based on eight hour work day with one hour for lunch and potential one hour of physical training.

¹⁴ Air Force Training Centre, "Block 5 Survival Guide," <http://17wing.winnipeg.mil.ca/cms/en/aftc/winginfo/CFSAS-home/Courses/AFOD/GeneralKnowledge.aspx#admin>, 26 January 2015.

¹⁵ Department of National Defence, "Qualification Standard and Training Plan – Army Operations Course," (Kingston: Canadian Army Command and Staff College, 2015), 1-4/5.

- a. students attending the AOC are given full time to complete the course (both DL and in-house education);
- b. each day during the DL portion there is a scheduled syndicate telephone conference where discussions are led by the DS and eventually the students; and
- c. the length of the in-house portion of AOC is much more significant.

13. Allocating full time to AOC students alleviates the challenge of balancing priorities of the education with one's job. If the education is critical to the development of junior CA officers, then the CA has provided the appropriate time to allow students to focus on their studies. The full-time allotted for the DL portion allows for the DS to schedule daily teleconferences where discussions that promote critical thinking can occur in order to solidify doctrinal concepts and ideas. Experienced students can share real-life examples providing deeper context to the discussions. The extra time in Kingston provides more interaction with students, staff, and guest lecturers. Here, not only are the concepts learned during the DL expanded upon, they are also applied through numerous exercises, team and individual projects, and presentations.

14. One other major difference between the two programs is that the AOC provides opportunities for students of other elements to attend. Not only does this broaden the connections made across the CA into the RCAF and the Royal Navy (RN), but students from other elements will also provide unique expertise and perspective on how to overcome challenges.

15. *AFOD proposal*. There is a time and place for solitary DL. Blocks two to four need to be reviewed in order to assess whether information contained within are

appropriate for solitary DL or if it is appropriate for discussion and debate amongst students and DS. Since it is suggested that Block two is “optimally completed during the initial two years of an officer’s first occupational posting,”¹⁶ then perhaps there should be little change to how this Block is administered. The information learned in Block two (the basics of Aerospace Doctrine, Command and Control, and Leadership) is applicable throughout one’s career and should be learned as early as possible. This Block also has the most involvement of the student’s supervisor (through the two deliverables) and can be leveraged to provide more feedback aiding in student development. The completion of this basic Block or phase would be a pre-requisite to entering the next phase of the AFOD program.

16. The next phase of the AFOD program is loosely designed based on an “AOC” style course. An appropriate amount of time would be allocated for students to complete an interactive DL portion. This portion of the course would include daily-required readings and teleconference discussions, as well as projects completed individually and in small groups. The culmination of this phase would include in-house learning either in Winnipeg or Trenton (for reasons below) dedicated for the purposes mentioned in paragraphs 11, 13, and 14.

17. Currently, there are courses offered by the CFAWC and the Air Force Expeditionary Readiness Standards and Evaluation Team (AFERSET) located at 8 Wing/Canadian Forces Base Trenton that would be beneficial to all RCAF officers. To name a few:

- a. Tactical Command and Control Course (TCCC);

¹⁶ Jamie Davidson and Rainer Wosnitza, “The Air Force Officer Development Program: What’s It All About?” in *The Canadian Air Force Journal*, Vol. 2, No. 1, (Winter 2009), 57.

- b. Operations Command and Control Course (OCCC); and
- c. RCAF Lessons Learned Staff Officers Course (LLSOC).

The purpose of these courses is to give junior/soon-to-be senior RCAF leaders critical information into how to operate within an RCAF and Joint Headquarters (HQ). The information provided on these courses could be synergistically incorporated in the AFOD in-house portion of the course. Also, if scheduling is done correctly, students not on AFOD could jump onto the courses listed above to receive the training while simultaneously giving a new perspective to the students already on AFOD. This would allow for non-AFOD students to get the course qualification and the AFOD students to get the exemption (as it would be inclusive in the AFOD qualification). It should also be noted that the CFAWC has a number of HQ simulation rooms that are set up like a real HQ or Combined Air Operations Centre (CAOC). Here, real-life scenarios can be exercised with the ability to introduce challenges in a controlled environment.

18. *Challenges.* With the proposal above there are time, personnel, and financial costs associated. Resources are required to dedicate full-time DS and students to an AOC type course. A specific timeframe for conducting this type of learning has not been proposed in this paper; however, more than the two-week phase of Block five is recommended. Synchronizing other courses offered by different RCAF establishments can help save time in the long run as they will not have to be completed later in one's career. This combination can also have a significant financial savings as well. In terms of time, the 25-30 working days required to complete the original Blocks two to four could be allocated to students at once to complete the proposed AFOD program. This will allow students the time to completely focus on their professional development to become the

most “air-minded”¹⁷ they can be. In terms of personnel, CFSAS would need more members, as one DS is required to lead one syndicate throughout the proposed AFOD program; however, other RCAF educational institutions could be leveraged as indicated in paragraph 17. Travel costs are already accounted for in Block five, but additional funding is needed for the supplementary days required to complete the longer in-house portion.

CONCLUSION

19. In order to facilitate and cultivate a deep learning and understanding of Aerospace doctrine, the current AFOD program is inadequate. It does not provide students the balance and time to prioritize their studies, it lacks a complete feedback loop to confirm their level of understanding, and it needs mandatory discussions that would solidify the education. It is acknowledged that solitary DL can be leveraged to absorb “the basics” of RCAF doctrine, but more time and personnel are needed to give students the opportunity to acquire a deeper understanding of more complex concepts. This will be facilitated through discussion and debate as proposed in the new AFOD program above.

RECOMMENDATION

20. It is recommended that 2 Cdn Air Div evaluate the information offered in the current AFOD program to delineate what can be learned via solitary DL and what should be provided in the proposed AFOD program. From there, an AOC type course should be developed to ensure the creation of high quality RCAF officers. Opening up this course to other elements should be explored once it has been developed.

¹⁷ “Air-mindedness is a comprehensive understanding of Air Power and its optimal application throughout the operational environment.” Christopher Coates, “Air-mindedness: An Essential Element of Air Power,” in *The Royal Canadian Air Force Journal*, ed. Kelvin Truss, Vol. 4, No. 3, (Summer 2015), 80.

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