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ENSURING THE FUTURE OF A NATIONAL ICON: MAKING THE SNOWBIRDS RELEVANT TO THE CANADIAN ARMED FORCES

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“By discharging their role with such singular excellence during their 32-year history, and by touching millions of lives in such a positive way, they have become, in every sense of the word, a national treasure – a treasure which simply must be preserved for future generations of Canadians to experience.”¹
Lieutenant General (Ret’d) Fred Sutherland, 2002

“The Snowbirds have been part of my life for a long time. Their skill, courage, and generosity of spirit have influenced Canadians of all ages for the last thirty-five years to reach for their dreams and keep hope alive. May they fly our skies forever as a proud symbol of a great country.”²
Senator Joyce Fairbairn, 2005

AIM

1. The Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) will have to replace its fleet of CT-114 Tutors by 2020 in order for the Snowbirds to continue their mission of representing the professionalism of the men and women of the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF). However, in order to justify the costs associated with the procurement of replacement aircraft, it is recommended that 431 Air Demonstration Squadron (the Snowbirds) take steps in making themselves more relevant and more representative of the CAF as a whole with the intention of maximising their Public Affairs (PA) impact while playing a more proactive role in recruiting. In short, the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) and the Canadian Army (CA) need to see the Snowbirds team serving their PA and recruiting needs, not

¹ Referring to the Snowbirds Team, Lieutenant General (Ret’d) Fred Sutherland’s foreword to Daniel V. Dempsey, *A Tradition of Excellence: Canada’s Airshow Team Heritage*, Victoria: High Flight Enterprises Ltd.: 2002, p.5.

² The Honourable Joyce Fairbairn was a Canadian Senator 1984 to 2013. Quoted in Mike Sroka, *Snowbirds: Behind the Scenes with Canada’s Air Demonstration Team*, Calgary: Fifth House Ltd.: 2006.

just those of the RCAF, in order to obtain their support for the platform replacement project and thus the continuation of the Snowbirds' mission.

INTRODUCTION

2. The Snowbirds have been thrilling audiences³ all over North America for 45 years with nine-plane aerobatic performances following in the tradition of other Canadian military air demonstration teams, such as the RCAF Siskins (1929-1932), the Blue Devils (1949-1951), the Golden Hawks (1959-1964) and the Golden Centennaires (1967).⁴ The Snowbirds' mission is to "demonstrate the skill, professionalism and teamwork of Canadian Armed Forces personnel for public relations and recruiting purposes."⁵ With approximately 20 percent of their performances taking place each year in the continental United States, the Snowbirds also have a foreign relations mandate, although this aspect is not included in the mission statement. Above the official roles and mandates is the intangibility of being known as a Canadian national icon⁶, which in itself carries responsibilities. These responsibilities include the very survival of the team and the continuance of the tradition of representing the excellence of the Canadian military.

3. This service paper makes the case that the Snowbirds' existing mandates can be optimised, at no cost, in order to better represent the men and women of the RCAF, the

³ "The Snowbirds have performed for approximately 140,000,000 spectators," fact from the official National Defence and the Canadian Armed Forces official website, "Royal Canadian Air Force Snowbirds," last accessed on 02 February 2016, <http://www.rcaf-arc.forces.gc.ca/en/snowbirds/index.page>.

⁴ Daniel V. Dempsey, *A Tradition of Excellence: Canada's Airshow Team Heritage*, Victoria: High Flight Enterprises Ltd.: 2002, pp.25-41 (Siskins); pp.72-77 (Blue Devils); pp.144-193 (Golden Hawks); and pp.254-301 (Golden Centennaires).

⁵ *Ibid*, p.567 for verbatim quote. Elements of mission statement also found on the official National Defence and the Canadian Armed Forces official website, "Royal Canadian Air Force Snowbirds," last accessed on 02 February 2016, <http://www.rcaf-arc.forces.gc.ca/en/snowbirds/index.page>.

⁶ The "national icon" designation can be found in most publication regarding 431 Squadron and is not solely the author's designation.

CA and the RCN and be a more effective recruiting tool for the CAF as a whole. First, a holistic rebranding effort must be undertaken in order to be more inclusive of the ground and sea elements. Second, stronger ties need to be developed and maintained with the Canadian Forces Recruiting Group (CFRG) and its regional detachments in order to align recruiting objectives with recruiting efforts. Similarly, linkages must be made between 431 Squadron and the regional National Defence Public Affairs Offices (NDPAO) so as to leverage their competencies in the strategic targeting and engagement of high-level stakeholders. Finally, the team's foreign relations mandate needs to be formalised and optimised through coordination with the Assistant Deputy Minister (Policy) (ADM [Pol]).

DISCUSSION

4. The Snowbirds have flown the CT-114 Tutor since their inception in 1971. The aircraft were acquired for pilot training in the mid-1960s and were slightly modified for aerobatic purposes.⁷ In 2000, the student pilots started training on the CT-156 Harvard II and CT-155 Hawk with the NATO Flying Training in Canada Program (NFTC), which now leaves only the Snowbirds flying the aging CT-114 Tutor until a replacement aircraft is procured. The Snowbird Aircraft Replacement Project (SARP) aims to “continue the proud tradition of Canada’s Snowbirds as an air display capability and a key recruitment tool for the Canadian Armed Forces.”⁸ The project is linked to the CT-114 Tutor life

⁷ Fact from the National Defence and the Canadian Armed Forces official website, “Royal Canadian Air Force Snowbirds,” last accessed on 02 February 2016, <http://www.rcf-arc.forces.gc.ca/en/snowbirds/index.page>.

⁸ National Defence and the Canadian Armed Forces official website, “The Snowbird Aircraft Replacement Project,” last accessed on 02 February 2016, <http://www.forces.gc.ca/en/business-defence-acquisition-guide-2015/aerospace-systems-347.page>.

extension project, which will keep the aircraft flying beyond 2020. It is also linked to the pilot training program, which is due to be replaced in 2020.⁹ There has been much speculation over the years as to which aircraft will replace the current jets to fulfill the Snowbirds' mission. Prospective candidates have included the CT-155 Hawk and the CF-188 Hornet. The stated requirement for the \$500 million to \$1.5 billion project leaves space for many contenders:

The chosen platform must be configurable to the 431 (AD) Squadron standard, including a smoke system, luggage capability and a unique paint scheme. The platform must also be interchangeable with the training fleet to ensure the hard demands of show performances can be distributed throughout the aircraft fleet.¹⁰

5. However, it is important to note that the Snowbirds and the SARP have received external criticism. For instance, Steve Staples of the Rideau Institute¹¹ contended that: “The Snowbirds, while entertaining, are a luxury at a time when people are losing their jobs, the economy is hurting and the government is in debt.”¹² Likewise, there have been doubts regarding the value of the planned expenditure within the CAF since the Snowbirds are not perceived as contributing to the RCAF combat capabilities.¹³ Others who are firm believers in the Snowbirds usefulness, like former team-lead Lieutenant-Colonel (Ret'd) Dan Dempsey, welcome the SARP:

Yes, it's not a hard-core combat capability, but it is an essential, and in my mind integral, component of the Canadian Forces because recruiting and public relations are always going to be vital.¹⁴

⁹ *Ibid.* The NFTC contract will end in 2020.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ The Rideau Institute is a non-profit research and advocacy group, focusing on foreign policy and defence policy.

¹² David Pugliese, “Canadian Forces spending \$755M to replace Snowbird jets,” *National Post*, 16 August 2012.

¹³ *Ibid.* Such internal criticism can also be found in other media sources such as in Jeff Sallott, “Flight risks, costs raise questions for the military,” *Globe and Mail*, 11 December 2004.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

In fact, Lieutenant General (Ret'd) Fred Sutherland, who was Commander of Air Command from 1989 to 1991 and Vice Chief of Defence Staff from 1991 to 1992, went as far as saying that if massive budget cuts would leave only one squadron standing, he would hope that it would be 431 Squadron because the entire RCAF could be rebuilt with the Snowbirds and their great PA influence and value.¹⁵ The Generate Function of the Canadian Forces Aerospace Doctrine implicitly echoes the importance of engaging with Canadians for public support purposes as well as recruiting.¹⁶ Connecting with Canadians is thus part of one of the four vectors that serve as strategic guidance for the RCAF.¹⁷

6. Hence, given the Snowbirds' mandate to connect with Canadians, efforts should be made to optimise the message, meaning that all elements should be adequately represented with a focus on recruitment. In order to do so, 431 Squadron must rebrand the team's name as The Canadian Armed Forces Snowbirds, which would be more inclusive than The RCAF Snowbirds or the commonly used appellation: The Snowbirds. According to marketing experts Philip Kotler and Kevin Keller brands identify the source of a product.¹⁸ It is therefore imperative, to accomplish the mission of representing all the men and women of the CAF, that the public be aware of the source of the product – in this case the CAF being the source of the Snowbirds. Kotler and Keller argue that:

Designing Holistic Marketing Activities Brands are not built by advertising alone. Customers come to know a brand through a range of contacts and

¹⁵ Lieutenant General (Ret'd) Fred Sutherland speech at the year-end show and Snowbirds' 35th Anniversary.

¹⁶ Canada, Department of National Defence, *B-GA-400-000/FP-000, Canadian Forces Aerospace Doctrine*, Ottawa: Chief of the Air Staff, December 2010, pp.4-10 and 5-9.

¹⁷ Canada, Department of National Defence, *A-GA-007-000/AF-008, Air Force Vectors*, Ottawa: Director General Air Force Development, 2014, p.38.

¹⁸ Philip Kotler and Kevin Keller, *Marketing Management (14th ed.)*, New Jersey: Pearsons Education Inc. publishing as Prentice-Hall: 2011, p.242.

touch points: personal observation and use, word of mouth, interactions with company personnel, online or telephone experiences, and payment transactions.¹⁹

The team's rebranding must therefore be applied to all communications and promotional items in order to be effective. On the one hand, the team's products, including the website, the posters, the letterhead and the brochures as well as the show narration, must consistently brand the team as The Canadian Armed Forces Snowbirds. On the other hand, the Snowbirds' hosts – whether they be airshow organizers or others – must also be made aware of the team's proper branding for their own advertising. Their posters, radio and television commercials, and other advertisements will therefore be aligned with the rebranding effort, leaving no doubt as to the Snowbirds' source – the CAF. The branding requirement can easily be integrated in the guide that is provided to airshow organizers in which all of the requirements for hosting the team are included.

7. In addition, the content of the team's products should be more representative of the entire CAF and include recruiting contact information. For instance, the brochures and posters could include small inserts of pictures depicting joint operations such as CH-146 Griffons and/or CH-147F Chinooks working with the CA and CH-148 Cyclones working with the RCN. These products could also include the recruiting website address and basic CAF facts. Moreover, since Snowbirds' pilots hail from the different airframe communities, their personalized promotional trading cards could focus on their previous assignments, especially when those were in joint environments.

8. The Snowbirds could also maximise their effectiveness in connecting with Canadians by engaging in strategic communications with key stakeholders. There are

¹⁹ *Ibid*, p.251.

NDPAOs in Vancouver, Calgary, Toronto, Montreal and Halifax whose mandate is to develop relationships with high-level stakeholders in the business and academic communities as well as the cultural milieu.²⁰ Communication strategies developed at the Assistant Deputy Minister (Public Affairs) (ADM [PA]) level give direction to the NDPAOs on what the overall objectives are so that the appropriate stakeholders can be targeted. The Snowbirds should therefore engage the NDPAOs in order to help achieve the overall strategic communication aims of the Department of National Defence (DND). For instance, the Snowbirds could partake in an outreach program thereby connecting with stakeholders who themselves are influential in their own communities. This type of communication can be very effective given that publics are often more easily persuaded by a message delivered by their opinion leaders rather than directly from the source. Communication theorists Paul Lazarsfeld and Elihu Kats conceived this two-step flow of communication model, hypothesising that opinion leaders are influenced by a source and in turn influence the wider population.²¹ This theory is based on personal influence, something the Snowbirds could leverage. By engaging with key stakeholders – in order to meet wider departmental objectives – the Snowbirds would be making themselves more relevant to the entire CAF as well as DND.

9. In a similar vein, stronger ties with CFRG and Canadian Forces Recruiting Centres (CFRC) would allow the Snowbirds to be more effective in their recruiting mandate. At present, there are no coordination methods in place allowing the team to

²⁰ Canada, Department of National Defence, *A-AD-207-001/AG-000, Public Affairs Handbook*. Ottawa: Director General Public Affairs, 2000, p.16.

²¹ Elihu Kats and Paul Lazarsfeld, *Personal Influence*. New York: Free Press: 1955.

align their messages and activities with overall DND recruiting objectives. Yet, synchronizing Snowbirds recruiting activities with the CFRCs objectives would go a long way in accomplishing the team's mission of acting as a platform for recruitment. An example of aligning and integrating efforts would be to have Snowbirds team members give presentations in schools that are also going to be visited by CFRCs. This strategy would increase the impact of recruiting efforts, especially if the focus of the Snowbirds presentations is on representing all the men and women of the CAF and not just pilots or RCAF members. The Snowbirds schedule already allows for them to engage in outreach and recruiting activities. Every effort should therefore be made to maximize these opportunities by aligning them with national objectives and demonstrating the worth of the Snowbirds to the overall forces.

10. Another area where 431 Squadron could benefit from increased intradepartmental coordination and maximize their public relations is in regards to its role as a Canadian ambassador vis-à-vis the United States. On average, the Snowbirds perform approximately 20 percent of their demonstrations south of the border each year. Yet there is no firm mandate for the team to engage in foreign relations. The United States is Canada's closest ally and most important partner in trade, defence and security. There are many intuitive reasons why Canada would want to wave its flag within the United States via the Snowbirds. However, greater efforts should be made to define those reasons and elaborate upon concrete objectives. Thus coordination with ADM (Pol), who is responsible for providing "advice and support on international defence relations", would initially help define the Snowbirds mandate as ambassadors representing Canada at

public events in the United States.²² Moreover, yearly objectives could be reviewed with ADM (Pol) in order to synchronize all of DND's efforts in foreign relations. This would serve to maximize the benefits of Snowbirds activities, without any additional costs.

11. Finally, since the Snowbirds team members come from the different airframe communities, they have the capacity to aid the RCAF in fostering air-mindedness throughout the organization. General Jonathan Vance argued in a scholarly paper that the military airshow performers contributed to air-mindedness in the 1930s.²³ In the same way, the Snowbirds could help bridge the gap between the air communities and promote better understanding of air power internally as well as with the general public, especially once they transition to a newer aircraft, one that will be more representative of today's modern forces.

CONCLUSION

12. The Snowbirds need to find a replacement aircraft in the short term as the aging CT-114 Tutor will be retired in the near future. The ideal scenario would be for the solution to the SARP to be linked to the NFTC replacement in 2020. However, the growing internal and external criticism as to the added value of the Snowbirds at a time of fiscal restraint could potentially put the team's future in jeopardy. For this reason, this service paper urges the Snowbirds to make themselves more representative and more relevant to the entire CAF by maximizing the positive effects of what they already do and

²² National Defence and the Canadian Armed Forces official website, "Assistant Deputy Minister (Policy)," last accessed on 02 February 2016, <http://www.forces.gc.ca/en/about-org-structure/assistant-deputy-minister-policy.page>.

²³ General Jonathan Vance, "The Royal Canadian Air Force and the Campaign for Air-Mindedness," in *Sic Itur Ad Astra: Canadian Aerospace Power Studies, Volume 3, Combat if Necessary but Not Necessarily Combat*, ed. W.A. March (Ottawa: Department of National Defence, 2011), p.14.

by better fulfilling their mandates. Rebranding of the team as The Canadian Armed Forces Snowbirds is a first step in being more representative of all the elements. Including CA, RCN and recruiting pictures and information on promotional items is another way to ensure the inclusiveness in the message and image. Moreover, efforts to synchronise activities with CFRCs and NDPAOs would maximize effects and attain overall DND communications goals and CAF recruiting objectives. Similarly, defining the mission and objectives of the Snowbirds' foreign relations mandate would help align them with other departmental activities and integrate them in the overall foreign engagement plan. Finally, the Snowbirds could play a role in the RCAF's attempts to foster air-mindedness internally and externally.

13. Furthermore, the recommendations made in this service paper would generate only minor rebranding and advertising costs. On the other hand, the benefits, especially to recruiting would be significant. In an era of budget cuts and restructuring, it is imperative for the Snowbirds to make themselves relevant; not just for sentimental or nostalgic reasons but because the Snowbirds team can be a very powerful PA tool, promoting the CAF at home and abroad and acting as an effective recruiting platform. Implementation of these recommendations would help ensure that the Snowbirds continue serving as a Canadian national icon so that future generations get to see the dedication, professionalism and teamwork of the men and women of the CAF and get to hear the famous: "Now look straight ahead for the nine twinkling lights as the Team Lead calls for the Snowbirds to check in."²⁴ Otherwise, the Snowbirds may become part of the RCAF's

²⁴ The show narration typically begins with these words followed by the Snowbirds checking-in live over the radio for the audience to hear.

history book, joining the Siskins, the Blue Devils, the Golden Hawks and the Golden Centennaires. A slight change in mind frame could prevent their potential disbandment.

RECOMMENDATION

14. The planning cycle for the 2017 show season will soon commence and it is therefore an opportune time to implement the recommendations included in this service paper. It is not enough to rely uniquely on the Squadron's Commanding Officer and Public Affairs Officer to implement such proposals on their own initiatives. Strategic guidance needs to be formalized and translated into objectives before becoming clear direction to 431 Squadron. Coordination between the RCAF, ADM (Pol), CFRG and ADM (PA) needs to happen early in the process in order for the Snowbirds to integrate the synchronized objectives in their own planning process. As well, coordination at the strategic level will facilitate synchronization of activities at the tactical level, between the Snowbirds, the CFRCs and NDPAOs. It is also recommended that the rebranding efforts commence as soon as feasible, with the production of the 2017 promotional items.

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