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## THE CANADIAN FORCES SNOWBIRDS VALUE IN THE FUTURE: PUBLIC AFFAIRS ROLE

Maj S.M. Scanlon-Simms

**JCSP 43**

***Exercise Solo Flight***

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EXERCISE *SOLO FLIGHT* – EXERCICE *SOLO FLIGHT*

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Word Count: 4761

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## Introduction

The 2017 show season will mark 47 years of the Canadian Forces (CF) Snowbirds wowing crowds across North America. Themed “A Tradition of Excellence”<sup>1</sup>, many of the displays will fittingly be in direct support of the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Canadian Confederation. The mission of the Snowbirds is to personify the “skill, professionalism and teamwork”<sup>2</sup> of the entire Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) and what a better way to celebrate being Canadian than watching the nine plane formation of tutors fly overhead emblazoned with the unmistakable red and white Snowbirds paint scheme. The participation of the team as the featured attraction in the national festivities both in the country’s capital and throughout the entire nation highlights that fact that the Snowbirds Air Demonstration team is indeed a “Canadian icon”<sup>3</sup>.

The understatement of the comparatively smaller, quieter aircraft is part of what makes the CF Snowbirds unique within the air show circuit and among other military aerobatic teams; this serves to underscore what it truly means to be Canadian icon on a global scale. The smooth, almost ballet-like choreography of the Snowbirds demonstration contrasted against the loud, flashy routines of other air demonstration teams flying front line fighter aircraft reinforces the Canadian identity. National and international audiences alike spectate in awe as they gaze upon the Canadair CT-114 Tutor quietly flying overhead in various formations and perceived daredevil like maneuvers. Watching the team produces an adrenaline rush in audiences of all ages and

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<sup>1</sup> Department of National Defence, “Royal Canadian Air Force” Canadian Forces Snowbirds, last accessed 26 March 2017. <http://www.rcaf-arc.forces.gc.ca/en/snowbirds/index.page>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 03 April 2017

<sup>3</sup> The “Canadian Icon” designation is a commonly used term when referring to 431 Squadron and is not attributed to a specific author.

instills a feeling of national pride. To lose this symbol of Canadian excellence and pride would have a long lasting and significant effect on our national identity.

Struggled to come in to existence since their inception, the Snowbirds have operated on a shoestring budget. They are often the very first and sometimes the only exposure to the CAF for the majority of the Canadian population which can have a profound and lasting influence on Canadians. The CAF needs to change the way that it markets and promotes the Snowbirds in order to take advantage of the true value of this resource and to reap the maximum benefit from this very worthwhile investment. Value is measured differently for different products and organizations. Advocates of disbanding the Snowbirds team tend to only see value strictly in monetary terms while others, like the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF), view value as return on investment which cannot always be linked to actual dollars. It is sometimes intangible and not readily quantifiable. The Oxford English dictionary defines value as, “The regard that something is held to deserve; the importance, worth or usefulness of something”<sup>4</sup>. In line with this definition, the Snowbirds have always been a valuable asset to the RCAF, the CAF and to Canada as a whole. They are held in high regard by the entire country and their value can be measured by their usefulness, particularly as public relations tool. Using a public affairs nexus, it will be argued that not only historically but in the present and particularly in the future, the Snowbirds are a valuable CAF asset that should be retained for the foreseeable future. They continuously reinforce the aspect of the CAF public affairs mandate of building rapport with the general public and showcasing the importance of both the Department of National Defence (DND) and the CAF.

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<sup>4</sup> English Oxford Living Dictionaries, “Definition of value in English” last accessed 28 April 2017, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/value>.

The intent of the PA policy is to ensure that Canadians are well-informed and aware of the role, mandate, operations and contributions of the CAF and DND. The policy is designed to establish and articulate PA operating principles, authorities, accountabilities, responsibilities, requirements and guidelines for CF members and DND employees at all levels to help them build, nurture and maintain a strong relationship with the public.<sup>5</sup>

This paper will be broken down in to four sections, each emphasizing the value of the public affairs role of the Snowbirds. The first section will focus on the establishment and history of the Snowbirds, a formal military unit designated as 431 Air Demonstration Squadron and the factors that have enabled them to remain in existence longer than any other Canadian military demonstration team. The second section will explore the value that they add to both Canadian society and to the CAF while emphasizing that this value has continued to increase over time. The third section will look at the various obstacles that the future holds with regard to retention of the Squadron, not the least of which is current aircraft life extension and future replacement. A constantly shrinking defence budget that must focus predominantly on combat capability also puts the Snowbirds at great risk. The final section will look at approaches that the CAF can take to market this resource to get maximum payback on investment and secure the team for future CAF operations and the Canadian public. In a time of fiscal restraint, when the CAF is experiencing increasing difficulty with recruiting, this valuable asset should be leveraged to capacity, proving the value that the Snowbirds bring to the CAF and the entire nation.

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<sup>5</sup> DAOD 2008-0, Public Affairs Policy, para 3.5, last accessed 28 April 2017, <http://www.forces.gc.ca/en/about-policies-standards-defence-admin-orders-directives-2000/2008-0.page>.

## Establishment and History

The Snowbirds are the longest surviving air demonstration team in the history of the CAF. They are actually the fifth official aerobatic team in Canadian history; the first having been created in 1929. Each of their predecessor teams have folded within relatively short time frames, typically less than five years. However the Snowbirds have withstood the test of time despite recommendations over the years to disband them as a cost saving measure for the RCAF or the CAF at large. Previous teams include the RCAF Siskins (1929-32), the Blue Devils (1949-52), the Golden Hawkes (1959-64) and the Golden Centennaires (1967)<sup>6</sup>. The Snowbirds were unofficially established in 1971 and have been flying the distinctly painted Canadair CT-114 Tutor since that time. The Tutor was originally purchased as a training aircraft for new pilots and later modified for air demonstrations. “The Tutors flown by the Snowbirds are slightly modified from the training version. In addition to show features [paint scheme and smoke tanks] the modified version has a more highly-tuned engine to enhance performance during low-level aerobatic flying.”<sup>7</sup>

Although they are about to embark on their 47<sup>th</sup> season, the beginning was not easy and, “Like their famous predecessors and counterparts in the world, the Snowbirds had to fight for their survival in the formative years.”<sup>8</sup> The Snowbirds were originally established when O.B. Philp, Wing Commander 15 Wing Moose Jaw (1969-1973)

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<sup>6</sup> 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).

<sup>7</sup> Department of National Defence, “Royal Canadian Air Force” Canadian Forces Snowbirds, last accessed 26 March 2017, <http://www.rcaf-arc.forces.gc.ca/en/snowbirds/index.page>.

<sup>8</sup> Daniel V.Dempsey, “The Snowbirds-An Integral Component of the Canadian Forces”, (Exercise New Horizons Course Paper, Canadian Forces Command and Staff College, 1988), 6.

realized that after unification, he had a surplus of pilot instructors, aircraft, flying hours and a dream. After spending a year travelling with the Golden Centennaires travelling across Canada and ending the year with an invitation to perform in the United States (US) he realized the true public relations value that rested in Canada having an air demonstration capability. “Day after day it seeped into my mind that the RCAF, by showing its colours, was sending a message to the people: Canadians of all walks of life.”<sup>9</sup> He pitched his proposal to form a new team to the top brass in the RCAF only to find out that they did not share his enthusiasm and were not interested in causing unrest among the other two services in the wake of unification. He was disappointed but did not abandon his idea of a future team however realized that creativity would likely be the key to his success.<sup>10</sup> Taking matters in to his own hands and stretching his authority as Wing Commander to the very limit, he authorized 2 Canadian Forces Flight Training Squadron (CFFTS) to use excess flying hours on training to provide fly pasts at local sporting events in order to strengthen and boost public relations. His tenacity combined with two aircraft with an all-white paint scheme, founded what would eventually become known worldwide as the CF Snowbirds. He did not ask permission from the RCAF to take on this endeavor and operated under the guise of instructor proficiency. When asked if this was the beginning of a new aerobatic team for the RCAF, Philp responded with “This is a Moose Jaw Base unofficial formation demonstration team to maintain instructor pilot’s proficiency.”<sup>11</sup> This creative approach would keep his bosses at bay, if only temporarily.

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<sup>9</sup> O.B.Philp and Bill Johnson, *Snowbirds, From The Beginning*, (Sidney: Porthole Press Ltd: 1990), 32.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 17-68.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 50.

The beginning of what is now known as the CF Snowbirds was off to an unofficial start acquiring their current name “Snowbirds” on 28 June 1971 after a competition was held at the base school.<sup>12</sup> Despite the official naming of the team, they had still not officially been recognized by the RCAF but that would change in the very near future. In July 1972, after gaining much public recognition, Philp officially asked the then Chief of Defence Staff (CDS), General Fred Sharp for permission to permanently establish the team. “We have created a national identity not dissimilar to that of the RCMP’s musical Ride and I think the time is right to establish the Snowbirds as a permanent unit in the Canadian Armed Forces.”<sup>13</sup> In the fall of that same year, a seven plane formation along with two solos, were officially authorized to continue performing for 1973 however, there would be no increase to the budget at 15 Wing Moose Jaw. After three years of struggling to build a team as well as official recognition, O.B. Philp had achieved his goal and the Snowbirds quickly became “the face of the Canadian Armed Forces.”<sup>14</sup>

Since the modest beginning of the team, they have continued to gain popularity as well as develop a national identity both within Canada and North America, currently performing one third of the show schedule demonstrations at various events and air shows across the United States and the other two thirds at locations throughout Canada. The team regularly takes part in commemorative events which adds to their nationally accepted identity as a ‘Canadian Icon’. The Snowbirds have been able to withstand the test of time due in large part to the team member’s uncanny ability to connect with the

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 55.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 64.

<sup>14</sup> LGen (R) F. Sutherland, Former Vice Chief of Defence Staff, discussion at Canadian Forces College. 03 April 2017.



public both in the air and on the ground. Snowbird pilots, technicians and support staff are members of Canadian society who have joined the CAF and followed a dream, each one becoming ambassadors in their own right. Before and after air demonstration performances, it is a regular occurrence for the Snowbirds to sign autographs, mingle with the crowd, visit children's hospitals or take part in local events wearing the signature red flight suit which itself has become a national symbol. It is this personable, down to earth nature that has allowed the team to personally gain popularity and recurrent requests to participate in annual as well as one-time events. "The Snowbirds have transcended their original role as Canada's aerial ambassadors and representatives of the Canadian military to become a truly unique symbol of what it is to be Canadian."<sup>15</sup> Citizens from all across this vast country are able to point to the Snowbirds flying overhead either during transit or at an airshow and easily identify the distinctly painted undercarriage of the Tutor aircraft. It is this ability to connect with Canadians both in the air and on the ground that has enabled the Snowbirds to outlive other Canadian air demonstration teams.

### **Value Retention**

The Snowbirds operate with a modest budget and expend approximately 3700 hours<sup>16</sup> of the RCAF's yearly flying rate (YFR) which includes training, transit and airshows. The total cost of to operate the squadron annually is "\$4.3 million."<sup>17</sup> This

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<sup>15</sup> Mike Soroka, *Snowbirds, Behind the Scenes with Canada's Air Demonstration Team*, ( Calgary: Fifth House Limited, 2006), 5.

<sup>16</sup> Information obtained from the Liaison and Communications office of the CF Snowbirds, 12 April 2017.

<sup>17</sup> Kathleen Harris, "Military studies extending life of Snowbird aircraft 20 years past retirement." *Canadian Broadcast Corporation*, 25 July 2016 <http://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/snowbirds-tutor-jets-replacement-1.3689876>

number includes substantial sunk costs such as salary and wages for military and civilian personnel who work at the Squadron as well as infrastructure, both of which one can assume would still be expended even if the unit was to disband. One of the largest costs for the Snowbirds is related to operating a fleet which is almost exclusively used for the air demonstration team with the exception of a small number of aircraft that are used by the CAF Aerospace Engineering Test Establishment (AETE) unit in Cold Lake.<sup>18</sup> The Snowbirds are the only air demonstration team in the world that maintains a separate fleet that is not employed in other roles within the organization.<sup>19</sup>

Throughout the past 47 years, the Snowbirds have performed for millions of people across North America and are often the first if not the only exposure that Canadians from rural areas of the country have with the CAF. The size of the Tutor allows it greater flexibility to perform at smaller venues and airfields that would be impossible for other, larger airframes. Interviewed in July 2016, former CDS Lieutenant General (retired) Lloyd Campbell stated that the Snowbirds provide value because they bring the country together, “They’re a tremendous unifying national organization that Canadians find appealing.”<sup>20</sup> This perfectly sums up how the average Canadian feels about the Snowbirds however this value is difficult to measure from a quantitative perspective. That qualitative value is uniquely measurable in the pride that one feels when seeing the awe struck gaze of spectators of all ages as they watch the team

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<sup>18</sup> Department of National Defence, “Royal Canadian Air Force” Canadian Forces Snowbirds, last accessed 26 March 17. <http://www.rcf-arc.forces.gc.ca/en/snowbirds/index.page>

<sup>19</sup> Nigel Howarth, “Canada’s Snowbirds Team – Unique in Military Aviation”, *Aviation Week*, 25 May 2016, <http://aviationweek.com/blog/canadas-snowbirds-team-unique-military-aviation>

<sup>20</sup> Kathleen Harris, “Military studies extending life of Snowbird aircraft 20 years past retirement.” *Canadian Broadcast Corporation*, 25 July 2016 <http://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/snowbirds-tutor-jets-replacement-1.3689876>

overhead. Campbell went on to say, “They’re a great recruiting tool...”<sup>21</sup> Watching the team perform and talking with them before and after the show provides individuals with a first-hand opportunity to engage with a member of the CAF, acquiring details and information that cannot possibly all be placed in a brochure. Citizens get a unique perspective on what being part of the CAF team entails. This knowledge can spark a desire to be part of the CAF from individuals who had never given it a second thought due to lack of information or exposure.

For the CAF specifically, this value from a recruiting perspective is largely anecdotal, however there has always been a strong consensus that recruiting centers see an increase in general inquiries as well as interested applicants in the days and weeks following performances by the team.<sup>22</sup> This value is acknowledged not only at the tactical level but strategically as well. The Snowbirds Aircraft Replacement Project (SARP) includes the following message, “To discontinue Snowbirds operations would result in the loss of an important Canadian Forces and Government of Canada public affairs vehicle that may affect image and/or recruiting efforts for the Canadian Forces.”<sup>23</sup> The fact that they have outlived their predecessors and continue to receive more requests each year, so many that they often have to make hard choices regarding which venues to attend and which ones must be refused or possibly be asked to wait until the next season, bear witness to their continuing popularity and value. The fact that the Snowbirds received

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<sup>21</sup>Kathleen Harris, “Military studies extending life of Snowbird aircraft 20 years past retirement.” *Canadian Broadcast Corporation*, 25 July 2016 <http://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/snowbirds-tutor-jets-replacement-1.3689876>

<sup>22</sup> O.B.Philp and Bill Johnson, *Snowbirds, From The Beginning*, (Sidney: Porthole Press Ltd: 1990) 32.

<sup>23</sup> National Defence and the Canadian Armed Forces official website. “The Snowbird Aircraft Replacement Project.” Last accessed on 06 March 2017. [http://cid-bic.forces.mil.ca/cid/intro\\_e.asp](http://cid-bic.forces.mil.ca/cid/intro_e.asp)

154 requests to perform for the 2017 season and are only able to accept 64,<sup>24</sup> speaks volumes to the value of the team. During these performances, they are able to reach large crowds of people in rural areas and possibly foster an interest in the CAF that would otherwise remain untapped.

The increasing popularity of social media has also brought the Snowbirds in to the home of aviation enthusiasts and potential future CAF recruits across the country. The team is gaining greater popularity and becoming more accessible to the public, providing information about frequently asked questions that are now available to the general public on their official website. The value of the team has not diminished over time however, as stated in the statistics above; interest in the team continues to grow on an annual basis which proves that they are held in high regard by Canadian society. Their annual participation as the headliner at Canada Day celebrations on Parliament Hill serves to reinforce that they are held in high regard by the entire nation.

### **Future Obstacles**

One of the biggest, if not the biggest obstacle facing the Snowbirds with regard to retention of the team involves the procurement of a replacement aircraft. The tutor life extension is currently only until 2020 with the CAF reviewing the possibility of extension until 2030. In 2012, The National Post published an article that quoted a military source as saying, “The Canadian Forces is planning to spend \$755-million on a new fleet of

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<sup>24</sup> Information obtained from the Liaison and Communications office of the CF Snowbirds, 12 April 2017.

aircraft for its Snowbirds aerobatics team...”<sup>25</sup> The Snowbirds Aircraft Replacement Project (SARP) identifies that the aircraft that is ultimately chosen as the lead in trainer for the future fighter fleet aircraft that is to replace the current CF-18 Hornet would be also be chosen as the future platform for the Snowbirds.<sup>26</sup> During a time of substantial fiscal restraint as well as budget reductions across the CAF, it is acknowledged that this may be a cost that some Canadians both within and outside the military and the government will have difficulty defending. However, true supporters of the Snowbird team who have an appreciation for their value advocate for their retention. Retired Lieutenant Colonel Dan Dempsey, previous Snowbirds Commanding Officer and Team Lead believes there is value in retention of the team despite the fact that they are not a combat capability, “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.”<sup>27</sup> Ensuring that this value is communicated and appreciated is yet another obstacle to their survival, but it is not unsurmountable. This is where a solid public affairs campaign and active marketing strategy will pay dividends towards the attitudes surrounding the retention of the team. Acknowledging that upfront cost would be high however, in the long run an aircraft that serves more than one specific purpose would cut down on overall expenditure in to the future. This information, if effectively communicated to all Canadians would effectively rationalize the purchase of the new platform.

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<sup>25</sup> David Pugliese, “The Canadian Forces spending \$755M to replace Snowbird jets.” *The National Post*, 16 August 2012. <http://news.nationalpost.com/news/canada/canadian-forces-spending-755m-to-replace-snowbird-jets> .

<sup>26</sup> National Defence and the Canadian Armed Forces official website. “The Snowbird Aircraft Replacement Project.” Last accessed on 06 March 2017. [http://cid-bic.forces.mil.ca/cid/intro\\_e.asp](http://cid-bic.forces.mil.ca/cid/intro_e.asp)

<sup>27</sup> David Pugliese, “The Canadian Forces spending \$755M to replace Snowbird jets.” *The National Post*, 16 August 2012. <http://news.nationalpost.com/news/canada/canadian-forces-spending-755m-to-replace-snowbird-jets> .

The possibility of extending the aircraft until 2030 brings about other costs which can be difficult to measure but past experience has proven that this cost is felt by a nation. Flying the aircraft until 2030 would see the Snowbirds flying a 67 year old aircraft which also brings about the question of safety specifically for the pilot. Over the years, the thrill of watching the Snowbirds has been occasionally eclipsed by accidents, some of which have been fatal to the pilot and/or passenger. It is impossible to attach a dollar figure to this loss. While the majority of accidents have been attributed to pilot error, some have been the result of a technical malfunction of the aircraft. The Snowbirds push the limits to this aircraft and the possibility of ejection is quite high. The SARP specifically states, “In the Snowbird role the tutor has the highest ejection rate and the lowest ejection seat performance by any Canadian Forces Fleet.”<sup>28</sup> Despite this statement in the project file, the tutor fleet is maintained by a team of highly qualified and experienced technicians who pride themselves on the serviceability of the aircraft.

In July 2016, Renee Filiatrault , Deputy Chief of Communications, Minister of National Defence speaking on behalf of Minister Sajjan made the following statement, “We have full confidence in the RCAF’s ability to ensure aircraft reliability going forward, while our government will continue to build Canada’s defence capabilities to ensure our men and women in uniform have safe, reliable equipment.”<sup>29</sup> Sources inside the CAF indicate that it is certainly feasible to maintain the tutor until 2030, specifically from a maintenance perspective. The organization is confident that an extension will not

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<sup>28</sup> National Defence and the Canadian Armed Forces official website. “The Snowbird Aircraft Replacement Project.” Last accessed on 06 March 2017. [http://cid-bic.forces.mil.ca/cid/intro\\_e.asp](http://cid-bic.forces.mil.ca/cid/intro_e.asp)

<sup>29</sup> Kathleen Harris, “Military studies extending life of Snowbird aircraft 20 years past retirement.” *Canadian Broadcast Corporation*, 25 July 2016 <http://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/snowbirds-tutor-jets-replacement-1.3689876>

place any unnecessary risk to CAF personnel. Just as with any large piece of equipment, the risk and danger can never be completely removed however solid safety practices and a team of professionals can mitigate risk to a large extent thus making the operation of the tutor aircraft no more of a risk than any other piece of CAF equipment.

### **Securing the Future**

In the early years, the Snowbirds tended to focus primarily on the pilots who flew the aircraft, however during the past 20 years they have shifted very much to a team concept. The team brochures now include the photos and names of both the 'Show Team' and the 'Home Team' which includes every military and civilian member of the Squadron and that individual's trade and/or title. Support trades are also invited to the show line if available to sign autographs and answer questions about the military in general or their trade specifically. This serves to highlight and acknowledge the various occupations within the CAF and the value that each member brings to the team. Embracing this team concept provides individuals both within and outside the military the ability to see that being part of this team is a possibility in the future.

Even though improvement in advertising and marketing has seen great improvement in the recent past, the Snowbirds and the CAF need to take ownership and advantage of the de facto recruiting and public affairs ability that the Snowbirds have acquired. Firstly, this must begin inside the CAF organization. Over the years, in times of financial uncertainty as well as large scale budget cuts, there have been a number of recommendations to disband the Snowbirds as a defence cost saving measure. In 2004, Colonel (retired) Michel Drapeau echoed these sentiments shortly after a fatal crash had

occurred, “It’s a luxury... and I think the time has come to question [it] and possibly do without.”<sup>30</sup> This also involved discussion around diverting their current budget to other areas within the defence department. This attitude is due in part to a lack of understanding of the large public affairs role of the Snowbirds. Promoted correctly, it could be one of the most cost efficient ways to pass the CAF message on to Canadians.

The Snowbirds need to find new and innovative ways to market themselves within the organization in order to remove some of the negative ideas that surround the team. One way of doing this is to reiterate the fact that while travelling through North America they are fulfilling not only a large public affairs role but one of the RCAF vectors as well, “As part of the CAF approach to connecting with Canadians through participation in community and local activities, the Air Force will also create strategies for enhancing the contribution of its people in the areas surrounding its wings and bases.”<sup>31</sup> The Royal Canadian Navy (RCN), The Canadian Army (CA) and the Special Operations Forces (SAF) communities need to find ways to tie in to this valuable resource as they travel throughout the country. This could be accomplished through Public Affairs at the strategic level taking on the internal messaging in order to gain a better, more inclusive external message that benefits the entire CAF.

The post-Afghanistan years along with the release of the Deschamps Report on sexual assault and sexual harassment in the CAF have added to unprecedented difficulty with recruiting and retention. “The Canadian Armed Forces have been bleeding personnel

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<sup>30</sup> Canadian Broadcasting Corporation News, “Critics say Snowbirds should be disbanded.” *CBC News*, 14 December 2004. <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/critics-say-snowbirds-should-be-disbanded-1.501972>

<sup>31</sup> Department of National Defence, “Air Force Vectors” first edition, (Canadian Forces aerospace Centre, 2014),39. [http://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection\\_2014/mdn-dnd/D2-300-2014-eng.pdf](http://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2014/mdn-dnd/D2-300-2014-eng.pdf)



at an increasing rate, as attrition and recruiting problems push the number of men and women in uniform down to levels not seen in years.”<sup>32</sup> Unofficially recognized for their recruiting ability, the Snowbirds provide a valuable opportunity that should be and needs to be exploited. The men and women of the CF Snowbirds are the product of the remarkable training and opportunities provided by the Canadian Armed Forces. The Snowbirds and Canadian Forces Recruiting Group (CFRG) do not currently have any type of arrangement or mechanism to combine resources in an attempt to bolster recruiting. These two organizations along with strategic public affairs could become one of the most effective recruiting tools that the CAF has ever had. This could be accomplished in a variety of ways; Snowbirds marketing material could be more inclusive of other services, while remaining vigilant not to distract from the team itself; members of CFRG, specifically recruiters could accompany the team to Canadian show sites in order to take advantage of larger groups of possible applicants who may not reside in proximity to a recruiting centers. While at these venues they could make a greater effort to market themselves to the local communities vice only the air show community. During the training/winter season, they could develop a strategy to attend a few key events throughout the country in order to maximize exposure to areas that may not have the opportunity to host an airshow. CFRG should also begin to keep statistics after airshows in areas with recruiting centers in order to quantify the impact that the Snowbirds have on recruiting. This could serve to change the anecdotal references to the recruiting ability of the Snowbirds in to concrete data to satisfy the skeptics.

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<sup>32</sup> Lee Berthiaume, “Canadian military losing soldiers at increasing rate as headcount drops to level not seen in years”, The National Post, 27 January 2016. <http://news.nationalpost.com/news/canada/canadian-military-losing-soldiers-at-increasing-rate-headcount-drops-to-level-not-seen-in-years>

## Conclusion

The arguments presented in this paper serve to outline the public affairs value that the CF Snowbirds have had throughout the history of the team and will continue to have in the future. Attitudes have changed over time and with the advent of social media, it is almost impossible to put a price tag on a reputation. While there are still skeptics who believe the money used for the team could be better spent, the CAF needs to take lead in presenting the public affairs value of the team, both inside and outside of the organization.

There is nothing that makes one feel more Canadian than standing in a crowd listening to the Snowbirds Coordinator directing your attention to the nine twinkling lights appearing on the horizon, signifying that the Snowbirds performance is about to begin. The Snowbirds began the 47<sup>th</sup> show season on 30 April 2017 in Gatineau, Quebec and will continue on to perform approximately 63 more times before the end of the show season in mid-October.<sup>33</sup> This season will see the team actively participating in the multiple celebrations celebrating 150 years since the Confederation of this great country. The invitation to participate in these festivities serves to solidify the Snowbirds as a source of national pride. Once again the Snowbirds will both welcome and shoulder the responsibility to showcase the “skill, professionalism and teamwork”<sup>34</sup> of the entire CAF.

Originating from modest beginnings and the perseverance of Colonel (retired) OB. Philp, the Snowbirds have transformed from an unofficial team of two tutors painted white conducting fly pasts on an ad hoc basis to an official nine plane formation that is

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<sup>33</sup> Department of National Defence, “Royal Canadian Air Force” Canadian Forces Snowbirds, last accessed 26 March 2017. <http://www.rcaf-arc.forces.gc.ca/en/snowbirds/index.page>

<sup>34</sup> Ibid

known worldwide. The scheduling process has also become a little more sophisticated since the early years with the team now receiving almost three times the requests that they are capable of filling. Although official numbers of spectators over the years vary, there is no doubt that they have performed in front of millions of adoring fans. The Snowbirds have officially completed 2566 shows since their inaugural year.<sup>35</sup> Increasing in popularity and value with each passing year, it would seem that the Snowbirds would have cemented their place in the figurative landscape of Canada however that does not appear to always be the case. Threats to the defence budget coupled with the requirement to procure a replacement aircraft has often made them a target to be disbanded not only by defence critics but sometimes by those within the organization. The aging tutor is only three short years away from scheduled retirement, the end of the 2020 show season. CAF personnel are currently working on a request to see the aging aircraft extended to 2030.

In order for the CAF to realize the enormous public affairs value of this commodity and use it to its potential, the Snowbirds need to actively take on a marketing strategy that is reflective of the entire organization. In order to sell their strategic significance to the country, it first needs to be sold to the interior of the organization, most notably the other three services. The entire CAF could benefit from the public affairs perspective if strategic level public affairs took on more of a coordination role between the services, particularly with regard to marketing paraphernalia such as posters and brochures. In a time when the CAF is not seen as an employer of choice and recruiting is at what seems to be an all-time low, the Snowbirds and CFRG need to combine resources in order to leverage the recruiting ability of the team. This can be

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<sup>35</sup> Information obtained from the Liaison and Communications office of the CF Snowbirds, 12 April 2017.

accomplished in a variety of ways but statistics need to be kept in order to see the actual affect that this cooperation has in actual number of new applicants and recruits. The bottom line is that the Snowbirds are part of the tapestry of Canada and reflect what is truly is to be Canadian. They are not the loudest or largest aircraft in the airshow circuit however they are one of the most respected aerobatic teams in the world. No effort should be spared to ensure the Team continues to be a true 'national icon' and source of pride to member of the CAF and, indeed, to all Canadians.

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