

Canadian
Forces
College

Collège
des
Forces
Canadiennes



Pilot Retention, the Saga Continues

Major Gregory Boone

JCSP 46 DL

Solo Flight

Disclaimer

Opinions expressed remain those of the author and do not represent Department of National Defence or Canadian Forces policy. This paper may not be used without written permission.

© 2021 Her Majesty the Queen in Right of Canada,
as represented by the Minister of National Defence.

PCEMI 46 AD

Solo Flight

Avertissement

Les opinions exprimées n'engagent que leurs auteurs et ne reflètent aucunement des politiques du Ministère de la Défense nationale ou des Forces canadiennes. Ce papier ne peut être reproduit sans autorisation écrite.

© 2021 Sa Majesté la Reine du Chef du Canada,
représentée par le ministre de la Défense nationale.

CANADIAN FORCES COLLEGE – COLLÈGE DES FORCES CANADIENNES

JCSP 46 DL – PCEMI 46 AD
2019 – 2021

SOLO FLIGHT

PILOT RETENTION, THE SAGA CONTINUES

By Major Gregory Boone

“This paper was written by a student attending the Canadian Forces College in fulfilment of one of the requirements of the Course of Studies. The paper is a scholastic document, and thus contains facts and opinions, which the author alone considered appropriate and correct for the subject. It does not necessarily reflect the policy or the opinion of any agency, including the Government of Canada and the Canadian Department of National Defence. This paper may not be released, quoted or copied, except with the express permission of the Canadian Department of National Defence.”

“La présente étude a été rédigée par un stagiaire du Collège des Forces canadiennes pour satisfaire à l'une des exigences du cours. L'étude est un document qui se rapporte au cours et contient donc des faits et des opinions que seul l'auteur considère appropriés et convenables au sujet. Elle ne reflète pas nécessairement la politique ou l'opinion d'un organisme quelconque, y compris le gouvernement du Canada et le ministère de la Défense nationale du Canada. Il est défendu de diffuser, de citer ou de reproduire cette étude sans la permission expresse du ministère de la Défense nationale.”

PILOT RETENTION, THE SAGA CONTINUES

Retention in the CAF (Canadian Armed Forces) as a whole is a wicked problem, especially when it comes to the pilot occupation. The ongoing dilemma that is pilot retention requires unique and resourceful solutions in order to stop the hemorrhaging of qualified and experienced pilots. As long as there is a desire and/or demand for humanity to travel by way of the most expeditious means, there will as a result, always be a pilot retention issue. Given the global demand for qualified pilots, the military employment pool is the ideal hunting grounds for civil aviation operators. Military pilots offer some of the most dynamic flying experience coupled with a grueling selection and training regime that enables only the top candidates to progress to operational status. This trial by fire right of passage produces some of the worlds most skilled aviators. Given the global shortage and/or demand for qualified pilots, the military is the ideal one stop shop for the airline industry. Taking into account the benefits offered by commercial airline carriers, one would even say with all things considered, it's like shooting fish in a barrel. This paper will debate the CAF's tenacious wicked problem that is pilot retention. It will highlight some of the most prevalent cause factors both externally and internally to include factors such as quality of life, job satisfaction and pay. The paper will examine the policies and methodology behind pilot retention strategies in the CAF, emphasizing the current retention strategies utilized by the CAF and allied nations. It will also address the red haring that is the COVID-19 Pandemic and how it affects retention both positively and negatively.

To properly frame the intricacies associated with the CAF's inability to retain their pilots, the notion of wicked problems is most fitting. Wicked problems are of a

social and/or cultural nature that are problematic or at times impossible to resolve, which have been attributed to four specific reasons: Incomplete or contradictory knowledge, the number of stakeholders involved and their respective opinions, the economic burden, and the interconnection of this specific problem with the CAF's other issues.¹ The CAF's pilot retention issue requires a methodical and cooperative approach to include all stakeholders. The real challenge in the CAF is proving that we have an institutional retention problem; the mantra in the CAF is that we simply do not fail. The last several years have shown that despite an operational pace unmatched in decades, the CAF continues to deliver mission success. The unfortunate realization is that this success has been carried on the backs of its members. One would say that the new CAF motto should be "do more with less".²

To better appreciate the problem space, an understanding of the associated training, relocations and other associated barriers will provide a glimpse of a CAF pilot's career cycle. Using the Royal Military College route as the baseline, members join and complete all necessary prerequisite training including a bachelors program, basic military training, second language training followed by basic sea, land and aeromedical survival training. This prerequisite stage accounts for the first five to six years of employment. Once this phase is complete, the pilot candidates will commence their specific MOC (military occupation code) training. Phase training for the majority of pilots is completed in four stages; Phase one introduces the candidate to basic flight training and principles over a period of approximately four months. This phase is also used as a secondary

¹ "Wicked Problems: Problems Worth Solving." Wicked Problems. Accessed 12 April, 2021.

² Kozak, LCol K. "Air Mobility Releases: the RCAF's Canary in a Coal Mine." RCAF Journal. Vol 6 no 3. Summer 2017. pg 93.

screening mechanism to ensure the highest probability for completion of trades training. Phase two, introduces the candidate to a high performance aircraft and advanced flight training and principles over a period of ten to twelve months, this phase also serves as a selection tool for streams. Military aviation is broken into three streams, multi-engine aircraft (C-17 Globemaster, C130 Hercules), jet aircraft (F18 Hornet, BAE Hawk) and helicopters (CH149 Cormorant, CH147 Chinook, etc). It is after completion of phase two that candidates are sorted into streams based upon academic standing, performance and needs of the service. Phase three culminates the previous phases of training and introduces the candidate to the demands and challenges associated with their stream and ranges from five to ten months depending on the stream. This phase also awards the successful candidates with their RCAF pilot wings. All in all, this process typically takes two to three years to complete based on course wait times and other unforeseen roadblocks. Newly winged pilots, or as they are referred to in the military, NWG (new wing grad) will now be directed to an operational community in which they will receive their first operational platform and commence their journey to attain Aircraft Commander status. This is the benchmark that the CAF relies on when investing in a pilots training. Over the next two to three years, the member will first attain their OFP (operational functional point) status upon completion of their OTU (Operation Training Unit), which provides their initial first officer qualification on their selected aircraft, followed by a grueling upgrade process to obtain their aircraft captaincy. The entire process from enrolment to attain aircraft commander status and being in a position to finally give back to the organization, takes an astounding yet approximate ten years to complete. Conscious of the above training cycle, it is apparent that retention cannot be offset by simply

enrolling a replacement as it would take upwards of ten years for that replacement to only begin to provide the services required/lost by another member's release.

The aviation industry has a colossal footprint worldwide, it is estimated that that there will be a call for 500,000 new pilots over the next 20 years to accommodate expanding air routes, retirements and airline expansions. In Canada alone, which accounts for a small portion of the aviation industry, it is estimated that by 2025, 7000 new aircrew will be absorbed into the industry.³ There have been several studies in the past that identify a relationship between major airline hiring sprees and the exodus of Air Force pilots. These studies focus on the timeframe in which a pilot arrives at their decision to either continue to serve or to release and seek employment elsewhere.⁴ This typically occurs seven years post wings in the CAF, as this is the end of their RRD/P (restricted release date/period). From a marketing perspective, this is when Air Force pilots are most desirable, predictably at the end of their second operation flying tour and typically the most senior aviators, holding training and standards positions at their respective units.

The associated high pay scales, seniority system and minuscule attrition rates of 0.5 percent are what attract pilots to the airline industry. Although boasting a low attrition rate, over the next 10 years there will be a drastic increase in hiring to offset the airline industries mandatory retirement age and the projected growth of the airline industry, which is estimated to grow by upwards of thirty percent.⁵ When considering CAF exit surveys, the overall themes affecting aircrew retention are institutional in nature, from

³ Thatcher, Chris. "Managed Shortfall." Skies Magazine. 2 March 2018, 1.

⁴ Mattock, Michael G. James Hosek, Beth J. Asch, and Rita Karam, "Retaining U.S. Air Force Pilots When the Civilian Demand for Pilots Is Growing." Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2016, 5.

⁵ Ibid, 39.

increased work loads due to under-manning, salaries that fall short in comparison to their civilian counterparts, as well as the added negative impact on families with regards to postings away from family, friends and in most cases spousal employment.⁶

As mentioned earlier, pilot retention is not a new problem, in fact, it's been in play since the early 90's due to the CAF's FRP (force reduction program). In 2008, former Air Force Commander Lt. Gen Watt was quoted as upbeat and confident that the pilot shortage could be handled. At that time, the pilot trade was at 87 percent manning while losing 100 to 105 pilots per year through attrition with the ability to train 80 to 85 replacements a year with hopes of reaching 105 in the future.⁷ As a previous pilot career manager, I was privy to high level conversations and more up to date figures with regards to the health of our trade. I can confirm that Lt. Gen Watts vision of increasing pilot output was not only reached, but surpassed as we trained 115 NWG's in 2019. That being said, overall OTU capacity is only 95 per year, therefore, although we've winged more pilots, the cyclical problem of an increased training backlog on the operational side persists, which resulted in NWG production being reduced to 95 to accommodate. To add to the problem, the annual pilot attrition rate has also increased to approximately 140 per year, therefore, the deficit continues to grow yearly with no signs of stopping. As it stands, the Pilot trade is hovering around 84 percent of the PML (preferred manning level).

Now that we understand not only the problem space, but also the roadblocks associated with pilot retention, we will examine some of the RCAF's retention strategies

⁶ Kozak, LCol K. "Air Mobility Releases: the RCAF's Canary in a Coal Mine...", 92.

⁷ Pugliese, David. "Air Force Short 250 Pilots but Getting a Handle on Retention" Ottawa Citizen. 13 June 2008, 2.

and then further compare them to the efforts of other likeminded nations in similar predicaments. In early 2019, the CAF implemented two retention strategies entitled Operation Talent and Operation Experience in order to stabilize and ensure the continued health of the CAF at large. It is the CAF's belief that these initiatives are crucial given the extraordinary level of competition on a global scale that is being put forth by the civil aviation industry.⁸ Utilizing Operation Experience, over the next couple years, the CAF plans to focus explicitly on the stabilization and subsequent increase in pilot experience. Utilizing Operation Talent, the CAF will focus on the ongoing quality of life and service for all of its members and family alike.⁹ Being witness to many releases and recipient of their exit surveys, it is clear that there isn't one specific grievance that stands out. In Fact, most surveys included heart-felt memo's indicating that the decision to leave was not an easy one, but in most cases, it was for family stability and quality of life improvements. Of note, were the following gripes; lack of stability due to multiple postings, absence of a plan for the future with regards to career progression and finally burnout due to low manning levels and an ever-increasing Op tempo. Current RCAF Commander Lt. Gen Meinzinger has articulated his fear of the RCAF's loss of operational experience, thereby reducing their capacity to mentor, train and transfer corporate knowledge to future aviators. This will inevitably lead to a negative impact on the RCAF's operational abilities.¹⁰ The CAF has made some strides other than the two aforementioned initiatives towards addressing their retention issue, they have redesigned their RRD/P policy as the

⁸ Government of Canada. "Quality of Life – Quality of Service. Ottawa. Royal Canadian Airforce. 13 May 2021, 1.

⁹ Ibid, 2.

¹⁰ Thatcher, Chris. "Managed Shortfall." Skies Magazine..., 3.

previous version was not well received. The exchange and requalification RRD/P's have been reduced from six to three years and two to one year respectively. The initial RRD/P for wings has been increased from seven to ten years in hopes of the CAF receiving "more bang for their buck".¹¹ Although these changes are having a positive affect for the institution, they have certainly been observed as more of a bigger stick and no carrot approach. Cash bonuses may incentivize pilots to stick around for a little while, but that will only be a short term measure. RCAF pilots are some of the best in the world and are clearly sought after by the airlines, the idea of dangling the cash carrot will not entice them for long.¹²

Col Mark Larsen, who is the director of Air Personnel Strategy in the CAF, is charged with the task of monitoring trade health and implementing the associated policies in support of retention and re-enrolment strategies. His organizations aim is to ensure that aircrew are employed in their primary role as pilots at the operation level, in short, pilots are happiest when they are flying planes and are dissatisfied when they are sent to staff jobs.¹³ Unfortunately, due to the manning priorities levels laid out by the VCDS (Vice Chief of Defence Staff) manning priorities, priority A through C are entitled to manning levels equal to 90 to 95 percent, 85 to 90 percent, and an equal distribution of the remaining personnel respectfully. Alas, most front line flying squadrons are designated as priority C, which plays against the RCAF's initiative to ensure pilots are satisfied by their state of employment as staff tours are inevitable and commonly regarded as a higher priority by the institution. Additionally, the institution believes that due to past retention

¹¹ Thatcher, Chris. "RCAF Reports Personnel 'Plateau'." Skies Magazine. 5 March 2020, 6.

¹² Taylor, Scott. "Canada must do more to retain RCAF pilots." The Chronicle Herald. 17 June 2019, 2.

¹³ Thatcher, Chris. "RCAF Reports Personnel 'Plateau...', 4.

initiatives such as the inception of the “Civvie U” program, which offered new enrollees the ability to complete their university degrees at a civilian university vice the preferred RMC route is to blame. Some in the institution believe that members who attended the “Civvie U” program are less invested in the military as a long term career plan.¹⁴

When considering other nations Air Force strategies to cope with their own retention issues, they certainly appear more action based. The USAF (United States Air Force) has been poised with more severe retention issues than we have here in Canada, although on a greater scale, the reasons remain the same. The USAF has already instituted a pilot retention program offering bonuses ranging from \$25,000 to \$35,000 per year for signing contracts of either one, two, five, nine or thirteen year terms.¹⁵ Although this initiative has aided in slowing the exodus, clearly it is not enough. USAF pilots are not leaving just for the money, it is also the additional duties, high deployment rates and the diminished quality of life factor. The USAF is therefore now looking into not only further financial incentives to bridge the gap between industry and military pilot salaries, but also investigating ways to improve the quality of life factor for its members via a reduction in additional duties, meaningless online courses and avenues to increase time spent with their families when not deployed.¹⁶

As if an answer from god, it seems that the COVID-19 pandemic has solved the CAF’s retention issues, release numbers have never been lower and re-enrolment numbers have never been higher. When the pandemic hit, international travel and the

¹⁴ NATO. “Recruiting and Retention of Military Personnel” RESEARCH AND TECHNOLOGY ORGANISATION. October 2007, 3.

¹⁵ Losey, Stephen. “Air Force rolls out 13-year, \$455,000 bonuses for fighter pilots.” AirForce Times, 5 June 2017, 1.

¹⁶ Ibid, 2.

global economy plummeted, and with it, the incentive for military aviators to seek employment outside the military. History has shown that once the economy has recovered, pilot hiring will begin accelerating within two to three years.¹⁷ Knowing that the COVID-19 vaccine is in full scale deployment, it is only a matter of time before the airline industry opens their flood gates when it comes to hiring. Given the aging population within the ranks of the airlines, some 20,000 pilots are set to retire as they approach the maximum age limit of 65. Given the fact that military pilots are the only ones maintaining their qualifications and proficiency during the pandemic, it is a safe assumption that once the airlines start hiring again, military pilots will be even more sought after.¹⁸

In conclusion, it is evident that the CAF is faced with a wicked problem in the form of pilot retention, it requires changes of a financial nature as well as significant institutional changes in order to ensure a positive outcome, one that if left unchecked will only worsen with the recovery of the world's economy. This paper has examined the policies and methodology behind pilot retention strategies in the CAF to include Operation Talents initiative of making positive changes to its members overall service experience, attempting to improve quality of life and reduce unnecessary additional duties. Operation Experiences mandate is to retain RCAF operational experience to ensure future aircrew development and completion of its operational requirements. The USAF has already employed financial methods to slow the exodus, but has also failed to address the quality of life and family balance dynamic. The RCAF would be wise to

¹⁷ Switzer, Tobias. "The Air Force Pilot Retention Crisis Is Not Over." War on the Rocks. 20 Oct 2020, 4.

¹⁸ Kane, Timothy. "Online Event: Air Force Pilot Retention: New Recommendations for An Enduring Crisis" Center for Strategic and International Studies. 28 Oct 2020, 2.

utilize the USAF's findings in order to avoid the same short comings with their own retention progress. As proven by their efforts, simply dangling a cash carrot is not enough, family time and job satisfaction is held to a higher regard then just pay on its own. The COVID-19 pandemic has certainly provided the CAF with some breathing room when it comes to addressing the pilot retention issue, however, the clock is ticking and this grace period will soon be over. Pilots by nature are typically highly educated, thoughtful and methodical problem solvers with a never ending desire to not only succeed, but for perpetual betterment. When faced with the decision between employment within the CAF, where they are overworked, typically in fields that do not fall within their job description, under paid in relation to their civilian counterparts and forced to sacrifice their families well-being and happiness in service of their country, it almost seems like a "no brainer". Employment with the airline industry provides flexibility, financial prosperity, family stability and an overall increased quality of life. If the CAF is seriously invested in fixing their pilot retention problems, they need to make positive changes and quickly enact useful and effective policies before the world returns to normal and the airlines start their hiring frenzy, by then it might be simply too little too late.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Government of Canada. “Quality of Life – Quality of Service. Ottawa. Royal Canadian Airforce. 13 May 2021. <https://www.rcaf-arc.forces.gc.ca/en/services/benefits-military/quality-life-quality-service.page#initiative20>
- Kane, Timothy. “Online Event: Air Force Pilot Retention: New Recommendations for An Enduring Crisis” Center for Strategic and International Studies. 28 Oct 2020. <https://www.csis.org/events/online-event-air-force-pilot-retention-new-recommendations-enduring-crisis>
- Kozak, LCol K. “Air Mobility Releases: the RCAF’s Canary in a Coal Mine.” *RCAF Journal*. Vol 6 no 3. Summer 2017. http://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2017/mdn-dnd/D12-16-6-3-eng.pdf
- Losey, Stephen. “Air Force rolls out 13-year, \$455,000 bonuses for fighter pilots.” *Air Force Times*, 5 June 2017. <https://www.airforcetimes.com/news/your-air-force/2017/06/05/air-force-rolls-out-13-year-455000-bonuses-for-fighter-pilots/>
- Mattock, Michael G. James Hosek, Beth J. Asch, and Rita Karam, “Retaining U.S. Air Force Pilots When the Civilian Demand for Pilots Is Growing.” Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2016. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1455.html.
- NATO. “Recruiting and Retention of Military Personnel.” Research and Technology Organisation. October 2007. https://www.nato.int/issues/women_nato/Recruiting%20&%20Retention%20of%20Mil%20Personnel.pdf
- Pugliese, David. “Air Force Short 250 Pilots but Getting a Handle on Retention” *Ottawa Citizen*. 13 June 2008. <http://ottawacitizen.com/news/national/defence-watch/air-force-short-250-pilots-but-getting-a-handle-on-retention>
- Switzer, Tobias. “The Air Force Pilot Retention Crisis Is Not Over.” *War on the Rocks*. 20 Oct 2020. <https://warontherocks.com/2020/10/the-air-force-pilot-retention-crisis-is-not-over/>
- Taylor, Scott. “Canada must do more to retain RCAF pilots.” *The Chronicle Herald*. 17 June 2019. <https://www.thechronicleherald.ca/opinion/scott-taylor-canada-must-do-more-to-retain-rcf-pilots-323075/>

Thatcher, Chris. "RCAF Reports Personnel 'Plateau'." *Skies Magazine*. 5 March 2020.
<https://skiesmag.com/news/rcaf-reports-personnel-plateau/>

Thatcher, Chris. "Managed Shortfall." *Skies Magazine*. 2 March 2018.
<https://www.skiesmag.com/features/managed-shortfall/>

"Wicked Problems: Problems Worth Solving." *Wicked Problems*. Accessed 12 April, 2021. https://www.wickedproblems.com/1_wicked_problems.php