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Recruiting and Retention of Pilots for the Canadian Armed Forces

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RECRUITING AND RETENTION OF PILOTS FOR THE CANADIAN ARMED FORCES

AIM

1. This paper aims to discuss the ongoing challenges of recruiting applicants for the trade of pilot in the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) and specifically the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF), as well as ongoing efforts to retain pilots once personnel have achieved the level of trained effective strength (TES). The pilot trade in the CAF historically has been a very attractive option for prospective applicants visiting the recruiting centres, however the CAF has always struggled with attracting qualified applicants to the trade and maintaining the pilot trade at the preferred manning level (PML) across all units and specialties.

INTRODUCTION

2. The RCAF has always struggled to maintain suitable levels of personnel in the pilot trade.¹ There are many reasons this is the case, some of which will be discussed herein, however the problem can be simplified and broken down into two broad categories: recruiting and retention. Recruiting of qualified pilot applicants is challenged as the prospective pilot has traditionally had a dearth of good and timely information on which to base their decision to apply to the RCAF or not. Many rumours and past restrictions haunt the pilot recruiting process to this day, and the current state of being of the pilot career in the CAF is not well understood by the pool of potential applicants.

3. Secondly, retention of current RCAF pilots is a perpetual problem despite the significant effort and resources that have been focused on this issue. The very simple reason for this ongoing drain on the pilot trade is that the skills given to the pilots while training and serving in the CAF are highly marketable and sought after in the private sector. With a much better quality of working life, remuneration, and working conditions in the private sector combine to make an irresistible draw for many RCAF pilots on “the outside”. The commercial aviation industry is anticipated to require thousands of new pilots each year in North America² and the competition for personnel will continue to be fierce.

DISCUSSION

Attraction and Recruitment

4. Recruiting efforts are a conglomeration of attraction and the action of processing applicants to become enrollees. Arguable these are equally important however without

¹Office of the Pilot Career Manager, “Pilot Career Manager Brief, 2020.” Chief of Military Personnel (Ottawa: DND, 2020), 5.

²Robert Erdos, “Whither the Pilot?,” *Skies Magazine* (Dec 2021): 42. Last accessed 10 Jan 2022. <https://issues.skiesmag.com/554/766/1704/CSV1116-Dec21Jan22/index.html?r=80>

attracting prospective pilots into the recruiting process there will never be any progress on the problem. Historically, the pilot trade has been a significant attractor in and of itself for young people to become interested in the RCAF. As mentioned above, challenges in attractions in the modern age have developed into new lows of suitable applicants for the CAF and RCAF specifically. Suitability in this context being defined as an applicant that can attain a passing grade on the required aptitude and physical testing and that has the required educational background to meet the entry requirements for a specific trade.

5. Attracting young people into the pilot trade requires outreach in both the physical real world and in cyberspace. Increasingly individuals turn to social media for all or nearly all of their information, the old model of having people walk into the recruiting centre and pose their questions is no longer the primary means. The RCAF needs to have timely and accurate information on the CAF websites as well as all social media platforms to enable the attraction of interest. While the Canadian Forces Recruiting Group (CFRG) has active online presence and multimedia advertising campaigns, more should be done to reach the younger target audience and to interact with them once they become even the slightest bit interested. Many employers use group interactions such as online webinars and small group discussions to involve the pool of potential applicants. The RCAF should have dedicated and pre-identified personnel from all trades including active and current pilots ready to interact with the applicants of tomorrow. For example, if a young person would like to ask about being a rotary wing pilot at an army base, the CFRG is able to access a ready list of pilots at 408 THS in Edmonton to interact online with that young person and answer their questions. This would improve the awareness of that potential applicant as to the lifestyle and challenges of RCAF life.

6. In generating interest in the public, the RCAF must continue to utilize outreach activities whenever possible. This includes a renewed emphasis by the RCAF Headquarters in providing a strong presence at each and every airshow with all types of airframes, and static displays where youth can interact with serving members. The importance of airshows cannot be overstated as they provide access to a culture of aviation enthusiasts not available elsewhere. Additionally, outreach activities should be undertaken at Cadet units throughout the country, small airport flying clubs, and other significant cultural activities such as the Canadian National Exhibition (CNE), the Calgary Stampede, the Pacific National Exhibition (PNE), and so on. High schools could also be targeted in strategic locations not well served by a nearby recruiting centre or an annual airshow. Small to medium sized cities could be visited by outreach teams and preplanned events at the local airport flying club in order to generate interest in the RCAF as a career. Even more beneficial would be if these outreach teams could travel by CH-146 Griffon helicopter or other RCAF asset and create interest by arranging to land in the schoolyard or other suitable location. In this case, a certain level of showmanship would be beneficial.

7. In attempting to attract individuals, the RCAF could improve in promoting the benefits of a career in the RCAF and as a pilot. Highlighting the diversity of training, the

skills one learns, the excitement of the trade all would assist.³ Additionally, the pay and benefits associated with the CF should be made abundantly clear. As the pilot trade is now offering a much more competitive salary under the new pay structure as part of the overall remuneration package, informing applicants of expected pay and promotion schedules would be beneficial. This information is available online however it is not readily accessed from the various websites.

8. Effort must also be engaged into combatting misinformation that abounds related to recruitment of pilots. Outdated information regarding the initial requirements of the pilot trade persists and prevents otherwise suitable applicants from applying. Specifically, the requirement for perfect eyesight, the suitability of laser eye surgery, and misinformation regarding age limitations is still prevalent within online forums, possibly CFRG itself, and therefore the beliefs of the public. Correcting these misconceptions will enhance the pool of potential applicants considerably.

9. Once the individual has become interested in a career in the RCAF as a pilot, it becomes very important as to how the file is handled, the timelines involved, and the criteria used for screening. Anecdotally the timelines are far too long for the youth of today between first application and receiving an offer. CFRG must ensure that to the maximum extent possible, all recruiting centre testing and interviews, medicals, and aircrew selection centre testing are all accomplished in the timeliest manner. The applicants of today have little tolerance for lengthy and uncertain timelines.

10. The requirements of the pilot trade should evolve to reflect the reality of the profession. Many employers of pilots who previously had required pilots to have a university degree are eliminating the requirement of a bachelor's degree for employment.⁴ Understanding that this is a CF-wide requirement for a degreed Officer corps, the applicant who presents with a commercial pilot's license or higher should be considered to have met the university degree requirement. Perhaps that member is then limited to the maximum rank of Captain in the absence of a university degree (as exists with the Continuing Education Officer Training Program, CEOTP), however the educational requirements of attaining a commercial pilot license are not insignificant. The net result of this change is more suitable applicants into recruiting centre, and/or fewer files being screened out of the process.

Retention

11. Retention of RCAF pilots continues to be a wicked problem despite much recent effort and many additional resources. The new and improved pilot pay scale that has been promised is a very large step in retaining existing RCAF pilots and will be a large measure of retention to a chronically understrength trade. These benefits will be realized for several years as there is now a sizeable incentive for pilots nearing retirement to

³Lisa Gordon, "Perfect Storm: The Looming Pilot Shortage." Last accessed 12 January 2022. <https://skiesmag.com/features/perfect-storm-looming-pilot-shortage/>.

⁴Ashley Barajas, "Delta Removes Degree Requirement for Prospective Pilots." Last accessed 20 January 2022. <https://www.flyingmag.com/delta-removes-degree-requirement-for-prospective-pilots/>.

continue for pension improvement reasons. The new pilot pay scale resembles earnings equivalent to a mid-level commercial pilot in North America after a few years of experience. Combined with the overall benefits package of the CF pension program and health care, the remuneration is now set to become fairly competitive and will have a net positive effect on retention it is anticipated.

12. Retention of pilots also can be influenced by many other factors, chiefly among them is quality of work life and job satisfaction. These aspects of the pilot trade in the RCAF definitely could be improved upon while searching for ways to retain pilots for a longer career in the interest of the RCAF.

13. Quality of life for pilots in the RCAF is less about the actual act of flying airplanes in an operational or training context, and more about all the surrounding responsibilities imposed upon the member. Many pilots depart the organization as a result of so much of their work life is spent not piloting aircraft, rather performing any number of other functions colloquially described as “queep”. These detractors include, but are not limited to, courses unrelated to pilotage or aircraft, menial administrative duties, secondary duties of little import, and so on. The problem worsens with rank and tenure, ultimately resulting in the pilot spending little or no time flying aircraft and all of their working life in administrative roles. The effect on the pilot’s decision to remain within the organization or depart cannot be overstated as the dreaded ground job in cubicle is the ultimate dissatisfier for most operational pilots. This problem is not new, as the organization requires a certain number of pilots to ascend in rank to steer the organization however this should not be the expectation for those that do not wish to do so. “Up or Out” ultimately drives many pilots to choose out, to the detriment of the organization as the skill and experience drain is enormous.

14. Improving the quality of work life for RCAF pilots can be addressed by any number of strategies, but it begins with one common theme – valuing that pilot’s time and experience. In valuing the person’s time, that means removing as many barriers to productivity as possible, supporting the member administratively, and eliminating unnecessary requirements to the maximum extent possible.⁵ Suggestions include minimizing and rationalizing myriad courses that are thought to be required. With the exception of weapons training, most if not all of the pre-deployment courses should be once per career or perhaps twice, and that member is considered trained and current forever. Namely Law of Armed Conflict, Standard First Aid, Peace Support Operations, Mine Awareness, Non-service Weapons, Green Procurement, Gender-Based Analysis Plus (GBA+), Portable Fire Extinguisher Training, Contracting Direct With Trade, Expenditure Management, Section 32, 33, and 34 Training, CBRN, Media Awareness, Information Security, Conduct After Capture, Controlled Goods General Awareness Training, Preventative Medicine Briefings, Explosive Threat and Hazard Awareness Recognition, Application of the Principles of the Use of Force, Stress Management, the

⁵Lisa Gordon, “Perfect Storm: The Looming Pilot Shortage.” Last accessed 12 January 2022. <https://skiesmag.com/features/perfect-storm-looming-pilot-shortage/>.

list goes on.⁶ Having the member complete training courses such as these prior to each deployment is unnecessary and a poor use of the member's work time. Many RCAF pilots do multiple and repetitive deployments depending on their specialty. Notably, the RCAF pilots have many trade qualification courses that are required to be proficient in their role, and therefore the other queep listed above should be once per career at most.

15. Obligatory service is another method that the RCAF has used to encourage retention, however this initiative is perhaps detrimental to the effort. To a young person, obligatory service of 10 years or more sounds like an eternity and is quite possibly preventing potential applicants from making the decision to join. This effect should be studied further to ascertain if there is a large portion of potential pilot recruits who decide not to pursue the RCAF pilot career. Consideration should be given to reducing this commitment, potentially returning the obligatory service to 7 years after attainment of pilot wings.

16. Finally, the retention of pilots could be improved by affording the senior pilots to have more control over their careers and futures instead of less. One unique aspect of the trade is that the individual increasingly loses control over their destiny and career path with tenure rather than the normal situation of gaining more control. The employers that the RCAF are in competition with for talent all value seniority and in other organizations seniority gains the employee an ever-increasing level of ability to shape their job opportunities and destiny. This could be easily achieved in the RCAF by identifying a level of seniority wherein those who attain, for example, 20 or 25 years of service can then write their own ticket as to where they would like to be posted and for how long they would like to remain in that position. This would result in some of the most senior personnel selecting a position at a flying squadron and becoming the old guard who never leave, whereas others might select a suitable ground job in a preferred location and becoming expert in that role. Both outcomes have benefits for the organization in terms of the most experienced personnel are available as mentors and standards personnel, and pilot experience is ultimately retained.

CONCLUSION

17. The CAF and RCAF are in direct competition for pilot talent with many other employers who use increasingly creative methods of attracting and recruiting employees. Once onboard, civilian employers of pilots have the advantage of providing a higher quality of life, better overall remuneration, as well as individual employee's control over the career path as seniority increases. The RCAF must employ new and emergent techniques to compete in the attractions arena, as well as make concerted efforts to enhance the work life of members with proper supports and valuation of both the individual's time and the pilot's experience.

⁶List compiled from Individual Battle Task Standard (IBTS) as published by Canadian Joint Operations Command (CJOC) on Defence Wide Area Network (DWAN only), as well as Air Force Education and Readiness Standards and Evaluation Team (AFERSET) individual training standards (DWAN only). List is not exhaustive.

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