

The RCAF Air Task Force: Considerations for the Employment of Air Power in Joint Operations

Article #5 in a series on command and control and the Royal Canadian Air Force¹

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Increasingly, the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) has identified the need to provide joint task force commanders (JTF Comds) with a well-trained and cohesive force, commanded by a single Air Force commander trained in the delivery of air power at the operational level. Importantly, the RCAF has taken on the responsibility of providing an air-power command and control (C2) solution that is agile enough to fit any domestic or expeditionary operation. As a result, the RCAF has invested a significant amount of energy since 2011 developing the air-task-force (ATF) concept as a means of generating a scalable and agile force. In order to effectively lead this process, the RCAF has also developed the role of ATF Comd, an officer who is responsible to oversee a number of processes that affect the ability of the ATF to effectively integrate air effects into joint operations. In this article, we will take a closer look at the ATF concept and just what it brings to the joint-operations table.

Background of the RCAF Air Task Force

Recent operations and major exercises have validated the RCAF's tactical delivery of air effects, and there is little doubt that the Air Force performs well in this regard. But what has the Air Force Lessons Learned Programme (AFLLP) repeatedly identified to us about our shortcomings? Despite some significant advances made over the past few years to avoid ad hoc solutions, C2 processes are regularly noted as an area for improvement. Also of concern are the methods in which the RCAF generates its forces for the myriad operations, from the small and simple to the large and complex.

Learning our lessons. Despite having a relatively high level of readiness across the Air Force, sizable contingency operations, such as Operation (Op) MOBILE, were effectively “breaking” the Air Force by making Air Force-wide demands for personnel and capabilities that followed no logical pattern other than the overriding need to generate a force. Despite being an effective tool for identifying key individuals for operations, the Canadian Forces Task Plans and Operations (CFTPO) process became a less-than-ideal method of randomly tasking “available” personnel. The result of this process on units lacking sufficient depth to fulfill all deployment needs was that the long-term planning of numerous wings, squadrons and units suffered greatly, simultaneously. Lessons learned made it clear that the RCAF also needed to prepare senior leadership for deployed roles. Simply “parachuting” commanders and their staffs into a quickly assembled deployed force created a significantly steep learning curve.

Enter AFEC and the MRP. Clearly, something had to be done to prevent this ad hoc type of force generation and leadership development in the future. Although comprised of some of the best players in the world, even Canada’s Olympic hockey teams needed time to practice in order for the individual to become a member of the team; furthermore, the coaches needed the opportunity to train and meld the players under one cohesive and effective plan. Is a deployed military force, created from units across the country, any different in this regard?²

The solution was to establish the Air Force Expeditionary Capability (AFEC) concept of operations (CONOPS),³ which brought order to force generation (FG) via a phased managed readiness plan (MRP)⁴ that clearly identified the parts of the Air Force required to form a numbered high-readiness ATF (e.g., ATF 1402) for a specified 12-month period of time following collective training. The MRP identifies two potential lines of operation (LoOs): one for a deliberate operation and the other for a contingency operation. Some units on continuous high-readiness status (such as 436 Transport Squadron, which represents a single-source for a specific air-power capability—tactical airlift in this example) will have to balance their participation in all ATFs of the MRP.

The runway to high readiness. Taking a page from the Army’s “road to high readiness,” the MRP provides the opportunity for the RCAF ATF to practise together in collective-training events—such as Exercise MAPLE RESOLVE and Op NANOOK—prior to the ATF’s employment window. With 2 Wing (which is ready to deploy for the contingency LoO and can support the activation effort for any other operation), the RCAF currently has the means to provide the critical mix of operational-level coordination, tactical command, an operations-support element (OSE) and mission-support element (MSE). This will ensure deployed air detachments (flying and non-flying) are properly commanded and supported by an RCAF air expeditionary wing (AEW) comd (see Figure 1). In the end, the AFEC and MRP have brought a marked improvement in the predictability of the way the RCAF prepares for and commits to operations. Chalk those particular lessons up as “learned.”

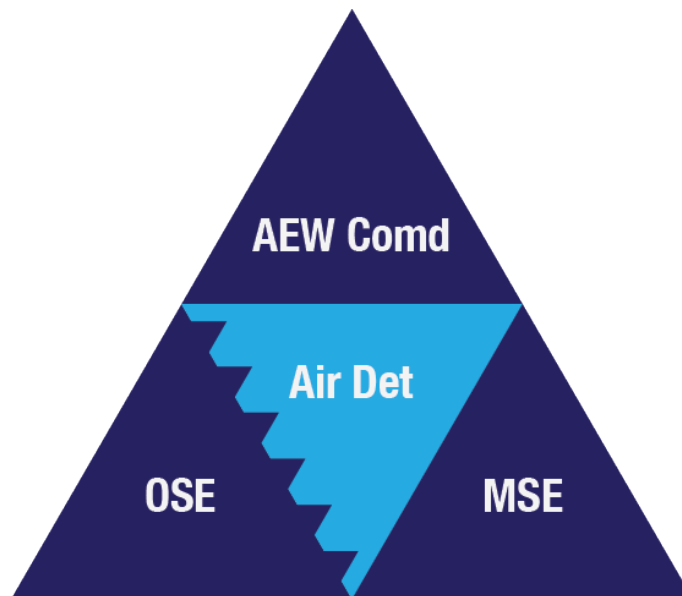


Figure 1. The air expeditionary wing

Commanding the ATF

Over the past few years, the RCAF has advanced its understanding and application of C2.⁵ There is, on the whole, a much better appreciation for the C2 roles and responsibilities the RCAF must fulfill during operations, including formalizing the authorities of the detachment commander (DETCO), AEW Comd, the air component commander (ACC) and the air component coordination element director (ACCE Dir). These roles must be filled by RCAF officers who are experienced in both the field and in the seminar room. With the establishment of the ATF, a new need arose to develop a way to effectively command it. The result of pan-Air Force collaboration led by the Canadian Forces Aerospace Warfare Centre (CAFWC), the ATF Comd concept is part of the RCAF's air-power doctrine with the publication of Air Doctrine Note (ADN) 14/01, which defines the terminology and establishes the roles and responsibilities of the ATF Comd.⁶ The ATF Comd concept represents a key component of the RCAF C2 solution that integrates air effects into joint/combined operations.

Defining ATF and ATF Comd. An air task force is a temporary grouping of RCAF formations, squadrons, units or detachments formed for the purpose of carrying out a specific operation, mission or task.⁷ Inherent in this definition is the fact that, in all likelihood, no two ATFs will look the same, owing to the diversity of operations they will participate in. The onus, therefore, is on the RCAF to provide a flexible C2 solution that permits the effective command of an ATF, no matter its size, composition or the types of air effects it delivers. An ATF Comd is an operational- or tactical-level commander who exercises command over the ATF.⁸ Fundamental to the existence of the ATF Comd is the fact that this officer will exercise either operational command (OPCOM) or tactical command (TACOM) of the ATF. The exercise of this authority is as necessary to the RCAF as that delegated to the commander of a Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) task group or a Canadian Army brigade.

Roles and responsibilities of the ATF Comd. The ATF Comd is responsible for ensuring that all national operational and administrative issues pertaining to the ATF are dealt with in a manner that meets the goals of either the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) joint force air component commander (JFACC)—during domestic and expeditionary operations where OPCOM has been delegated to the CAF JFACC—or the CAF JTF Comd—during expeditionary operations where OPCOM has been delegated to the CAF JTF Comd. In addition to commanding the ATF, the ATF Comd is responsible for the overall coordination of activities and acts as the single point of contact for issues affecting all elements of the ATF including:⁹

- a. monitoring RCAF residual-authorities (RA) issues within the ATF to ensure they are consistently practiced in accordance with the direction provided by the Comd 1 Canadian Air Division (1 Cdn Air Div);
- b. implementing and monitoring operational-risk (OR) management processes to include mission-acceptance (MA) and launch-authority (LA) processes that bridge RCAF RA and CAF JFACC / CAF JTF Comd OR management authority;

- c. ensuring effective coordination lines between various ATF elements, national/allied/coalition commanders and operations centres / headquarters (HQs). The ATF Comd deploys air task force coordination elements (ATFCE), as required, to effect this coordination;
- d. managing and coordinating the sustainment of the ATF in cooperation with the CAF JTF HQ, national command element (NCE) J-staff and the joint task force support element (JTFSE); and
- e. monitoring, in accordance with the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) Strategic Targeting Directive, the ATF’s target-engagement-authority (TEA) process at the allied/coalition combined air operations centre (CAOC).

Options for ATF Comd employment. When selecting the best option for the employment of an ATF Comd, a number of factors (see Figure 2) must be weighed, including the size, complexity and length of the operation. As an operation evolves, it may be necessary to recommend a change in the ATF Comd option in order to ensure the appropriate level of air leadership is present in theatre. There are four different situations detailed in the ADN where any one of the three ATF Comd options can be employed. ATF Comd authority can be assigned to a DETCO (option X), the W/AEW Comd (also option X) or the ACC / ACCE Dir (option Y), or an ATF Comd can be appointed separate from these roles (option Z).¹⁰ When determining C2 courses of action for commanders, staff planners must remember that the duties of an ATF Comd are distinctly different from those of the existing C2 roles mentioned above. As such, the geographic location and anticipated workload must be considered if the ATF Comd is to be double-hatted with one of these roles. During large, complex operations involving allied/coalition partners, a separate officer (not double-hatted with another duty) may be designated as ATF Comd and collocated with the CAF Canadian national commander (CNC) / JTF Comd (see Figure 3).

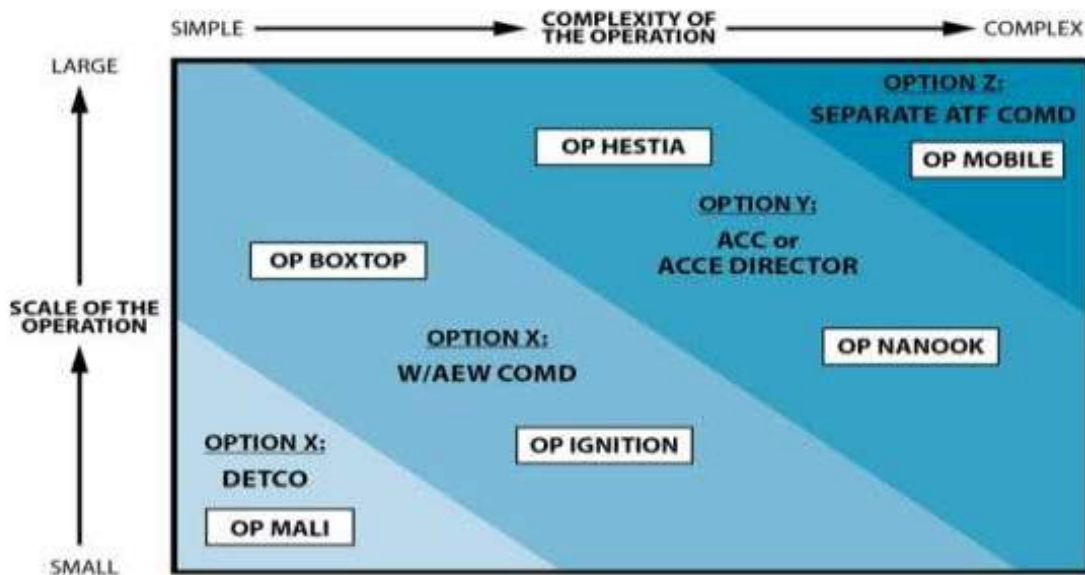


Figure 2. Factors affecting the selection of an ATF Comd

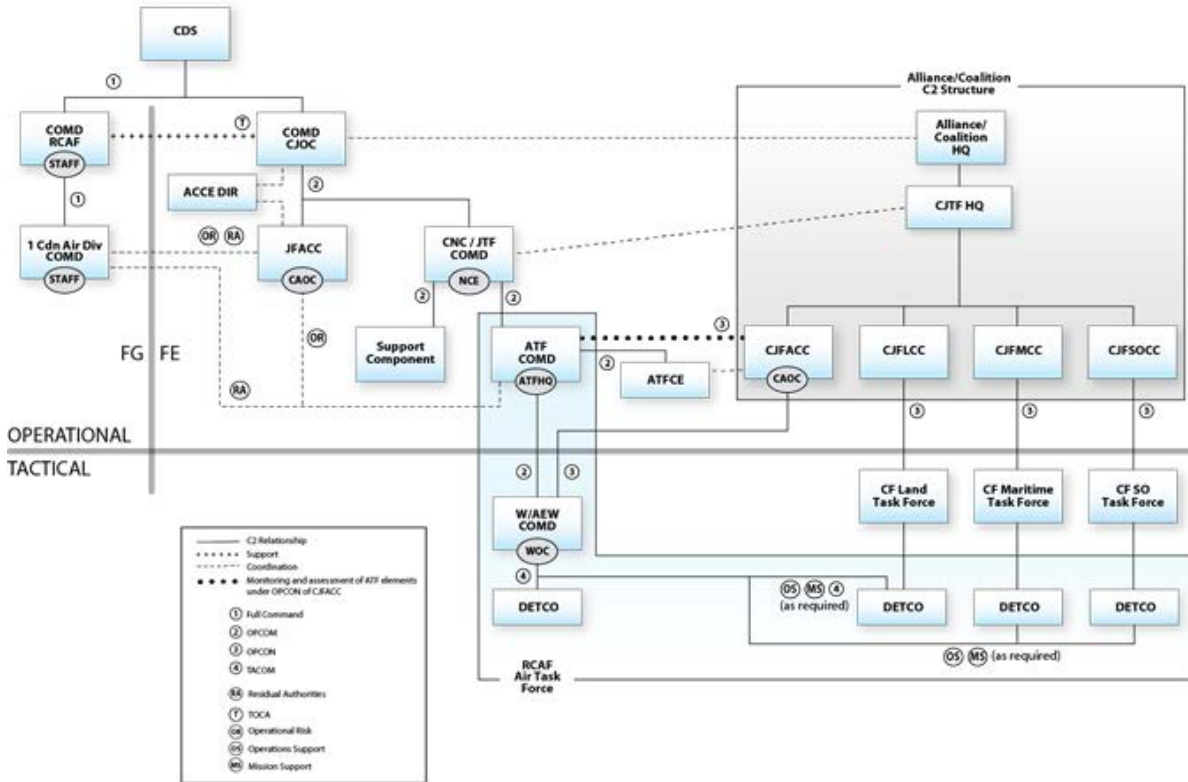


Figure 3. An RCAF ATF as part of an allied/coalition (multinational) operation

Developing an ATF Comd

While the skill sets required of an ATF Comd can currently be found in many of the RCAF’s senior officers, there have been limited opportunities to develop these individuals within the context of coordinating air power above the tactical level in joint operations. While the RCAF provides hundreds of training courses to ensure its personnel have the requisite skills to fight at the tactical level, not one formal course exists to expose leaders to the operational level of air power. Although there is little doubt that RCAF officers have ample opportunity during their careers to develop command experience, most of this will have been practised at the tactical level. An understanding of the operations planning process, the air tasking cycle, CAOC operations, sustainment, force protection and allied/coalition C2 processes are just a few of the areas that ATF Comds must have an understanding of or be experienced in.

Faced with a pressing need to develop leaders at the operational level of warfare, the Comd RCAF directed CFAWC in 2011 to begin filling that gap. The resulting week-long Air Component Coordination Element Seminar, delivered several times a year by CFAWC, was held at 1 Cdn Air Div HQ. The seminar focused on discussions and war gaming as a means to develop a “graduate-level” way of thinking about air power. Taught by senior officers with extensive experience at the tactical and operational levels of both national, NORAD and allied/coalition operations, the seminar offers a means to prepare ATF Comds, ACCs, ACCE Dirs and their key staff members for their duties in the MRP or upcoming major

operations and exercises such as NANOOK, RIMPAC and JOINTTEX. In 2014, the course (shown in Figures 4 and 5) changed its name to the RCAF Operations Command and Control Course (OCCC, “the O Triple C”) and moved to CFAWC. The seminars have continued to evolve to meet the needs of the RCAF, principally by helping to develop the ATF Comd.



Figure 4. The RCAF OCCC at CFAWC



Figure 5. The RCAF OCCC at CFAWC

Summary

Generating a scalable and agile force, capable of deploying anywhere in the world, is the goal of the RCAF'S MRP. The "operational currency" of the RCAF, defined by what it brings to the fight, is the air task force. Whether in support of a small, 2 aircraft / 50 personnel deployment to support a Caribbean country or a large multifleet North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) operation in the Mediterranean, the RCAF intends to deliver air effects to meet the needs of the Canadian or allied/coalition JTF Comd. By avoiding previously used ad hoc approaches to FG, the RCAF plans to identify and develop an ATF in a predictable way, providing options to the Comd RCAF for the employment of air power. Developing well-qualified and experienced ATF Comds, able to work at the operational level, will remain a long-term project for the RCAF and is worthy of continued investment. In the end, the ATF concept represents an RCAF C2 solution that can be flexibly applied to any national or allied/coalition C2 construct. If our lessons learned have taught us anything, simply saying "anytime, anywhere" isn't going to be good enough ... the RCAF must continue to develop the ATF to remain a credible force that can deliver air effects on a continuous basis, far into the future.

Abbreviations

1 Cdn Air Div	1 Canadian Air Division
ACC	air component commander
ACCE Dir	air component coordination element director
ADN	air doctrine note
AEW	air expeditionary wing
AFEC	Air Force Expeditionary Capability
Air Det	air detachment
ATF	air task force
ATFCE	air task force coordination element
ATFHQ	air task force headquarters
C2	command and control
CAF	Canadian Armed Forces
CAOC	combined air operations centre
CDS	Chief of Defence Staff
CFAWC	Canadian Forces Aerospace Warfare Centre
CJFACC	combined joint force air component commander
CJFLCC	combined joint force land component commander
CJFMCC	combined joint force maritime component commander
CJFSOCC	combined joint force special operations component commander
CJOC	Canadian Joint Operations Command
CJTF	combined joint task force
CNC	Canadian national commander
comd	commander
CONOPS	concept of operations
DETCO	detachment commander
FE	force employment
FG	force generation
HQ	headquarters

JFACC	joint force air component commander
JTF	joint task force
LoO	line of operation
MRP	managed readiness plan
MSE	mission-support element
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NCE	national command element
OCCC	Operations Command and Control Course
Op	operation
OPCOM	operational command
OPCON	operational control
OR	operational risk
OSE	operations-support element
RA	residual authority
RCAF	Royal Canadian Air Force
SO	special operations
TACOM	tactical command
TOCA	transfer of command authority
W Comd	wing commander
WOC	wing operations centre

Notes

1. This is the fifth in a series of short articles on the subject of command and control in the RCAF. For more detailed information, consult B-GA-401-000/FP-001, *Canadian Forces Aerospace Command Doctrine*, found on the Internet at <http://www.rcaf-arc.forces.gc.ca/en/cf-aerospace-warfare-centre/aerospace-doctrine.page> and the Defence Wide Area Network at http://trenton.mil.ca/lodger/CFAWC/CDD/Doctrine_e.asp (both sites accessed August 1, 2014).

2. The author suspected you would not mind this analogy, given the gold-medal performances of both our women's and men's hockey teams in the 2014 Winter Olympics.

3. Although the result of the cumulative effort of many skilled staff officers, the AFEC CONOPS owes its ultimate success to the vision and persistence of Major Scott Ash, then of 1 Cdn Air Div HQ A7.

4. Detailed information on the high-readiness air task force can be found in 3000-MRP (A7-3), 8 May 2013, Royal Canadian Air Force Managed Readiness Plan 2012–2017 – Revision 1, issued under the authority of the Commander, 1 Canadian Air Division.

5. For further information on the development of RCAF C2 doctrine, see article #1 in this series. Command and Control and the Royal Canadian Air Force, Major Pux Barnes, "Command or Control? Considerations for the Employment of Air Power in Joint Operations," Canadian Forces Aerospace Warfare Centre, both sites accessed August 1, 2014, <http://www.rcaf-arc.forces.gc.ca/en/cf-aerospace-warfare-centre/command-and-control.page> (Internet) and http://trenton.mil.ca/lodger/cfawc/CDD/C2_e.asp (Defence Wide Area Network).

6. Canadian Forces Air Doctrine Note 14/01, “Royal Canadian Air Force Air Task Force Commander Definitions, Roles and Responsibilities,” Canadian Forces Aerospace Warfare Centre, accessed August 1, 2014, http://trenton.mil.ca/lodger/CFAWC/CDD/Doctrine_e.asp.

7. As the term has not yet been defined, CFAWC is using this as a working draft.

8. Like the ATF, there is no existing definition of ATF Comd. CFAWC is using this as a working draft.

9. See ADN 14/01 for further details of these roles and responsibilities.

10. For more on the various roles played by key personnel in the delivery of air power, see article #3 in this series. Command and Control and the Royal Canadian Air Force, Major Pux Barnes, “The RCAF Theatre Air Control System: Considerations for the Employment of Air Power in Joint Operations,” Canadian Forces Aerospace Warfare Centre, both sites accessed August 1, 2014, <http://www.rcaf-arc.forces.gc.ca/en/cf-aerospace-warfare-centre/command-and-control.page> (Internet) and http://trenton.mil.ca/lodger/cfawc/CDD/C2_e.asp (Defence Wide Area Network).