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A Case for Canada's Airborne Capability

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About the Authors

> This paper represents the collective views of CAFA members, both serving in or retired from the CAF. Written by Col (Retd) James Holsworth — who served 36 years in the CAF, Late The Royal Canadian Corps of Signals, The Canadian Airborne Regiment, and Colonel of the Regiment for Signals and currently serves as Vice President of CAFA — with invaluable contributions by LCol Aaron Corey, Col (Retd) Bruce Ewing, LCol (Retd) Greg Jensen, LCol Ben Rogerson, and translation by LCol (Retd) Garry Yusichuk. It makes a sincere case to rebuild Canada's airborne capability in hope that consideration will be given by commanders and force developers steering force modernization. CAFA stands by to assist, with its collective interest and experience, in renewing airborne, parachute, and aerial delivery capabilities. Ex Coelis!

On the Cover

> A member of the Royal 22e Régiment prepares for a water landing after jumping out of a Royal Canadian Air Force CC-130 Hercules aircraft near Canadian Forces Base Esquimalt, British Columbia during Exercise TRIDENT FURY 13 (JOINTEX) on May 16, 2013.
>
> Photo: Sgt Norm McLean, Canadian Forces Combat Camera
> https://www.flickr.com/photos/cafcombatcameradecombatfac/8878887821/

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Introduction

With the dangerous shift in global security and growing threats to its sovereignty, Canada is now accelerating the rebuild of its armed forces. However, three decades of post-Cold War atrophy in defence, lack of troops, and training, have seriously eroded key combat functions and operational capabilities – including airborne, air assault, and aerial delivery.[1]

Until 1995, Canada maintained an all-arms, high-readiness airborne force, a robust fleet of fixed- and rotary-wing aircraft, mounting bases, plus rigging and aircrew expertise for aerial delivery of troops and materiel. Since then, parachuting skills have been kept alive by three infantry companies, a reserve unit, a training center, a demonstration team, special forces, and search and rescue.

Airborne elements remain integral to the NATO Response Force and the UK-led Joint Expeditionary Force for deterrence and interdiction in Europe and the Arctic, respectively. Therefore, parachute modernization would promote CAF cohesion, rebuild credibility with allies, and leverage emerging technologies. A parachute-enabled regiment and tasked aircraft could anchor this expertise by enabling reconnaissance teams to deploy quickly and access remote combat zones or disaster relief sites.

C-130 Platform Drop Edmonton, circa 1970

Canada's defence renewal has now created an opportunity to reassess how parachute and aerial delivery expertise can improve strategic response and give tactical advantage to CAF missions. This paper makes a case to rebuild our airborne, parachute, and aerial delivery expertise, as niche and joint capabilities. It will examine Canada's airborne legacy, skill fade over 30 years and how to leverage new tactics and techniques to reinforce coalition missions and Arctic sovereignty.

Legacy

Canada's airborne legacy started with 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion, the first Canadians into Normandy on D-Day, and the 1st Special Service Force, *The Devil's Brigade*. At the start of the Cold War, infantry 'maroon beret' battalions were assigned to the Mobile Strike Force. By 1958, infantry, engineer, signal, and logistic units maintained aerial delivery skills for Defence of Canada Operations (DCO).

C-119 Flying Boxcar, Jump Depot, Rivers, Manitoba, circa 1960

A decade later, this expertise was assembled in an all-arms formation, the Airborne Regiment, for DCO and global high-readiness roles. It specialized in jungle, winter, mountain, and desert warfare, and parachute delivery. Despite calls to reinforce the Regiment, in 1977, it was reduced and moved to Petawawa with the Special Service Force.[2] Events in Somalia and the Cold War 'peace dividend' prompted the political decision, in 1995, to cut this national strategic reserve.

Until then, the Air Force maintained several fixed- and rotary wing squadrons, operationally tasked for troop and materiel drops.[3] Ongoing airlift exercises

sustained aircrew proficiency, trialed load configurations, and worked with allied air forces. CFB Edmonton, *Gateway to the North*, was ideal to mount and dispatch forces, proven on many Arctic exercises and UN aid missions worldwide. However, in 1998, air movement, parachute rigging, and training units moved to Trenton.[4]

Canada's parachute capability was reduced to three infantry companies, a reserve unit, a training center, a demonstration team, special forces, and search and rescue.[5] These dispersed sub-units do not exercise as an all-arms combat force, as no artillery, engineer, signal, intelligence, logistic, or medical parachute elements exist. Jump courses qualify a minimal number of basic parachutists, aircrew, jumpmasters, pathfinders, and riggers.[6]

Skill Fade

Lost in the 1990s was the knowledge of airborne operations, especially marshalling, rigging, and loading procedures. Airborne and air assault doctrine, credibility with allies, and currency in parachuting all faded. The art of aerial delivery, especially for heavy vehicles and weapons, has been kept alive by a dedicated core of riggers and aircrew.

The expertise required to rig materiel for parachute delivery, be it for combat, resupply, or disaster relief, has been difficult to maintain without an operational focus. Canada did not join relief efforts in Haiti or Sudan but recently participated in a food drop into Gaza.[7] The Disaster Assistance Response Team (DART) based in Trenton and specializing in humanitarian aid, does not have parachute delivery capability, per se.[8]

Most critical, however, is the skill fade of paratroopers, after years of nominal training, few available aircraft, and no new kit. Parachuting demands the repetitive honing of skills to build jumper confidence and reduce injuries. Pathfinder and early-entry team skills, dependent upon parachute insertion, also fade without ongoing evaluation. The 'wedge' ramp drop of toboggans, simultaneously with double-door troop exits, was lost with conversion to the CC-130J Hercules.

Structured parachute training, including airborne indoctrination, would improve career progression, build core competencies, and protect investment into highly skilled troops.[9] This would help recruitment and retention, by attracting those who want to be fit, operationally challenged, and who embrace the airborne spirit as part of an elite cadre. Like our allies, the talent pool of qualified and indoctrinated jumpers could then be managed as trade specialties, benefiting all CAF parachute units.[10]

Tactics, Techniques & Procedure

A 'parachute corps' would promote cohesion across the CAF, the sharing of best practices and collaboration with allies and industry to develop new tactics, techniques and procedures (TTPs). For example, precision parachuting has evolved from 'free fall' (high altitude, low opening) to 'static line square' (high altitude, high opening) as an effective way of inserting tactical teams and equipment.[11]

Although traditional 'round static line' parachuting requires longer, more vulnerable drop zones (DZ), it equally provides a solid training baseline which can be scaled up for larger 'mass' drops. On the other hand, 'static line square' requires smaller DZ, yet greater training, as troops and kit are inserted then 'flown' several kilometers onto an objective. This method is best for remote access and early tactical entry by small reconnaissance and special forces teams.[12]

Defence Renewal

Now, with defence renewal, the time is right to reassess how airborne expertise can reinforce emerging CAF missions. The Air Force and Navy are recapitalizing and recrewing their respective fleets, a new command will generate joint forces, and the Army is modernizing.[13] *Inflection Point 2025* is a profound investment into light, medium, heavy forces to meet threats across the spectrum of conflict, at home and abroad.[14] Adaptive airborne techniques will become a key enabler for "rapid response, long-range precision sense and strike, deep reconnaissance, multi-domain targeting, robust C5ISRT networks."[15]

For the land component, of a joint airborne force, the obvious anchor for renewed parachute expertise is the Light Infantry Regiment (LIR) to enhance the role of the high-readiness Global Response Task Force (GRTF).[16] Airborne-enabled pathfinder and early tactical entry teams would give this regiment the flexibility to secure lodgements for follow-on forces and access remote sites to build austere runways across the North.[17]

Coalitions

Canada's lead in Latvia has revived our doctrine on how to fight a peer adversary within a coalition, and how to mount and sustain an expeditionary force, but it has also exposed our lack of strategic mobility and rapid response. The flyover battalion reinforcing the Latvia mission has no parachute capability, Canada's division declared to NATO has no airborne elements, and Canadians have rarely participated in NATO airborne exercises.

By comparison, our allies and adversaries continue to invest in airborne forces. 16 Air Assault Brigade is the UK's rapid reaction force, and 173rd Airborne Brigade is the US lead force in Europe. Poland, France, Germany, and other nations are investing heavily in combat aerial delivery.[18]

Airborne forces are integral to the NATO Response Force and SACEUR's plans for interdiction and deterrence. "The employment or mere threat of employment of airborne units to spearhead an operation has great strategic value and demonstrates significant political resolve."[19] Operations today involve dispersion, mobility, drones and long-range strike, ideal for parachute insertion of reconnaissance and strike teams.

An airborne capability would strengthen credibility with our allies and be a visible contribution to NATO and UN operations.[20] The declaration of an airborne battalion to the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF) would complete the coverage (in blue) for defence of NATO's northern flank, Greenland and Canada's Arctic.[21]

The Arctic

For decades, Canada had a parachute capability to access remote sites in the North for disaster assistance, airfield construction, resupply, and communications. The techniques for heavy drop of over-snow vehicles, engineer equipment and weapons were frequently practised, along with how to operate at -40. Airborne engineers often built austere landing strips for follow-on forces. Expertise for air disasters now resides with SAR, supported by CAAWC, with any security response limited to an infantry company air-landed on existing airfields.

The established view is that the vastness of the North requires minimal surveillance (Canadian Rangers) and presence (Operation NANOOK).[22] However, with growing interest in, and passage through, the Arctic, Canada's sovereignty claim is being challenged, by friend and foe.[23] Although incursions can indeed be detected by advanced technologies and deterred by area denial weapons, 'mukluks on the ground' will still be required to protect command nodes, refueling sites, and mobile assets such as air defence and long-range rockets.[24]

Remote access will be key in responding to major air disasters and enabling austere airfield construction.[25] The return to a parachute-enabled quick reaction force (QRF) is needed to support such scenarios.[26] As our investment in submarines, icebreakers, drones, over-the-horizon radar, and forward bases is being evaluated, through wargames such as Ex Arctic Resolve, airborne capabilities must equally be included.[27]

So What?

How can airborne, parachute and aerial delivery capabilities enable Canada's defence?

- ***Niche* Capability.** First, airborne operations should be reframed as a *niche* force multiplier to give freedom of manoeuvre for sovereignty and expeditionary missions. Conventional parachuting should be retained as a training baseline, with precision parachuting (freefall and static line square) developed for early entry and remote access.

- **Professional Development.** Structured parachute training and indoctrination would strengthen core competencies and rebuild knowledge of CAF airborne and air assault doctrine. A 'parachute corps' would manage the collective talent of aircrew, jumpers, riggers, jumpmasters, pathfinders, special operators, and SAR technicians. The payoff would be the attraction, motivation, and retention of an elite cadre.

- **Joint Force Development.** The CAF is too small to have independent specialties. Joint development of parachute and aerial delivery would build capacity and align TTPs across Navy, Army, Air Force, Special Forces, and SAR missions. The RCAF could align and operationally task its aircraft fleet over time, and forward operating bases could be enhanced with airstrips, helicopter pads, and pre-positioned logistics.[28]

- **Light Infantry Regiment.** The land component of a joint airborne capability should be anchored in the LIR, to include all combat, command, and support arms, potentially modelled after the UK's 16 Air Assault Brigade.[29] Parachute expertise would give the GRTF the flexibility of early entry and remote access, nested within an all-arms combat formation.

- **Interoperability.** Renewed parachute focus would also give the LIR a viable role as a niche contribution to coalitions. Canada's reputation as 'stormtroopers' fits with allied doctrine of j*oint forcible entry operations* (airborne, air assault, and amphibious) and with mission areas of 16 (UK) Air Assault Brigade for NATO, the JEF for Greenland, and 11th (US) Airborne Division for the Arctic.

- **Rapid Response.** Canada needs strategic mobility and rapid response to security and humanitarian crises. A QRF would reinforce Arctic sovereignty and the JEF mission for NATO's northern flank. The GRTF would be a visible contribution to the NATO Response Force, and the DART could reach remote regions with parachute delivery.

Way Ahead

Canada's defence investment is impressive but will take time. There is an urgent need to fill the ranks, motivate and train troops, and rebuild operational readiness through targeted modernization. A stepwise approach would retain proven expertise and evaluate new TTPs for 'quick wins' to meet immediate requirements and inform decisions on new investments.

Paratroopers from 3rd Battalion

In summary, the CAF should retain round chute parachuting as a baseline, and evaluate new square chute techniques for team insertion; use the LIR to trial modest loads (runway kits, 'wedge' toboggans) to renew rigging procedures and enable the GRTF mission; view aerial delivery of DART, Arctic QRF, airfield engineer, mobile strike and air defence elements as joint capabilities; offer coalition partners a niche early entry capability for the NATO Response Force and JEF missions; and, manage airborne talent, jointly, as a cadre of special CAF trades and skills.

As a middle power with global influence and interests, Canada is now facing increased expectations to step up its contributions to international security. The time is right to look ahead at how parachute and aerial delivery capabilities can enable operational scenarios for Arctic sovereignty, alongside NATO and UN partners, and humanitarian aid.

Conclusion

There is now an opportunity to enhance CAF readiness, modernization, and reconstitution through renewal of airborne capabilities. The status quo of limited training and no operational focus will keep parachuting and aerial delivery on 'life support.' By systematic evaluation of new TTPs and structured training, traditional parachuting can evolve into a highly relevant contribution to operational readiness, deterrence, and global response.

Finally, **no Air Force**, **no Airborne**! A robust fleet of fixed- and rotary-wing aircraft, aircrew proficiency, plus mounting and forward operating bases, are essential to enable strategic response and tactical agility.

References

[1] Airborne forces are airlanded or airdropped into combat zones. Air assault is the movement of forces by aircraft, such as helicopters, or parachute, to seize key terrain. Aerial delivery is the transport of equipment by airdrop, airlanding or slung loads, into remote or hostile sites.
[2] David Charters argued for an airborne brigade to meet DCO, NATO, UN commitments. '*Armed Forces for Political Purpose: Airborne Forces in the Canadian Army in the 1980s',* Centre for Strategic Studies, Jan 1984, pages 103–120.
[3] CFB Edmonton held two C-130 Hercules, CH-135 Helicopter, CC-115 Buffalo and CC-138 Twin Otter squadrons.
[4] CFB Calgary closed, 1 CMBG moved to CFB Edmonton, unit hangers were built on the flightline and Canada's longest runway deactivated.
[5] 3 RCR, 3 PPCLI, 3 R22eR, QOR queensownrifles each have a parachute company. Parachuting expertise is maintained by Canadian Army Advanced Warfare Centre (CAAWC), the Sky Hawks, Canadian Special Operations Regiment (CSOR) and CAF Search & Rescue (SAR).
[6] Pathfinders set up drop or landing zones for air assault missions. Riggers are a specialized CAF trade, qualified to pack and maintain parachutes.
[7] 4 August 2025 Canadian Forces airdrop humanitarian aid into Gaza for the first time | CBC News
[8] Disaster Assistance Response Team deploys engineer, medical and logistics support, globally, for disaster relief and humanitarian aid.
[9] Airborne indoctrination, eliminated in 1994, set a standard of physical and mental endurance, qualifying soldiers to wear the maroon beret.
[10] Australia Defence Force stream talent from a recruiting pool to the parachute regiments and special forces. UK 3rd Battalion, The Para Regiment, works closely with the Special Air Service & Special Reconnaissance Regiment as a 'special forces support group'.
[11] '*Precision Parachute…Potential Employment in the Land Force'*, Bruce Ewing, Canadian Army Journal 8.3, Fall 2005, page 83. CAJ 8.3.qxd
[12] Square & round parachutes are used to insert CAAWC jumpers tasked to provide cordon support to SAR for major air disasters.
[13] RCAF fleet is: 17 CC-130J Hercules (92 paratroopers), 16 CC-130H (SAR, refuelling), 5 CC-177s Globemaster (102 paratroopers Facebook), plus CH-147F Chinook, CH-146 Griffin, CH-149 Cormorant helicopters. Using 2/3 availability, 1000 troops can be dropped, or less with equipment.
[14] Canadian Army Modernization - Canada.ca Inflection Point 2025 - Canada.ca
[15] C5ISRT – C2, computers, communications, cyber, intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance and targeting.
[16] *Global Response Task Force (GRTF)* is a high-readiness light infantry battalion trained for strategic response and first-entry missions.
[17] *Regimental Aerial Access & Delivery Team,* is a proposed concept to combine recce, pathfinder, drone, surveillance and engineer survey.
[18] Britain's Paratroopers' training for NATO rapid deployment missions and NATO Airborne Forces
[19] '*Future of Airborne Forces'* NATO Defence College, though dated Jan 2013, capabilities remain relevant, especially for aircraft and aircrew. https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/166780/Report_FutureAirborneForcesNATO_Lasconjarias.pdf
[20] LCol David Stead argues an airborne battle group for deterrence, rapid response to Arctic, UN, NATO missions, and support to SOF. JCSP 45, 14 Oct 2018, '*Bellerophon Revitalised: New Airborne Force Employment Concept… '* https://www.cfc.forces.gc.ca/259/290/308/192/stead.pdf
[21] JEF, UK-led high-readiness force of Nordic & Baltic nations for deterrence in N. Atlantic, Baltics, & High North. JEF Coalition for Common Security
[22] The northern flank: the Arctic: implications for SOF / Bernd Horn, Howard G. Coombs and Tony Balasevicius, editors.
[23] How Russia is preparing for conflict in Nato's new Arctic battleground
[24] 3 RCR parachuted with 11th (US) Airborne Div to deploy a High Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS). Training Extreme: Arctic Warriors
[25] Airfield Survey & Reconnaissance (ASAR) RCAF engineer capability to assess austere landing sites, certify air operations on unprepared surfaces.
[26] Richard Nghiem argues to reform the Airborne Regiment as a quick reaction force (QRF). Canadian Defence Review, 31 Mar 25. Arctic QRF
[27] Ex Arctic Resolve reinforces the need for CAF investment into sea, air, land forces, including parachute aerial delivery into remote sites.
[28] Potentially, reactivate Edmonton, Goose Bay as mounting bases; develop Yellowknife, Churchill, Inuvik & Iqaluit as forward operating bases.
[29] 16 Air Assault Brigade is the UK's rapid reaction spearhead force Bing Video 16 AA Bde