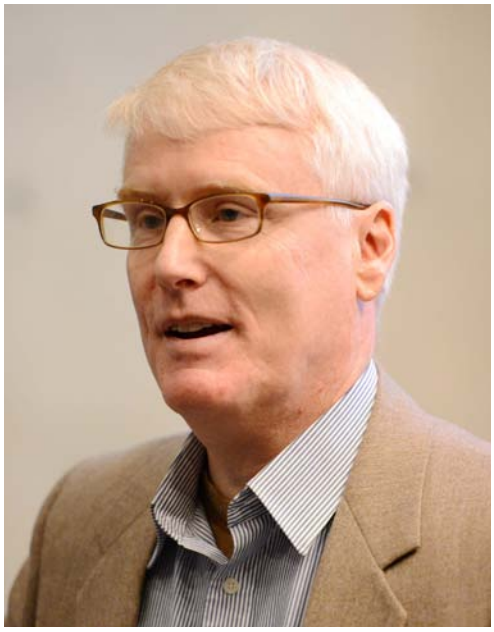
February Meeting

Topic: Original Canadian Air Division: Canada's Astonishing Contribution to Cold War NATO in Europe
Speaker: Lieutenant Colonel Paul D. Johnston
Reporter: Gord McNulty



Lieutenant Colonel Paul D. Johnston
Photo Credit - Neil McGavock

CAHS Toronto Chapter President Dr. George Topple introduced Lieutenant Colonel Paul D. Johnston. As a Royal Canadian Air Force intelligence officer, he is currently employed on the faculty of the Canadian Forces College in Toronto. LCol Johnston grew up near Peterborough. Upon finishing high school there, he enrolled in the ROTC programme and was promptly dispatched to the other side of Canada, to attend Royal Roads Military College for an honours BA in military and strategic studies. LCol Johnston's career has ranged from tactical positions in the fighter community (starting at Baden-Soellingen in Germany during the "good old days of the Cold War"), to operational level headquarters (including the Joint Force Headquarters in Kingston), to the strategic level at the Chief of Defence Intelligence in Ottawa, where for his "sins" he has been posted twice. His most recent deployment was as Chief Assessments Officer of the Joint Intelligence Centre at ISAF Headquarters in Kabul. LCol Johnston is also a doctoral student at Queen's University in the history programme. He is currently writing his dissertation on the evolution of tactical air power within NATO, and has published academic articles and chapter contributions to books widely, mostly on air power history themes. He lives just down from the street from the Canadian Forces College, with his wife Sheila, four children and the family dog Wolseley, and is thus mercifully spared commuting in Toronto traffic. LCol Johnston, whose experience in the air force dates to 1984, can be reached at Johnston@cfc.dnd.ca or (416) 482-6800 extension 6923 or fax (416) 482-6802.

Paul began with a historical overview of the early 1950s, Cold-War era of massive retaliation. The Western Alliance, led by the Eisenhower administration, made a strategic decision to rely on nuclear weapons in Europe in order to deter the Soviet Union. Conventional military forces in Europe would in theory serve only as a small, "trip-wire" force to initiate the Western nuclear response. The Kennedy administration introduced a more flexible response policy, replacing the all-or-nothing nuclear sledgehammer with more reliance on conventional defences for NATO. That didn't sit well with French President Charles de Gaulle, who withdrew France from NATO's integrated military structure in 1967 and basically kicked Canada's air bases from France.

Starfighter 703 being reined in by its tail chute at Marville, France.
Photo credit – DND

Whatever the historical overview, Paul noted that on the ground, NATO's conventional forces actually increased substantially during the so-called 'massive retaliation' years. In fact, NATO's enhanced non-nuclear build-up saw the RCAF flourish in what is recalled as the 'Golden Age' of the RCAF in Europe, with a highly capable Air Division. Yet, when flexible response came in, these conventional forces were reduced. "The actual history on the ground doesn't match the strategic and political narrative in most history books," Paul said. Originally a political alliance, NATO evolved as a military force during a crisis atmosphere shortly after the Korean War erupted in 1950.

The Western allies, including Canada, feared that war in Europe was imminent, and that the Soviets were about to sweep to the English Channel. Then retired General Dwight Eisenhower was named the first Supreme Commander of NATO in December, 1950. He set up a military organization – with components such as Allied Air Forces Central Europe (AAFCE) quickly established in April, 1951. It initially began with surplus elements of air forces that were left in Europe to occupy Germany after the Second World War. The British, for example, had five airfields and about 350 combat aircraft. The French had about 150 mostly wartime aircraft that they had acquired from the British. The Americans initially had six fighter-bomber squadrons and six transport squadrons, and about 150 combat aircraft. All told, AAFCE could muster as many as 750 aircraft but many were obsolescent. It was also problematic that these aircraft were based simply at where they had finished the war. In many cases the bases were forward of the defensive positions that NATO would require in the event of a Soviet invasion.

Quickly, however, plans for a robust conventional military defence of Europe were drawn up. Now- declassified documents show the U.S. had secretly planned to evacuate the continent as indefensible if war broke out with a Soviet invasion. In meetings with British and Canadian officials, the Americans indicated they would fall back in Europe, rely on strategic nuclear bombing and then eventually build up what was left of the continent amid the radioactive rubble. Paul said the Americans didn't share these plans with France and other continental allies, "perhaps not surprisingly." Eisenhower's task was to build conventional forces so that the atomic strategy wouldn't become a reality. In early 1952, NATO held the Lisbon Conference, where the NATO Secretary-General position was created. Deciding to rely on conventional airpower to counter the Soviets' overwhelming strength in land forces, NATO adopted an extremely ambitious goal of 9,000 aircraft by the mid-1950s. This was consistent with policies earlier set by the Canadian cabinet in August, 1950. Prime Minister Louis St. Laurent, Defence Minister Brooke Claxton, and External Affairs Minister Lester Pearson were key players who responded to early pressure for a major Canadian commitment to NATO. Winston Churchill, in fact, suggested Canada should provide three army divisions and an equivalent air force contribution. The cabinet gave the RCAF priority in a massive defence buildup for Europe involving 11 squadrons. There would also be one army division, involving one brigade in Korea, one brigade in Europe and one brigade in Canada – a regular force element ready to reinforce whatever was necessary.

In April 1951, at Washington, DC, NATO's main air force chiefs of staff, including Canada's Wilf Curtis, called for Canada to provide 24 squadrons in Europe. The plan entailed one air division of 12 squadrons of fighters, another division of light bombers, and a transport squadron in support. Not surprisingly, Canada balked at such a massive commitment. The final plan involved 12 squadrons of fighters, starting with the Canadair Sabre. Initially, 16 jets were to be provided per squadron, building up to 25 per squadron by 1954, for a total of 300 aircraft. Similar forces were built by Canada's NATO's allies, ranging from the U.S. and the U.K. to the relatively minor players like Belgium and the Netherlands. The AAFCE set up a command system with Allied tactical air forces established in the north and the south, where Canada's No. 1 Air Division was established. The first elements of the RCAF arrived in Europe in November, 1951, only weeks after the cabinet made the final decision to proceed. In fact, RCAF 410 Squadron had already been committed to strengthening the air defence of Britain, from the RAF airfield at North Luffenham, just north of London. The air force simply rolled this into the commitment on the continent. The first two squadrons of Sabres – 410 and 441 – were shipped across the Atlantic, packed on the deck of the carrier HMCS *Magnificent*. Most of the personnel went as passengers on the "Maggie" as well. An entire fighter wing of Sabres was established at North Luffenham. The last squadron to make the full wing, 439, was flown over in what was called "Operation Leapfrog" involving the wartime route from Goose Bay to Bluie West I in Greenland, Keflavik, and Kinloss or Prestwick.

The first arrival on the continent of Europe took place in October, 1952, when the Air Division headquarters was established temporarily in Paris. Then Operation Leapfrog 2 flew over another wing of Sabres, 2 Wing, with 416 and 421 Squadrons, to Grostenquin, France. (Paul later served in 421 Sqdn. as Squadron Intelligence Officer, from 1990 to 1992, at CFB Baden-Soellingen, West Germany). NATO had started to build standardized air bases, entailing one long main runway with a parallel taxiway. They were designed to provide easier dispersal of aircraft and be less vulnerable to attack. Wartime airfields had been somewhat triangular, designed to always provide a runway into the wind whatever the direction. NATO funding for the runway construction program came primarily from the U.S, Britain and Canada. The country that ran each base was responsible for providing whatever amenities it chose to offer.

By the end of 1952, NATO had bolstered its original 750 aircraft to about 3,000 aircraft. In the spring of 1953, No. 1 Canadian Air Division headquarters moved to its final headquarters in Metz, France. 3 Wing flew to Zweibrucken, West Germany, in what was known as Leapfrog 3. The headquarters was established in a historic chateau. It was comfortable accommodation that exemplified what Paul described as "the good old days" that are now history. A fourth wing was set up later in 1953, after Leapfrog 4, to Baden-Sollingen. In total, Canada had contributed an Air Division of four wings, of two squadrons each, with 300 Sabres operational in Europe. This was, Paul contended, "the glory days of the RCAF." One wing moved to Marville, France.

By the end of 1954, NATO's initial buildup was essentially complete. The combat jets were mostly capable types like the Sabre and the Republic F-84F Thunderstreak. Although the 9,000-aircraft target of the Lisbon Conference wasn't achieved, NATO's conventional air power was formidable. It far exceeded what was necessary for a trip-wire force. In the mid-1950s, West Germany began to rearm. It joined NATO in 1955. While the idea was controversial, especially with France, the U.S. argued that German rearmament was the only way that NATO could achieve its goals. Eventually, 12 German squadrons were established. However, this was matched by a reduction of 12 Anglo-American squadrons, so the total number of aircraft remained at around 3,000.

In 1957, one squadron of each wing in No. 1 Air Division converted to the Avro Canada CF-100, to provide all-weather capability, while the Sabres flew daylight operations. The 1960s saw a generational change as the CF-104 Starfighter, the "missile with a man in it" built by Canadair under licence from Lockheed, replaced the classic Sabre starting in 1962. Germany and other NATO partners also adopted the Starfighter. The number of aircraft, and the organizational structure, was basically retained. The Starfighter would roam the skies of Western Europe until 1986. For Canada, the most significant change involved a shift from conventional air-to-air defence with the Sabre to a nuclear strike reconnaissance capability with the CF-104. Ironically, the shift occurred when NATO was supposedly committed to a more flexible response policy. In explaining the change, Paul cited debate among NATO partners over the sharing of costs. He also suggested that NATO's air element had become so powerful that it became entrenched as a large, bureaucratic structure right until the Cold War ended with the collapse of the Soviet Union.

CF-104G Showing Underwing Bomb Racks – Nuclear Weapons were carried on a Centreline Pod • *Photo Credit - DND*

While the creation of No. 1 Air Division, RCAF, was a significant accomplishment, Paul maintained it's largely been forgotten by the public. The 12 squadrons were basically recruited and created from scratch, as the RCAF had downsized to a very small level after the war. It took only two years to establish a post-war generation of capable combat aircraft, set up the organization and build the bases. Adding to the challenge, all of this was done on another continent under what amounted to almost wartime pressure. Compare that to Canada's seemingly endless and costly problems today in trying to replace the Sea Kings, find a successor to the CF-18 Hornet, and procure a new fixed-wing search and rescue aircraft!

In explaining the ongoing military equipment issues, Paul observed that "as in life, everything comes down to money at the end of the day." He noted Canadian defence spending rose from near zero with post-war demobilization and spiked rapidly with the Korean War. It peaked with the NATO commitment. Defence spending, as a percentage of Gross Domestic Product, reached eight or nine per cent during the 1950s. As a percentage of the federal budget, the armed forces peaked at more than 20 per cent. Defence spending then slowly declined until the Cold War escalated and the Western allies bolstered military spending in the Reagan/ Thatcher years, though not as dramatically in percentage terms as in the 1950s. More recently, Paul said, Canadian defence spending has continued to decline, despite the Harper government's claim to have made unprecedented investments in the military. Defence is now down to less than two per cent of GDP.

In closing, Paul noted he is looking for relevant materials to support his dissertation research. If Chapter members have anything, he will be more than appreciative to receive such material. Answering a number of questions, Paul compared Canada's substantial post-war European commitment to a kind of "British Commonwealth Air Training Plan Mark 2 for NATO." Canadian personnel, in fact, did extensive training of the continental air forces that were rebuilding after the war. The tradition continues at 15 Wing, CFB Moose Jaw, home of the NATO Flying Training in Canada program. George thanked our speaker for an informative and comprehensive talk. Program Support Volunteer Bob Winson presented Paul with a copy of *Night Madness: A Rear Gunner's Story of Love, Courage, and Hope in World War II*, on behalf of the Chapter executive and members.

Starfighter Appendix

The Lockheed (Canadair Licensed) Starfighter CF -104G at a maximum speed of 1450 – 1500 mph was the fastest aircraft ever flown by the CF/ RCAF. The GE J79 Engine was built by Orenda Engines Ltd. at Malton under license as J79-OEL-7. Please enjoy these photos… *CAHS Toronto Chapter*.

CF-104D Starfighter on the grounds of the Canadian Forces College • *Photo - Wikipedia Commons*

CF-104D Over The Toronto Waterfront
Photo Credit - DND

CF-104D On display at the entrance to the Canadian Warplane Heritage Museum, Hamilton • *Photo Credit - CWHM*

CF-104G On display at the National Air Force Museum, Trenton
Photo Credit -BZUK Wikipedia Commons

First 5 Production CF-104Gs
Photo Credit - CF collection