

The Public Face of the Royal Canadian Air Force: The Importance of Air Shows and Demonstration Teams to the R.C.A.F.

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This article examines the history of Royal Canadian Air Force (R.C.A.F.) air show participation and demonstrations teams, and argues these teams have provided many important services and benefits to the R.C.A.F. The article draws on information from oral history interviews of three retired R.C.A.F. officers conducted by the author. The interviewees refute common criticisms of demonstration teams, such as being prohibitively expensive or as being glorifications of war. They provide examples that detail how these teams are an important tool used to display the skill and professionalism of the force, and are also a significant part of public relations and recruiting. Based on these testimonies, and supporting secondary sources, the article concludes that demonstration teams, such as the Snowbirds, are an integral part of today's R.C.A.F.

For almost as long as Canada has had an air force, it has had demonstration flyers displaying the skill and daring required to be a pilot.¹ From the first formation flight in 1919 on, demonstration teams have played an important role in keeping the Royal Canadian Air Force (R.C.A.F.) engaged and interacting with the Canadian public.² Examining the history of R.C.A.F. air show participation and demonstration flying reveals that Canadian demonstration teams regularly faced adversity and criticisms, such as being too expensive or having ulterior motives other than public interaction, despite the fact that they have provided many important services and benefits to the R.C.A.F.

¹ Dan Dempsey, *A Tradition of Excellence: Canada's Air Show Team Heritage*, (Victoria, B.C. High Flight Enterprises, 2002), 12.

² Ibid., 19.

R.C.A.F. participation at air shows is not only an important way to demonstrate the skill and professionalism of the force, but also a significant part of public relations and a vital recruiting tool. For these reasons, today's 431 Squadron Snowbirds are an integral part of the Canadian Forces.

Rather than relying on secondary sources, this paper's argument will primarily be supported by the information drawn from three oral history interviews conducted by the author of this paper. Reliable sources on the topic of Canadian air shows and demonstration flying is limited, and, as military historian Edward M. Coffman points out, if one seeks information "you must seek it among the impressions which can be obtained only from those who have lived a life amid particular surroundings."³ The three interviewees are Major General Scott Eichel (Retired), former base commander and Chief Air Doctrine officer;⁴ Lieutenant Colonel Daniel Dempsey (Retired), former Snowbird lead and author of *A Tradition of Excellence*;⁵ and Captain Gary Brown (Retired), a former pilot instructor and civilian air controller at the Dubai International Air Show.⁶ The strength of these interviews lies in the vast combined experience of all three R.C.A.F. men, as well as in air show functions and organization. However, all three being former R.C.A.F. officers suggests a possible bias to their opinions on the subjects raised in the paper. For this reason, the paper will use their accounts to answer criticism that have

³ Edward M. Coffman, "Talking About War: Reflections on Doing Oral history and Military History," (*Journal of American History*, Vol.87, No.2, Sept. 2000), 591.

⁴ Maj. Gen. Scott Eichel, interview by Luke F. Kowalski, 14 March 2013, (Recording, University of Victoria Oral History Collection, Victoria).

⁵ Lt. Col. Dan Dempsey, interview by Luke F. Kowalski, 18 March, 2013, (Recording, University of Victoria Oral History Collection, Victoria).

⁶ Capt. Gary Brown, interview by Luke F. Kowalski, 18 March 2013, (Recording, University of Victoria Oral History Collection, Victoria).

been levelled at R.C.A.F. demonstration teams and air show participation, and will use their anecdotal experience to back up claims made by other sources such as official histories and government documents.

While the entity that is currently the R.C.A.F. has changed designations multiple times since its inception as the Canadian Air Force in the 1920s, this paper will solely use the term Royal Canadian Air Force (R.C.A.F.).⁷ This is to avoid confusion and to incorporate all of the interviewer's information seamlessly. It is also important to note that the historical section of this paper will rely largely on Lt. Col. Dan Dempsey's book *A Tradition of Excellence*. There is a lack of scholarly literature concerning the topic of R.C.A.F. demonstration flying, and Dempsey's book is often cited as the seminal source on the subject. For example, the author of one of the most detailed histories of Canada's Air Forces, Larry Milberry, states that, "*A Tradition of Excellence* eclipsed all books covering the topic."⁸ Both the official and popular histories of the R.C.A.F. also contain sparse accounts of the importance of air shows and demonstration teams. The literature that does exist on the topic is either from celebratory popular sources, self-produced by the R.C.A.F., or by anti-war and peace movement writers and thus is largely unreliable for scholarly use. For these reasons, *A Tradition of Excellence* stands alone as a well-researched and accountable source.

To explain the importance of demonstration flying teams to the R.C.A.F., it is necessary to understand the historical significance that demonstration flying has had since the Force's

⁷ Richard Oliver Mayne, "Royal Matters: Symbolism, History, and the Significance of the R.C.A.F.'s Name Change, 1909-2011," *The Royal Canadian Air force Journal* (Vol. 1, No. 4, Fall 2012), 22.

⁸ Larry Milberry, *Canada's Air Force: At War and Peace*, V.3, (Toronto, Ontario: CANAV Books, 2000), 130.

inception. February 23rd, 1909 marked the first instance of powered flight in Canada.⁹ Soon after, aviation enthusiasts were inspired to create aeronautics clubs and began hosting display meets where they showed off their inventions and daring tricks to a curious Canadian public.¹⁰ Military interest in demonstration flying would not take form until after the First World War, when war heroes like Billy Bishop and William Barker –both national celebrities by this point— returned home to Canada, and were encouraged and delighted to perform aerial demonstrations in front of crowds across the country.¹¹ These “barnstormers” put on aerobatic displays for civilians who wanted to see what the pilots had done in the war, demonstrating the skill and daring required to be an R.C.A.F. pilot.¹² The first official R.C.A.F. demonstration team, “The Siskins”, would be formed in 1929, and would tour the country during a Trans-Canada air pageant performing for hundreds of thousands of Canadians.¹³ It was at these pageant events that Air Force officers noted the “positive effect the pageant had on public opinion.”¹⁴ Officially disbanded in 1932, The Siskin’s would make occasional performances at various events, but costs and lack of equipment would keep them grounded; Canada would not have another official team until after the Second World War.¹⁵

After the Second World War, Canada had the fourth largest allied air force, a considerable reputation, and a wealth of

⁹ Dempsey, *A Tradition*, 12

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹¹ Dempsey, *A Tradition*, 22.

¹² Jonathan Vance. “The Royal Canadian Air Force and the Campaign for Air-mindedness.” *Canadian Aerospace Power Studies, V. 3: Combat If Necessary, But Not Necessarily Combat*, (Ottawa, Department of National Defence, 2011), 8.

¹³ Dempsey, *A Tradition*, 25-37.

¹⁴ Vance, “The Royal”, 14.

¹⁵ Dempsey, *A Tradition*, 40.

experienced personnel and equipment.¹⁶ Flying combat capable and contemporary aircraft, various R.C.A.F. demonstration teams would fly Supermarine Seafires, Grumman Avengers, and P-51 Mustangs at events across Canada.¹⁷ The first jet powered Canadian team, the “Blue Devils,” would fly the De Havilland Vampire in 1948, showing just how important it was for the R.C.A.F. to demonstrate its new equipment to the public.¹⁸ Captain Brown recounted the impact of this demonstration flying on his small town in Saskatchewan: “One person from our town was on a demonstration team way back, and he flew a jet over our small town when I was a kid, and I remember that. I thought ‘by gar I’d like to do that someday’.”¹⁹ Dempsey refers to the 1950s as the “Fabulous Fifties” in which a wealth of jet powered teams flew the newest aircraft and generated “great fame for Canada’s military services, at home and abroad.”²⁰ The year 1959 saw the formation of the R.C.A.F. Golden Hawks, flying the Canadair Sabre and who “represented everything that was glorious about the R.C.A.F.”²¹ Air shows of the period set out to inspire Canadians, and Dempsey himself recounted in interview how his interest in the R.C.A.F. was inspired by demonstration flying.

[My interest] was fostered at a very young age, and it happened to be fostered at the first air show I ever went to and that was the 6th of June 1959. It happened to be at R.C.A.F. station Rockcliffe in Ottawa where my dad was posted at the time, and it also happened to be the first air show for the R.C.A.F. Golden Hawks ... I was quite

¹⁶ Dempsey, *A Tradition*, 43.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 44-57.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 70-71.

¹⁹ Brown, interview.

²⁰ Dempsey, *A Tradition*, 79.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 136.

mesmerized, even as a 6 year old boy, by the Golden Hawks, by the Red Knight, and by all the other aircraft that flew.²²

Clearly, air demonstrations played an integral part in Lt. Col, Dempsey's R.C.A.F. enlistment. No doubt there were others like young Dempsey who were inspired by the air show teams of the fifties to join the R.C.A.F. as well.

The Golden Hawks would be disbanded in 1964, again due to budgetary concerns, and because the Sabre was being retired from combat duty.²³ The "Red Knight" was a series of aircraft painted in a distinct bright red paint scheme that continued the tradition of demonstration flying; however, it would also get axed due to budgetary concerns in 1970.²⁴ Other famous teams such as "The Golden Centennaires" flying the Tutor jet trainer, would face similar fates, although they were widely received and revered by the public.²⁵ Demonstration flying was not dead in Canada at this point; however, no teams would gain the fame of these past flyers until the inception of the Snowbirds.

The Snowbirds first took flight in 1971, and after seven years of continual crowd amazement they became an official permanent squadron in 1978, when they were inaugurated as the 431 Demonstration Squadron.²⁶ According to the official history on the Snowbirds website, this inauguration "was a milestone in the history of Canada's formation teams", as 431 was the first

²² Dempsey, interview.

²³ Dempsey, *A Tradition*, 187.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 222.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 297.

²⁶ "Snowbirds: Full History," Royal Canadian Air Force, Department of National Defence, Government of Canada, Date Modified: 9 December 2008, <http://www.rcaf-arc.forces.gc.ca/snowbirds/page-eng.asp?id=1568>, (accessed 29 March 2013).

acrobatic team to be granted full squadron status.²⁷ Existing to this day, the Snowbirds perform “before millions of spectators across North America, and are honoured to carry on the fine traditions established by their forerunners.”²⁸ The squadron’s official mandate is “to demonstrate the skill, professionalism and teamwork of the Canadian Forces personnel for public relations and recruiting purposes.”²⁹ The Snowbirds have cemented a place for themselves in R.C.A.F. history, and Major General Eichel feels that they have gone “from being an Air Force aerobatic team to a national icon.”³⁰ This reputation has been retained even though critics of the Snowbirds, and of demonstration flying in general, still exist.

Throughout this history, it is stated that Canadian demonstration teams have been expected to display the skill, training, and abilities of the R.C.A.F.’s pilots and machines to the public. Government sources on air shows support this. The air show section on the current R.C.A.F. website claims that air shows “allow Canadians a firsthand look at the equipment, training and specialized skills of the men and women of the air force” and that “crews demonstrate their precision flying... putting their skills and training to the test.”³¹ When asked if this was the case, Captain Brown wholeheartedly agreed: “when you watch the Snowbirds, and you see the precision they operate with, you understand just how professional those guys are, and I think that any Canadian that views a demonstration team like that is

²⁷ “Snowbirds: Full history.”

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Dempsey, *A Tradition*, 567.

³⁰ Eichel, interview.

³¹ “Air Shows”, Royal Canadian Air Force, Department of National Defence, Government of Canada, Date Modified: 21 December 2011, <http://www.rcf-arc.forces.gc.ca/v2/page-eng.asp?id=54>, (Accessed 27 March 2013).

proud.”³² Lt. Col. Dempsey also agreed that “the opportunity to demonstrate the skill, and professionalism of the Canadian Forces is also an opportunity, and I’ve seen this so many times, to inspire young people - and they don’t have to be inspired to join the military...it’s an inspiration to go and perhaps better their own lives.”³³ Participating in air show demonstrations allows the air force an opportunity to display these attributes, and although this is the official statement on why R.C.A.F. demonstration teams fly, they perform other important functions as well.

One of these important functions is direct public relations. Air shows provided a way for the R.C.A.F. to interact directly with the Canadian public. Maj. Gen. Eichel feels this is important so that “it’s not just a bunch of faceless people flying airplanes for your entertainment like a circus, those are real people.”³⁴ This is reflected in today’s demonstration team’s *modus operandi*. The organizer’s package for those wishing to book an R.C.A.F. demonstration team states that “to truly act as Ambassadors for Canada and the Canadian Forces we encourage, where possible, public appearances.”³⁵ It also explains interview procedures, autograph opportunities, VIP access to the crews, and potential fly-alongs for community members.³⁶ The R.C.A.F. stresses that direct public interaction be incorporated into any event, particularly in the case of the Snowbirds team.

³² Brown, Interview.

³³ Dempsey, interview.

³⁴ Eichel, interview.

³⁵ “Canadian Air Division Air Display Organizer Package,” Royal Canadian Air Force, Department of National Defence, Government of Canada, Section 7: Public Appearances,

www.airshows.forces.gc.ca/Documents/OrganizerPackage/AirDisplay-Organizers-package-eng-20120329.pdf, (Accessed 27 March 2013).

³⁶ Ibid.

Snowbirds pilots are not just expected to fly, but to continuously interact with the public on the ground through flying and through ground shows; they also maintain public relations through interviews, event participation, autograph signings, and visits to schools, hospitals, and other public places.³⁷ Being “first and foremost” a public relations tool, personality is of the utmost importance, and the air demonstration is “just a means to an end.”³⁸ The ability to go out and represent the R.C.A.F. professionally is central to being a Snowbird team member, and hopeful tryouts for the team have been dismissed on the basis of their personalities.³⁹ According to Lt. Col. Dempsey, flying ability is secondary to having the necessary “trust and personality” required to interact with other team members and the public.⁴⁰ When asked about the importance of face-to-face interaction with the public, Dempsey felt that “in many respects you could argue that that’s one of the most important things we do. It’s that personal one on one interaction, where people get to realize these are just average young Canadians doing a great job at what they do.”⁴¹ This public interaction is an important factor in keeping the R.C.A.F. in touch with the Canadian public, and putting a human face on the organization.

Some peace movement publications have criticized R.C.A.F. motives for attending air shows as thinly veiled glorifications of war. An example of this is the entire issue of the journal *Press for Conversion* titled “Canada’s Military Air Shows; Reaching New Heights in the Glorification of War.” Containing articles such as “Military aircraft: Symbols with

³⁷ Dempsey, *A Tradition*, 664.

³⁸ Dempsey, interview.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

Diverse Meanings” and “Concerned Citizens: opposing Military Air Shows,” the publication makes a number of arguments against Air Shows and their intended objectives.⁴² The Publication claims that by displaying military aircraft in an entertaining light, the R.C.A.F. is deceiving the public of their true destructive and violent capabilities.⁴³ When presented with these criticisms, all three interviewees rejected the validity of these arguments. Lt. Col Dempsey dismissed the opposition by saying,

We’re not there to glorify war and we don’t. We’re there to entertain people, we’re there to motivate people, we’re there to inspire young kids to do something special with their lives, so yeah I hear the peace movement side of it, I just don’t agree with them.⁴⁴

Gary brown likewise scoffs at the argument.

When you say ‘peace movement’ I’ve got nothing against peace but...To say that air shows are promoting war is to say that the Grenadier Guards in front of Buckingham palace are promoting war because you’ve got military troops with guns on their shoulders marching back and forth... A military display is of interest to the public because they are professional, and they are precise, and they have precision shows, so that’s the entertainment value. It isn’t promoting war; I don’t think anybody promotes war.⁴⁵

⁴² Richard Sanders, “Canada’s Military Air Shows: Reaching New Heights in the Glorification of War,” *Press For Conversion*, #48 (July 2002), http://coat.ncf.ca/our_magazine/links/issue48/issue48.htm (Accessed 27 March 2013).

⁴³ Sanders, “Canada’s Military Air Shows.”

⁴⁴ Demspey, interview.

⁴⁵ Brown, interview.

Maj. Gen. Eichel took a more understanding approach. “Some people think that even talking about the military is glorying war; nobody hates war like the warrior”, but he acknowledges that “I can see the other side of that coin. I just don’t accept it.”⁴⁶ Roundly dismissing this criticism, all three interviewees disparaged the validity of these accusations by pointing out that entertainment is the primary function of demonstration teams, and that making the assumption that the military ‘glorifies war’ is a preposterous claim.

Another criticism levelled against Canadian Air Shows is that they are less about demonstrating military prestige and public relations than about being a commercial venue for the military to sell equipment.⁴⁷ Captain Brown, whose experience at the Dubai International Air Show affords him credible experience, felt that this should not be a shock.

All air shows have one purpose to my mind, and it’s to sell something or other. You might be selling the military if it’s a local air show at the local base, but civilian air shows...are designed for manufacturers to show off their aviation equipment, be it airframes, engines, equipment, safety equipment, electronics, pilot training, simulator building; everybody wants to show off their products to the rest of the world to sell.⁴⁸

Clearly, Brown feels that the commercial aspects of shows are not something that should be discouraged or disparaged. Brown also pointed out that in the case of the Snowbirds, “[They] use the

⁴⁶ Eichel, interview.

⁴⁷ David Thiessen, “Air show Canada: Canada’s Pacific Arms Show,” *The Ploughshares Monitor*, June 1996, Volume 17 Issue 2, http://ploughshares.ca/pl_publications/airshow-canada-canadas-pacific-arms-show, (accessed 27 March 2013).

⁴⁸ Brown, interview.

Tutor now, and we don't manufacture the Tutor anymore, so we don't have an airplane to sell. It is just the fact that we are demonstrating the professionalism of our air force to the general public, and that's a good thing."⁴⁹ The Tutor is an outdated jet trainer that is solely flown by the Snowbirds, and has little military value. The R.C.A.F. is 'selling' their image at air shows, not their equipment. Lt. Col. Dempsey echoed this statement when asked whether military sales occur at Canadian air shows he said "None. Zero. You could make that argument for military air shows in the United States, because that's where your big military manufacturers are. But we don't have those military manufactures in Canada anymore."⁵⁰ Eichel also dismissed this idea based on the fact that the Snowbirds fly the Tutor, and that the military has nothing to sell at air shows.⁵¹ Air shows, particularly the commercial ones, are about demonstrating equipment; however R.C.A.F. attendance of the shows is not about selling equipment, but about selling the virtues of the force.

Another important function of the R.C.A.F. demonstration teams has always been recruitment. One Department of National Defence source lauds the 431 squadron Snowbirds as an "important public relations and recruiting tool."⁵² Another similar document planning R.C.A.F. operations into 2035 stresses the importance of recruiting to the R.C.A.F., as "The Air Force must aggressively recruit and develop its most precious

⁴⁹ Brown, interview.

⁵⁰ Dempsey, Interview.

⁵¹ Eichel, interview.

⁵² *The Aerospace Capability Framework: A Guide to Transform and Develop Canada's Air Force*. 1st ed. (Ottawa: Department of National Defence, 2003), 41.

capability...people".⁵³ According to Lt. Col. Dempsey, air shows and demonstration teams provide a way for the R.C.A.F. to advertise to the public and recruit on a national scale.

There is no other medium in our entire nation where you can expose the Canadian forces to a larger population than an air show. For a couple of reasons, they're very popular... and two, air shows are mobile because we can fly to every corner of Canada, including the North. It's easy to reach out to people right across Canada, to every community large and small.⁵⁴

The scale of participation and mobility of air show teams are what makes them the best recruiting tool. Dempsey also points out that "recruiting teams will always be there" for all branches of the Canadian Forces at air shows, and that inspiration can let people "live vicariously" through the pilots. Just as he was inspired to join the air force by a jet demonstration, Captain Brown also argues that demonstration teams are "especially effective as recruiting devices for young people... when they see a demonstration team fly they say 'you know what, I'd like to do that.' It gives them an interest."⁵⁵ According to the Snowbirds website, upwards of six million people a year see the Snowbirds perform.⁵⁶ This supports the statements of Dempsey and Brown by demonstrating the vast numbers of people that the R.C.A.F can interact with at these events where recruitment can potentially take place. Advertising the skills of the air force, and the chance

⁵³ Andrew B. Godefroy, *Projecting Power: Canada's Air Force 2035*, (Ottawa: Canadian Forces Aerospace Warfare Centre, Department of National Defence, Government of Canada, 2009), 48.

⁵⁴ Dempsey, interview.

⁵⁵ Brown, interview.

⁵⁶ Snowbirds: Full history.

to inspire crowds of that size, clearly provides a valuable recruiting venue for the R.C.A.F.

Despite the Snowbirds being an important public relations and recruitment tool, their operating cost and their value are often put into question. One of the many examples from the media, a 2004 *Globe and Mail* editorial, stated that “the aerobatic team should be disbanded. It's both inordinately expensive and a luxury, at a time when the Canadian military can ill afford either.”⁵⁷ The article also asked, “does it make sense to spend a small fortune to keep the Snowbirds aloft?”⁵⁸ When confronted with these questions and statements, Maj. Gen. Eichel recounted his time as a senior staff officer.

I used to sit at tables in Ottawa in my roles, and when budget cutting would come up and there were all kinds of people who would say you're spending too much money on those Snowbirds. My argument was look at how little money you spend for the value you get... and to say that you would save ten million dollars, or seven million, or whatever number you want to put on it by disbanding the Snowbirds, is not entirely accurate anyway, as that includes personnel costs. Which are in my view kind of sunk costs anyway; those personnel would not go away.⁵⁹

Eichel argues that the Snowbirds are valuable in a “cost-benefit” ratio, and that the money spent on the Snowbirds receives its best return in relation to other expenditures by the Department of National Defence.⁶⁰ He stressed that the public affairs aspect of demonstration flying is vital, as it allows the R.C.A.F. to show the

⁵⁷ “The Snowbird Costs.” *The Globe and Mail*, 15 December 2004, *Proquest*, (accessed 2 April 2013).

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Eichel, interview.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

Canadian public that “this is where your taxpayers dollar is going, we would like to show you it is well spent, we hope you think it’s well spent, and here is the things we can do that underline that. It’s public affairs writ large.”⁶¹ Captain Brown, when asked about air shows expenditures, explained that “nobody puts out money they don’t think they’re going to get payback for... governments who supply their military have their reasons, and they are P.R. reasons, or demonstrating their capabilities, so they figure they’re going to get payback.”⁶² Rather than seeing this as a frivolous luxury, he understands that the R.C.A.F. gains important benefits from this investment.⁶³ Brown also cited the quality of the Snowbirds as an important factor in their costs.

I have seen many demonstration teams over my years as I mentioned. I’ve seen the R.A.F. Red Arrows, the Italian Frecca Tricolore, the French team [Patrouille de France], those are the big ones...and I’ve seen the Snowbirds, and...the United States Blue Angels and their Thunderbirds and to my way of thinking the Snowbirds put on the best show.⁶⁴

Captain Brown posits that the Snowbirds are the best of the major demonstration teams and this is a reflection of money well spent. The benefits that the Snowbirds provide to the R.C.A.F., and the sheer quality of their display, are important are strong arguments put forth for continuing their operation.

The Snowbirds are an important means through which the R.C.A.F. advertises and recruits, but when asked if they are a necessary part of the Canadian Forces, Captain Brown admitted

⁶¹ Eichel, interview.

⁶² Brown, interview.

⁶³ Ibid

⁶⁴ Ibid

that they were not. However, they are very important regardless of their necessity.

No, we would still have a Canadian Air Force that was combat ready to go anywhere in the world if we didn't have the Snowbirds; however, would it be as good? Would we have attracted the very best without the Snowbirds? ...I think the Snowbirds attract the cream of the crop that you're going to get.⁶⁵

Raising an important issue, Brown demonstrates how although the Snowbirds are not necessary, they are essential for recruiting the best people, and for maintaining the high standards of R.C.A.F. personnel.

Lt. Col Dempsey was expectedly adamant that the Snowbirds are an "integral component of the Canadian forces", because "they're absolutely fundamental to where we want to go in the future in terms of public relations and recruiting for the Canadian military. You have to have a body out there to interact with the Canadian public...and the Snowbirds are the public face of the Canadian Forces."⁶⁶ Regarding costs, Dempsey argued that "the Snowbirds have been a bargain for this country since the day they started. Even though the Snowbirds fly nine aircraft, their budget is about one tenth of each of what the American teams [cost]."⁶⁷ Instead of seeing demonstration teams as a waste of money, Dempsey feels that "people deserve to know how their money is being spent, and be reassured that their money is being well spent, so that's where public relations comes in. The public relations are to both inform and to educate people as to what the military represents, what the mandate of the military is, and where

⁶⁵ Brown, interview.

⁶⁶ Dempsey, interview.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

the money is going and why it's going there.”⁶⁸ The Snowbirds, he posits, are the best vehicle for achieving this.⁶⁹

All three interviewees see the benefits of the Snowbirds as outweighing the costs.⁷⁰ Strictly looking at the dollars spent does not tell the whole story, as just looking at the cost does not relate to value, or mean the costs could just be eliminated. Rather than being money that is “thrown away”, the demonstration teams gain a return in public relations, recruitment, and experience gained by the R.C.A.F.⁷¹

Throughout the history of the R.C.A.F., demonstration flying has been an important public relations and recruiting tool. Whether interacting with throngs of crowds while introducing the jet age to Canada in the 1950s, or today's Snowbirds visiting a children's hospital, the teams have been a way for the R.C.A.F. to demonstrate its skills and virtues to the Canadian public. They also help provide a human face to the force, allowing the R.C.A.F. to interact with the public on a face-to-face basis. Despite the obvious benefits, air shows and demonstration teams have often come under criticisms as being glorifications of war, military sales venues, or being too costly to operate. Through the explanations of the former R.C.A.F. officers Maj. Gen. Scott Eichel, Lt. Col. Dempsey, and Capt. Gary Brown, these criticisms are refuted on the basis that entertainment and inspiration is the sole purpose behind these teams, and that the benefits far outweigh the costs of operating a team like the Snowbirds. These men have lived and breathed the air force life, and even though there may be a bias in their answers, their interpretations provide information as valuable as any secondary source may through the

⁶⁸ Dempsey, interview.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Brown, interview. Dempsey, interview. Eichel, interview.

⁷¹ Eichel, interview.

wealth of their experiences. Through these explanations, and the evaluation of the history of demonstration flying in Canada, it is undeniable that demonstration teams are an integral part of the Royal Canadian Air Force.

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