

PUSHING THE ENVELOPE

A Fine Mess: How Our Tactical Helicopter Force Came To Be What It Is

Col Randall Wakelam

It's hard to disagree with the conclusions which Thierry Gongora and Slawomir Wesolkowski reach in their article¹ on the Air Force's tactical helicopter force: balanced it is not. The nagging question which, however, remains unasked and unanswered is how did we come to be in this position? The next few paragraphs are intended to shed some light on aviation doctrine and procurement decisions during the 1970s, 80s and 90s as I believe that this historical context is germane to understanding where we are today. Much of what follows is based on personal recollection and anecdotal history.

During the 1960s we had three categories of helicopters (here I will use the categories defined in the original article). Reconnaissance helicopters (CH112 Hiller Nomads) were operated by armoured regiments in what were called the "bubble troops." The Royal Canadian Army Service Corps activated 1 Transport Helicopter Platoon and equipped it with light transport helicopters—the Vertol CH113 Voyageur. Finally, we purchased a squadron's worth of CUH-1H (subsequent CH118) Iroquois utility helicopters and formed 403 Squadron as a precursor to bigger things to come. So we had three of four of the principal categories of tactical helicopters. As the 1970s advanced we replaced all three fleets with more up to date hardware in the

form of the CH136 Kiowa reconnaissance helicopter, the CH147 Chinook medium transport helicopter and the CH135 Twin Huey utility helicopter.

Tactical aviation doctrine had been formulated in the late 1960s and was promulgated in Canadian Forces Publication 311(5) in 1971. CFP 311(5) *The Tactical Helicopter Squadron in Battle* was a Force Mobile Command document in the days when there was no army or air force as such and the tactical air and aviation assets with 10 Tactical Air Group belonged to the land element. Other titles in the 311 series spoke to the infantry battalion, the armoured and artillery regiments and the like. Similar to the US Army, which was the model that North Atlantic Treaty Organization nations used as a benchmark, the 311(5) described four categories of helicopters. These categories were: observation, utility, transport and attack. Members of 10 Tactical Air Group, while recognizing that Canada was unlikely to acquire attack assets due to cost and politics, understood well the need for attack helicopters on the Cold War battlefield. Wherever possible Canadian field exercises would include US Army attack units and Canada established an attack helicopter exchange at the end of the 1970s. Attack assets were also included in wargames and operational research modelling. As the Army designed its ultimate staff college Cold War organization, Corps 86, it included not only a complete attack helicopter wing but a medium transport helicopter wing and composite wings within each army division. There was no question as to the importance of a balanced aviation force.

It was also in the latter half of the 1980s that it was recognized that all three fleets would soon be in need of midlife refits. Projects were started, but as with all such undertakings progress was slow. Compounding the challenge was the fact that while the aircraft were now operated by the Air Force the money for these projects would come in large part from the Army since the capability was similarly in large part a land force one. At the same time there was also a push in the Air Force to rationalize the number of fleets being operated.

The Joint Helicopter Acquisition Project concept was to acquire one aircraft, the EH101, to replace SAR Vertols, navy Sea Kings and strangely the Chinooks. The concept was dropped, as far as the Chinooks were concerned, when it was determined that the best load that the EH101 could manage was either the front or the rear unit of the BV 206 over snow vehicle and that the distance that these units could be moved was only about 60 km on the fuel available. This meant that it would be necessary to consider extending the Chinook. There were at that time seven aircraft in the fleet and they had proven of limited reliability. With three aircraft at Namao with 447 Squadron and four on the establishment of 450 Squadron in Ottawa there were many days when each squadron had only one aircraft available. The units were not located with army units or formations and as a result they were often deemed of limited utility. Thus when the army was asked to provide some \$500M to refurbish the aircraft the answer was No. The aircraft, as is currently well known, were ultimately sold to the Dutch.

By comparison the CH135 extension programme seemed cheap and low risk. The US Marines were in the process of extending their UH-1N fleet and it seemed plausible to add the Canadian aircraft to that process. Similarly the Kiowa project looked to such alternatives as the US Army OH 58D programme to provide a renewed aircraft with capabilities for years to come—ironically including enhanced observation and armed capabilities.

Regardless, neither of these projects had much chance of moving ahead given that the end of Cold War peace dividend was taking over. As the defence budget stalled it appeared that there would be no alternative but to stretch the service life of these two fleets, much like the current day Sea King. Thus when the government announced in the fall of 1991 that the CF would be buying 100 Bell CH146 Griffons to replace both remaining fleets there was a scramble to see how aviation doctrine could adapt to this circumstance. Working groups were struck to look at crew configurations to protect at least some of the reconnaissance capability of the Kiowa; it was intended that each squadron retain about half a dozen combat arms observers who had crewed the CH136. Later in the decade, work was done to develop an enhanced observation suite—Electro-optical, Reconnaissance, Surveillance and Target Acquisition—to allow the aircraft to conduct stand off observation.

While this work was going on (and still is) to try to stretch one fleet across two categories, the country remained (as Gongora and Wesolkowski point out) without a transport, attack or reconnaissance capability. Indeed, one might conclude that while we have recognized from the earliest days of aviation the need for a balanced and complete suite of aircraft categories and capabilities we have indeed gotten ourselves into a fine mess. ■

Col Randall Wakelam served in 408, 403 and 430 Squadrons between 1977 and 1986. He was Directorate of Land Aviation 3, responsible for aviation procurement from 1988 to 1989. He commanded 408 Squadron from 1991 to 1993 and is currently Director of Research and Symposia at the Canadian Forces College.

Notes

1. Thierry Gongora and Slawomir Wesolkowski, "What Does a Balance Tactical Helicopter Force Look Like: An International Comparison," *The Canadian Air Force Journal* 1, no.2 (Summer 2008): 13-19. Available on-line at http://www.airforce.forces.gc.ca/CFAWC/eLibrary/Journal/Vol1-2008/Iss2-Summer_e.asp (accessed August 15, 2008).