

## Staff Systems: More Grist for the Mill

By Colonel Randall Wakelam, CD, PhD

# PUSHING THE ENVELOPE

Paul Johnston's articles on staff systems have been excellent in drawing attention to the Air Force's need for staff officers and staff processes. It is hoped this short commentary will provide additional perspective so that as the Air Force examines its staff needs and what professional development is needed to produce effective air staff officers, it does so with as much context and history at its disposal as can be made available.

Not coincidentally it was 65 years ago, at the height of the Second World War, that the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) conducted its first War Staff Course at what is now the Canadian Forces College in Toronto. The course dealt largely with staff procedures, but still included guest lectures to set these lessons in a broader operational and strategic context. In 1945, the RCAF was ready to expand the programme to six months. In writing about the course and its aims, the Commandant, Air Commodore Wait, wrote:

The [proposed] Course ... is a comprehensive one, and will be conducted on University lines. The course is designed to make an officer *think straight* and to *get his thoughts down clearly on paper*. The amount and depth of his thinking will depend entirely upon himself. There will be little use for anyone to come on the Course expecting to do only the bare minimum of work and to get by. The candidate must want to make the Service a career; want to take the Course; *have a high level of ability to learn*; and have a reasonable education (minimum Senior Matriculation).<sup>1</sup> [Italics added by author.]

By the late 1950s, the original 10-week programme had grown to a full year, the purpose of which was captured in the course calendar:

The RCAF Staff College makes no attempt to graduate experts in a particular field, nor does it expound any easy universally applicable doctrines. Rather by providing its graduates with an *education of the broadest scope* and by *developing habits of clear thinking*, it attempts to provide them with the breadth of interest, *openness of mind, reasoning ability, and a broad view of their Service and profession*, which will enable them to *master the specific tasks of any appointment and to make sound decisions in any situation*.<sup>2</sup> [Italics added by author.]

This last thought is one to which we can return shortly.

Johnston says that the RAF staff system during the war resembled the British Army's diarchy of operations (ops) and administrative/quartermaster (AQ) functions. While this was true, there, apparently, the similarities started to pale. A contemporary observer, Lieutenant-Colonel Charles Carrington, the Army liaison officer at Bomber Command, noted some unique characteristics, as did other writers. The Air (i.e., ops) staff tended to be populated by young, hard-charging, upwardly mobile flyers, while the administrative staff was more likely to contain former flyers or those who came from support branches.<sup>3</sup> Equally intriguing, there was no standard headquarters organization within the Command. As noted by staff in 5 Group:

There is no standard system in Bomber Command for the allocation of Air Staff duties at groups and this differs considerably from one Group to

another.... As a result [of shortages of qualified personnel] allocation is often governed by personalities rather than by the basic principles of sound organization.<sup>4</sup>

This was apparent within the Command Headquarters as well. By 1943 the senior air staff officer (SASO) had been elevated to a deputy commander in chief, in effect a chief of staff. And beginning in February 1944 there were two SASOs, one for tactical operations and one for strategic bombing. We might reasonably conclude that the same sort of needs-based local arrangements, shifting missions, and personality-driven organizations applied to other commands and groups. We might also surmise that the RAF was experiencing the same sort of transformation, organizational challenges, and chaos that the Air Force in Canada has faced over the past two decades.

So what sort of staff officer do we need in these circumstances? There is little doubt that we have a requirement for officers who understand and can use staff conventions

and processes. They need to be capable of producing timely and accurate staff products, using standardized formats and lexicons. But these officers are likely to be found working in squadron and wing staffs as well as filling lower level appointments at the Air Division and higher headquarters. Their work is unquestionably complicated, but it is not work which requires them to deal with complexity and ambiguity—in other words, to deal with “problems which defy solution.”<sup>5</sup> These are the sorts of institutional issues that Staff College faculty were thinking about when they called, in 1959, for broad education to deal with any situation. This sort of staff education gives senior staff appointments and the commanders the ability to build campaign plans, figure out how to work in joint and combined collations, and deal with whole of government solutions. In short, we need those who can conceptualize solutions and, equally, those who can put those concepts into action. Both are required if the Air Force is to have an effective staff and staff system now and in the future. ■

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## NOTES

1. William R. Shields and Dace Sefers, *Canadian Forces Command and Staff College: A History 1797-1946* (Toronto: Canadian Forces College, 1987), 4-28. This document was part of a Canadian Forces College history project.

2. Canada, Department of National Defence, “Conclusion,” in *R.C.A.F. Staff College Calendar Course 23: 1958-59*.

3. Charles Carrington, *Soldier at Bomber Command* (London: Leo Cooper, 1987), 14-7. See also Group Captain A. H. Stradling, *The Brass Hat: Being Hints on How to Make the Job Easier* (Aldershot, UK: Gale & Polden Limited, 1951).

4. “Organization of Air Staff at 5 Group Headquarters”, n.d., UK National Archives Air 14/1892.

5. This is one of the central themes of Canada, Department of National Defence, *Report of the Officer Development Board* (Ottawa: DND, 1969), which is often referred to as the “Rowley Report.”