

The Wing Concept Revisited: The Adoption of Capability-based Wings as an Alternative to Groups

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With the imminent creation of 2 Canadian Air Division, there are also strong rumours that the groups (which disappeared in 1997 when the Commander of Air Command [Chief of the Air Staff] moved from Winnipeg to Ottawa and 1 Canadian Air Division Headquarters was resurrected) will be recreated.

Having been at the forefront of the implementation of the wing concept¹ in 1993 under LGen Huddleston, I have always been a supporter of that initiative and feel that it went a long way to reinvigorate the Air Force approach to operations. Nevertheless, there were aspects of the wing concept that bothered me at the time and, perhaps, now is the perfect time to re-examine the concept as a possible alternative to bringing back the groups.

I have always believed that a wing should be a fighting formation, made up of two or three squadrons (sqns) of identical aircraft (for example, 4 Wing Baden [pre-1993] consisted of three CF188 squadrons) or two or more squadrons of different aircraft that would fight together (for example, 366 Wing, Mountain Home Air Force Base [pre-2002] consisted of EF-111A, F-15C and B-1B squadrons). The latter is commonly referred to as a composite wing. When the wing concept was instituted in Canada, most of our wings were composite wings, in that they were made up of disparate units; however, few of them met the definition of a fighting formation. A good example of this is 19 Wing where, at the time, there was a long-range patrol squadron (CP140), a combat support squadron (CT133) and a search and rescue squadron (CC115/CH113). This situation has not changed significantly over the intervening years and arguably has gotten worse due to the standing down of various units. 3 Wing and 4 Wing now only have one operational CF188 squadron each and 14 Wing has only one operational CP140 squadron.

The reason that these composite wings existed is that, with the exception of 1 Wing and 12 Wing, they were geographically based. The Air Force had primarily taken the Canadian Forces base (CFB) structure and simply re-clothed it as a wing. Perhaps, now is the time to re-evaluate this structure and possibly apply the 1 Wing and 12 Wing model to the remainder of our wings.

This proposal would result in the creation of wings based on capability lines. For the moment, I would like to ignore the wings that do not operate aircraft (16 Wing and 22 Wing). Taking the remainder, I would envision establishing wings along seven capability lines:

- a. air mobility;
- b. fighters;

- c. long-range patrol;
- d. maritime helicopter;
- e. search and rescue (SAR);
- f. tactical aviation; and
- g. training.

These capability-based wings would cross geographic boundaries and include all of the pertinent units involved in generating that capability, regardless of where they are currently located. Another critical aspect of implementing this concept is to physically separate the wing commander (W Comd) and base commander (B Comd), leaving each with their own unique set of responsibilities. Since 1993, these two hats have been worn by the same person. One major purpose of the wing

concept was to reassert the role of air base commanders in the chain of command.² This should be preserved in the role of the wing commander; however, the base commander responsibilities should be removed and assigned to another person. This allows the wing commander to be unhindered by geography. Base commanders would report to a specific wing commander but would not be in the operational chain of command. As technically is the case at present, the base would simply be another unit in the formation, albeit with greater emphasis on this distinction.

The easiest way to envision how this concept would be implemented is to discuss how each existing wing would be affected. For simplicity's sake, I will not address the test and evaluation flights and the non-flying units; however, they can be easily accommodated by the structure. This concept would see the following changes:

- a. **1 Wing.** This wing is already structured in the fashion being proposed. It would continue to include the five squadrons that it has today: 400, 403, 408, 430 and 438.
- b. **3 Wing / 4 Wing.** One of these wings would become the fighter wing and would include 409, 410, 414 and 425 Sqns. The other wing would be disbanded as a formation. B Comds of CFB Bagotville and CFB Cold Lake would report to the fighter W Comd. 419 Sqn would chop to a training wing; 417 and 439 Sqns would chop to the SAR wing.
- c. **5 Wing.** 444 Sqn would chop to the SAR wing. 5 Wing would be disbanded as a formation and B Comd CFB Goose Bay would report to the SAR W Comd.
- d. **8 Wing.** This wing would become the air mobility wing and would include 412, 426, 429, 435, 436, 437 and 440 Sqns. B Comd CFB Trenton would report to W Comd 8 Wing. The SAR W Comd would

have operational control of 435 Sqn for its SAR responsibilities.

- e. **9 Wing.** 103 Sqn would chop to the SAR wing. 9 Wing would be disbanded as a formation and B Comd CFB Gander would report to the SAR W Comd.
- f. **12 Wing.** This wing is already structured in the fashion being proposed. It would continue to include the three squadrons that it has today: 406, 423 and 443 Sqns.
- g. **14 Wing.** This wing would become the long-range patrol wing and include 404, 405 and 407 Sqns. 413 Sqn would chop to the SAR W Comd. B Comd CFB Greenwood and B Comd CFB Comox would report to W Comd 14 Wing.
- h. **15 Wing.** This wing would become a training wing and essentially remain as it is today except for the addition of 419 Sqn. B Comd CFB Moose Jaw would report to W Comd 15 Wing.
- i. **16 Wing.** As a non-flying wing, there would be no change.
- j. **17 Wing.** This wing would become a training wing. 435 and 440 Sqns would chop to 8 Wing; the other current units would remain. B Comd CFB Winnipeg would report to W Comd 17 Wing.
- k. **19 Wing.** This wing would become the SAR wing and would include 103, 413, 417, 424, 439, 442 and 444 Sqns. B Comds CFB Goose Bay and CFB Gander would report to W Comd 19 Wing.
- l. **22 Wing.** As a non-flying wing, there would be no change. However, consideration should be given to separating the B Comd responsibilities from that of the W Comd.

As for the effect of this implementation on the larger Air Force structure, 1 Canadian Air Division would include 1 Wing, 3 or 4 Wing, 8 Wing, 12 Wing, 14 Wing, 19 Wing

and 22 Wing. 2 Canadian Air Division would include 15 Wing, 16 Wing and 17 Wing.

Both the creation of 2 Canadian Air Division and the possible resurrection of the groups has been mentioned in the context of creating additional operational positions for the development of Air Force brigadier-generals. The capability-based wing structure I have described also lends itself to that approach. As a minimum, the fighter and air mobility W Comds could be established as BGen. In the fighter case, this is driven by the existence of two large main operating bases; in the transport case, by the large number of units. Base commanders at Bagotville, Cold Lake and Trenton would

remain as colonels. For the other wings, where the W Comd positions remain as colonels, the B Comd responsibilities should be given to a newly established lieutenant-colonel or double-hatted with one of the current lieutenant-colonel branch head positions.

The above proposal has been offered with a view of turning all wings into single-focus, fighting formations. This accomplishes the same purpose as re-establishing the groups but in a different manner and, perhaps, with a lower overhead and a reduced personnel bill. More than anything else, however, I would hope that this article will stimulate some thought and discussion. ■

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NOTES

1. Paul Johnston "Staff Systems and the Canadian Air Force: Part 2 A Convolved Evolution," *The Canadian Air Force Journal* 1, no. 3 (Fall 2008): 20-32. Available online http://www.airforce.forces.gc.ca/CFAWC/eLibrary/Journal/Vol1-2008/Iss3-Fall_e.asp (accessed February 13, 2009).

2. "Master Implementation Plan for the Wing Concept," (Winnipeg: Air Command Headquarters, 1993).