

Executive Summary

A Case for Canada's Airborne Capability

January 19th, 2026 (version française à suivre)



Until 1995, Canada maintained an all-arms, high-readiness airborne force, a robust fleet of fixed and rotary wing aircraft, mounting bases, plus rigging and aircrew expertise for aerial delivery of troops and materiel. Lack of troops and training have since eroded operational readiness and parachuting skills, kept alive by three infantry companies, a reserve unit, training center, demonstration team, special forces and search & rescue.

Aim. To make a case to rebuild parachute and aerial delivery expertise, as a joint capability, to enable CAF operations.

Targeted parachute modernization would enhance CAF cohesion, share best practises, build credibility with allies, and renew tactics, techniques and procedures. The Light Infantry Regiment could anchor this expertise for the global response mission, by enabling pathfinder and early-entry teams to access remote combat zones or relief sites.

Airborne elements of the NATO Response Force remain integral to SACEUR's ability to deter and interdict, and our allies are maintaining airborne forces for strategic agility. With growing threats to Canada's sovereignty, a rapid response into remote Arctic sites has now become paramount.

Renewed airborne, parachute and aerial delivery capabilities would enhance Canada's defence and security by:

- developing **niche capabilities** for freedom of manoeuvre in both domestic and expeditionary operations,
- **structured training** of specialized trades to strengthen core competencies and build capacity,
- **joint development** of airborne doctrine to align navy, army, air force, special forces and SAR missions,
- investing in **aerial delivery aircraft**, aircrew proficiency and **forward operating bases**,
- enabling the **Light Infantry Regiment** for early entry operations and relief missions,
- **interoperability** with 16 (UK) Air Assault Brigade in NATO, and 11th (US) Airborne Division in the Arctic,
- declaring the **Global Response Task Force** to NATO and the **Joint Expeditionary Force** for Greenland, and
- enhancing the **Disaster Assistance Response Team** with parachute delivery for humanitarian relief.

Operational readiness can be achieved through a stepwise approach to retain proven expertise and evaluate new capabilities. This will shape global response, reinforce allies, complement joint missions for disaster relief and in the North, and manage talent of specialty skills across the CAF.

As a middle power, with global influence and interests, Canada now faces expectations to step-up its game. Defence renewal has created a window to reassess parachute and aerial delivery for global response and tactical advantage.

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Introduction

Facing the dangerous shift in global security and new threats to its sovereignty, Canada is rebuilding its armed forces. Post Cold War atrophy in defence, lack of troops and training have eroded key combat functions and operational capabilities, including airborne, air assault and aerial delivery.¹



3 PPCLI Para Company
Normandy Peak, Alberta

In 1995, Canada's parachute capability was reduced to three infantry companies, a reserve unit, training center, demonstration team, special forces and search & rescue.² These dispersed sub-units do not exercise as an all-arms combat force, as no artillery, engineer, signal, intelligence, logistic or medical parachute elements exist. Jump courses qualify a minimal number of basic parachutists, aircrew, jumpmasters, pathfinders and riggers.³

Likewise, the expertise required to rig materiel for aerial delivery, be it for combat, resupply or disaster relief, has been difficult to maintain without an operational focus. Canada did not join recent relief efforts to Haiti or Sudan but did drop food bundles into Gaza by parachute.⁴ The Disaster Assistance Response Team (DART) in Trenton does not have parachute delivery capability, per se.

Aim. To make a case for Canada to rebuild its airborne, parachute and aerial delivery expertise, as a joint capability, to complement emerging CAF missions.

Legacy

Our airborne legacy started with 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion, the first Canadians into Normandy on D-Day, and the 1st Special Service Force, *The Devil's Brigade*. At the start of the Cold War, infantry 'maroon beret' battalions were assigned to the Mobile Strike Force. By 1958, infantry, engineer, signal and logistic units maintained aerial delivery skills for Defence of Canada Operations (DCO).



C-119 Flying Boxcar, Jump Depot, Rivers, Manitoba, circa 1960

A decade later, this expertise was assembled in an all-arms formation, the Airborne Regiment, for DCO and global high-readiness roles. It specialized in jungle, winter, mountain and desert warfare, and parachute delivery. Despite calls to reinforce the Regiment, in 1977, it was reduced and moved to Petawawa with the Special Service Force.⁵ Events in Somalia and the Cold War 'peace dividend' led to political direction, in 1995, to cut our national strategic reserve.



C-130 Platform Drop
Edmonton, circa 1970

Until then, the air force maintained several fixed and rotary wing squadrons operationally tasked for troop and material drops.⁶ Ongoing airlift exercises sustained aircrew proficiency, trialed load configurations and worked with allied air forces. CFB Edmonton, *Gateway to the North*, was ideal to mount and dispatch forces, proven on many Arctic exercises and UN aid missions worldwide. However, in 1998, air movement, parachute rigging and training units moved to Trenton.⁷

¹ **Airborne forces** are airlanded or airdropped into combat zones. **Air assault** is the movement of forces by aircraft, such as helicopters, or parachute, to seize key terrain. **Aerial delivery** is the transport of equipment by airdrop, airlanding or slung loads, into remote or hostile sites.

² **3 RCR, 3 PPCLI, 3 R22eR, QOR** [queensownrifles](#) each have a parachute company. Parachuting expertise is maintained by Canadian Army Advanced Warfare Centre (CAAWC), the Sky Hawks, Canadian Special Operations Regiment (CSOR) and CAF Search & Rescue (SAR).

³ **Pathfinders** set up drop or landing zones for air assault missions. **Riggers** are a specialized CAF trade, qualified to pack and maintain parachutes.

⁴ 4 August 2025 [Canadian Forces airdrop humanitarian aid into Gaza for the first time | CBC News](#)

⁵ David Charters argued for an airborne brigade to meet DCO, NATO, UN commitments. '**Armed Forces for Political Purpose: Airborne Forces in the Canadian Army in the 1980s**', Centre for Strategic Studies, Jan 1984, pages 103–120.

⁶ CFB Edmonton held (435 & 436) C-130 Hercules, (408) CH-135 Helicopter, CC-115 Buffalo and CC-138 Twin Otter Squadrons.

⁷ CFB Calgary closed, 1 CMBG moved to CFB Edmonton, unit hangers were built on the flightline and Canada's longest runway deactivated.



Skill Fade

Lost in the 1990s was the knowledge of airborne operations, along with marshalling, rigging and loading procedures. Airborne and air assault doctrine, credibility with allies and currency in parachuting all faded. The art of aerial delivery, especially for heavy vehicles and weapons, has been kept alive by a dedicated core of riggers and aircrew.



3 R22eR Para Company 2016

Most critical was the skill fade of paratroopers, after years of nominal training, few available aircraft and no new kit. Parachuting demands honing of skills, through repetition, to build jumper confidence and reduce injuries. Patrol-pathfinder and early-entry team skills, dependent upon parachute insertion, also fade without ongoing evaluation. The 'wedge' ramp drop of toboggans, simultaneously with double-door troop exists, was lost with conversion to the CC-130J Hercules.

Structured parachute training, including airborne indoctrination, would improve career progression, build core competencies and protect investment into highly skilled troops.⁸ This would help recruiting and retention, by attracting those who want to be fit, operationally challenged and embrace the airborne spirit as part of an elite cadre. Like our allies, the talent pool of qualified and indoctrinated jumpers could then be managed as trade specialties, benefitting all parachute units.⁹

Tactics, Techniques & Procedures

A parachute 'corps', per se, would promote cohesion across the CAF, sharing of best practises and collaboration with allies and industry to renew tactics, techniques and procedures (TTPs). For example, precision parachuting has evolved from 'free fall' (high altitude, low opening) to 'static line square' parachuting (high altitude, high opening) as an effective way of inserting tactical teams and equipment.¹⁰



CT-6 CAF Static Line Square Parachute

Although traditional 'round static line' parachuting requires longer, more vulnerable DZ, it readily provides a training baseline to be scaled up for larger 'mass' drops. On the other hand, 'static line square' needs smaller DZ, yet more training, as troops and kit are inserted then 'flown' several kilometers onto an objective. This method is best for early-entry and remote access of small tactical teams.¹¹

Defence Renewal

The time is right to reassess how airborne expertise can enable CAF missions. The air force and navy are recapitalizing and reconfiguring their respective fleets, a new command will generate joint forces, and the army is modernizing.¹² *Inflection Point 2025*, is a profound investment into light, medium, heavy forces to meet threats across the spectrum of conflict, at home and abroad.¹³ Adaptive airborne techniques will be a key enabler for, "rapid response, long-range precision sense and strike, deep reconnaissance, multi-domain targeting, robust C5ISRT networks."¹⁴

Within the army, the obvious anchor for renewed parachute expertise is the Light Infantry Regiment (LIR) to enhance the high-readiness Global Response Task Force (GRTF).¹⁵ Airborne-enabled pathfinder and early entry teams would give the regiment flexibility to secure DZ and lodgements and access remote austere sites.¹⁶

⁸ Airborne indoctrination, eliminated in 1994, set a high standard of physical and mental endurance, qualifying soldiers to wear the maroon beret.

⁹ Australia Defence Force stream talent from a recruiting pool to the parachute regiments and special forces. UK 3rd Battalion, The Para Regiment, works closely with the Special Air Service & Special Reconnaissance Regiment as a 'special forces support group'.

¹⁰ Precision Parachute...Potential Employment in the Land Force, Bruce Ewing, Canadian Army Journal 8.3, Fall 2005, page 83. [CAJ 8.3.qxd](#)

¹¹ Square & round parachutes are used to insert CAAWC jumpers tasked to provide cordon support to SAR for major air disasters.

¹² RCAF fleet is: 17 CC-130J Hercules (92 paratroopers), 16 CC-130H (SAR, refuelling), 5 CC-177s Globemaster (102 paratroopers [Facebook](#)), plus CH-147F Chinook, CH-146 Griffin, CH-149 Cormorant helicopters. Using 2/3 availability, 1000 troops can be dropped, or less with equipment rigging.

¹³ [Canadian Army Modernization - Canada.ca](#) [Inflection Point 2025 - Canada.ca](#)

¹⁴ 5ISRT – C2, computers, communications, cyber, intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance and targeting.

¹⁵ Global Response Task Force (GRTF) is a high-readiness light infantry battalion trained for strategic response and first-entry missions.

¹⁶ Regimental Aerial Access & Delivery Team, a proposed concept to combine recce, pathfinder, drone, surveillance and engineer survey.



Coalitions

Canada's lead in Latvia has revived our doctrine on how to fight a peer adversary within a coalition, mount and sustain an expeditionary force, but also exposed our lack of strategic mobility and rapid response. The flyover battalion reinforcing the Latvia mission has no parachute capability, Canada's division declared to NATO has no airborne elements, and Canadians have rarely participated in NATO airborne exercises.



6th Polish Airborne
NATO Exercise

By comparison, our allies, and adversaries, continue to invest in airborne forces. 16 Air Assault Brigade is UK's rapid reaction force, and 173rd Airborne Brigade is the US lead force in Europe. Poland, France, Germany and other nations are investing in combat aerial delivery.¹⁷

Airborne forces are integral to the NATO Response Force and SACEUR's plans for interdiction and deterrence. 'The employment or mere threat of employment of airborne units to spearhead an operation has great strategic value and demonstrates significant political resolve.'¹⁸ Operations today involve dispersion, mobility, drones and long-range strike, ideal for parachute insertion of reconnaissance and strike teams.

A viable airborne capability would strengthen credibility with our allies and be a visible contribution to NATO and UN operations.¹⁹ The commitment of an airborne battalion group to the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF) would complete the coverage (in blue) for both defence of NATO's northern flank, including Greenland, and Canadian Arctic sovereignty.²⁰



The Arctic

For decades, Canada had a parachute capability to access remote sites in the North for disaster assistance, airfield construction, resupply and communications. The techniques for heavy drop of over-snow vehicles, engineer equipment and weapons were frequently practised, along with how to operate at -40C. Airborne engineers often built austere landing strips for follow-on forces. Expertise for air disasters now resides with SAR, supported by CAAWC, with any security response limited to an infantry company air-landed on existing airfields.

The established view is that the vastness of the North requires minimal surveillance (Canadian Rangers) and presence (Operation NANOOK).²¹ However, with growing interest in, and passage through, the Arctic, Canada's sovereignty claim is being challenged, by friend and foe.²² Although incursions can indeed be detected by advanced technologies and deterred by area denial weapons, 'mukluks on the ground' will still be required to protect command nodes, refueling sites and mobile assets such as air defence and long-range rockets.²³

Remote access will be key in responding to major air disasters and enabling austere airfield construction.²⁴ A parachute-enabled quick reaction force (QRF) will be needed to support such scenarios.²⁵ As our investment in submarines, icebreakers, drones, over-the-horizon radar and forward bases is being evaluated, through wargames such as [Ex Arctic Resolve](#), airborne capabilities should be included.²⁶

¹⁷ [Britain's Paratroopers' training for NATO rapid deployment missions](#) and [NATO Airborne Forces](#)

¹⁸ 'Future of Airborne Forces' NATO Defence College, though dated Jan 2013, capabilities remain relevant, especially for aircraft and aircrew. https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/166780/Report_FutureAirborneForcesNATO_Lasconjarias.pdf

¹⁹ LCol David Stead argues an airborne battle group for deterrence, rapid response to Arctic, UN, NATO missions, and support to SOF. JCSP 45, 14 Oct 2018, 'Bellerophon Revitalised: New Airborne Force Employment Concept...' <https://www.cfc.forces.gc.ca/259/290/308/192/stead.pdf>

²⁰ JEF, UK-led high-readiness force of Nordic & Baltic nations for deterrence in N. Atlantic, Baltics, & High North. [JEF Coalition for Common Security](#)

²¹ [The northern flank: the Arctic: implications for SOF / Bernd Horn, Howard G. Coombs and Tony Balasevicius, editors.](#)

²² [How Russia is preparing for conflict in Nato's new Arctic battleground](#)

²³ 3 RCR will parachute with 11th (US) Airborne Div to deploy a High Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS). [Training Extreme: Arctic Warriors](#)

²⁴ Airfield Survey & Reconnaissance (ASAR) RCAF engineer capability to assess austere landing sites, certify air operations on unprepared surfaces.

²⁵ Richard Nghiem argues to reform the Airborne Regiment as a quick reaction force (QRF). Canadian Defence Review, 31 Mar 25. [Arctic QRF](#)

²⁶ Ex Arctic Resolve reinforces the need for CAF investment into sea, air, land forces, including parachute aerial delivery into remote sites.



So What?

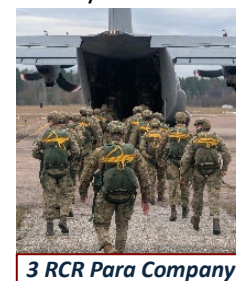
How can airborne, parachute and aerial delivery capabilities enable Canada's defence?

- **Niche Capability.** First, airborne operations should be reframed as a *niche* force multiplier to give freedom of manoeuvre for sovereignty and expeditionary missions. Conventional parachuting should be retained as a training baseline, with precision parachuting (freefall and static line square) developed for early entry and remote access.
- **Professional Development.** Structured parachute training and indoctrination would strengthen core competencies and rebuild knowledge of CAF airborne and air assault doctrine. A parachute 'corps' would manage the collective talent of aircrew, jumpers, riggers, jumpmasters, pathfinders, special operators and SAR technicians. The payoff would be attraction, motivation and retention of an elite cadre.
- **Joint Force Development.** The CAF is too small to have independent specialties. Joint development of parachute and aerial delivery would build capacity and align TTPs of navy, army, air force, special forces and SAR missions. The RCAF could align our aircraft fleet over time, and forward operating bases could be enhanced with airstrips, helicopter pads and pre-positioned logistics.²⁷
- **Light Infantry Regiment.** The land component of a joint airborne capability should be anchored on the LIR, to include all combat, command and support arms, potentially modelled after UK 16 Air Assault Brigade.²⁸ Parachute expertise would give the GRTF early entry, remote access and flexibility, nested within an all-arms combat formation.
- **Interoperability.** Renewed parachute focus would also give the LIR a viable role as a niche contribution to coalitions. Canada's reputation as 'stormtroopers' fits with allied doctrine of *joint forcible entry operations* (airborne, air-assault, amphibious) and with mission areas of 16 (UK) Air Assault Brigade for NATO, the JEF for Greenland and 11th (US) Airborne Division for the Arctic.
- **Rapid Response.** Canada needs strategic mobility and rapid response to security and humanitarian crises. A QRF would reinforce Arctic sovereignty and the JEF mission for NATO's northern flank. The GRTF would be a visible contribution to NATO Response Force, and the DART could reach remote regions with parachute delivery.



Way Ahead

Canada's defence investment is impressive but will take time. There is need, now, to fill the ranks, motivate and train troops, and rebuild operational readiness through targeted modernization. A stepwise approach would retain proven expertise and evaluate new TTPs for 'quick wins' to meet immediate requirements and inform decisions on new investments. In summary:



- retain round parachuting as a baseline and pilot new precision techniques against team insertion and skill fade,
- LIR to trial modest loads (runway kits, 'wedge' toboggans) to prove techniques and shape the GRTF mission,
- merge joint aerial delivery for DART, Arctic QRF, airfield engineer, mobile strike and air defence deployments,
- offer coalition partners an early entry, niche capability for NATO Response Force and JEF missions, and
- force develop and 'talent manage' airborne capabilities, jointly, as a cadre of trade and skill specialties.

As a middle power with global influence and interests, Canada is now facing increased expectations to step up contributions to international security. The time is right to look ahead at how parachute and aerial delivery capabilities can enable operational scenarios for Arctic sovereignty, with NATO and UN partners, and humanitarian aid.

²⁷ Potentially, reactivate Edmonton, Goose Bay as mounting bases; develop Yellowknife, Churchill, Inuvik & Iqaluit as forward operating bases.

²⁸ 16 Air Assault Brigade is the UK's rapid reaction spearhead force [Bing Video 16 AA Bde](#)



Last Thoughts

There is now an opportunity to enhance CAF readiness, modernization and reconstitution through renewal of airborne capabilities. The status quo, of limited training and no operational focus, will keep parachuting and aerial delivery on 'life support.' By systematic evaluation of new TTPs and structure training, traditional parachuting can evolve into a highly relevant, niche capability for deterrence and global response.

Finally, **no air force, no airborne!** A robust fleet of fixed and rotary wing aircraft, aircrew proficiency, plus mounting and forward operating bases are essential to enable strategic response and tactical agility.



Op Nanook Resolute Bay 2024



*Canadian Sniper Team
Chinook Insertion*



*173rd (US) Airborne Brigade
NATO Exercise, Poland, 2018*

This paper is the collective views of CAFA members, either serving in or retired from the CAF.²⁹ It makes a sincere case to rebuild Canada's airborne capability in hope that consideration will be given by commanders and force developers steering force modernization. CAFA stands by to assist, with its collective interest and experience, in renewing airborne, parachute and aerial delivery capabilities. **All the way!**

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²⁹ With thanks to: LCol Aaron Corey, Col (Retd) Bruce Ewing, Col (Retd) James Holsworth, LCol (Retd) Greg Jensen, LCol Ben Rogerson

