



**CANADIAN GLOBAL AFFAIRS INSTITUTE**  
**INSTITUT CANADIEN DES AFFAIRES MONDIALES**

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by Matthew Fisher  
November 2018

# COMMENTARY

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**M**ihail Kogălniceanu Air Base, Romania – The first Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) pilot to have intercepted a frontline Russian fighter jet in nearly half a century has laid out the stark challenges facing those who lead Canada's fighter jet community. As the auditor general [concluded](#) in a blistering report published this week, the country has lost so many experienced pilots and technicians that it can no longer defend Canadian air space and carry out NATO missions in Europe.

“My burden as a squadron commander is that I can't fix the losses quickly enough,” said Lt.-Col. Timothy Woods, who is in charge of Air Task Force Romania. The task force has deployed five jets to the Black Sea port of Constanța for four months, from 425 Tactical Fighter Squadron in Bagotville, Quebec.

“The metric for an experienced pilot is 500 to 750 hours on a CF-18. Some pick up faster than others. It usually takes about four years on squadron. And it takes three to four years to get to squadron. So, it takes seven to eight years to get an experienced pilot.

“The thing we are most worried about is losing our core experienced fighter pilots to train the next generation. That number has been whittled down. It is a cause for concern.”

Wood flew one of two CF-18s that scrambled to intercept a pair of formidable Russian SU-27 Flankers over the Black Sea in October. The Flankers had approached Romanian air space after launching from a base in Russian-occupied Crimea. The highly maneuverable Russian air superiority fighters turned back after the Canadian Hornets came within 500 metres of them.

While the RCAF has often intercepted Russian long-range bombers flying near the margins of Canadian air space in the high Arctic and along the Atlantic and Pacific coasts, it very seldom interacts with Russian fighter jets because they are based in Europe and have a much shorter range.

“Their two airplanes were armed to the teeth. I could see the air-to-air missiles,” Woods said during an interview conducted late last month. “They waved to us. We waved to them. He gave the thumbs-up. I gave the thumbs-up. I gave him a salute and left.

“I would characterize it as a very professional interaction. Whatever the geopolitical situation might be, we both acknowledged that we had a job to do and got on with it. It was not until I was really close that I realized that it was a Flanker. It was very large, much larger than a F-18.”

Ironically, Woods, who as commander is usually involved in administrative matters and planning, was on alert to scramble “because of the loss of so many experienced pilots. I am having to fly more to help with that. I am having to fly about twice a week. The kids are flying four or five times a week.”

Canada's acute fighter jet pilot and technician shortage was a hot topic in Romania as it has been at bases back in Canada.



“I have no plans to release though this is something that is definitely discussed among the pilots,” said a captain who only has 600 hours on the CF-18. “One-quarter of our pilots – 23 of them – released last year. Most of those who are leaving are mid-level to senior pilots. They are the ones who are the trainers, so finding enough trainers is hard. It is a major problem.”

The young pilot, who did not wish to be identified, said that many of those who have left the RCAF have been hired as instructors by air forces in the Middle East. Others are flying private or commercial airliners.

In a paradox that was not lost on anyone in Romania, some Canadian pilots have been considering whether to join the Royal Australian Air Force because it would give them a chance to fly highly advanced F-35 fighter jets. To fill what the government has claimed is a capability gap, Ottawa decided last fall to spend \$500 million to buy 25 RAAF Hornets that the Australians were getting rid of because Canberra had decided to buy the much more capable F-35. Canada has dithered for years over how to replace its Hornets.

“Is that affecting releases? I’d say yes,” said the pilot, who was several years younger than the jet that he flew.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said during the 2015 campaign that if elected his government would never buy the F-35, but he has subsequently said Canada is committed to a fair competition to replace the Hornets. This contradiction has never been explained and the decision on when to launch a competition has been delayed several times.

Woods, who has been involved in the effort to fix the pilots and ground crew shortages, said “we are actively working to generate more pilots and technicians. What we really need to work on is retaining experienced individuals. You can put forward the argument that one way to retain people is on the financial side. There has already been considerable effort put into this.”

The colonel stressed that the five Hornets in Romania are still “very capable” to conduct the NATO interception mission the RCAF was given.

“We are going to fly to the best of our ability with whatever the Canadian government supplies us with,” Woods said. “That’s our job.”

## ► About the Author

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***Matthew Fisher** is a Fellow at the Canadian Global Affairs Institute. He was born in northwestern Ontario and raised there and in the Ottawa Valley. He has lived and worked abroad for 34 years as a foreign correspondent for the Globe and Mail, Sun Media and Postmedia. Assignments have taken him to 171 countries. An eyewitness to 19 conflicts including Somalia, the Rwandan genocide, Chechnya, the Balkan Wars, Israel in Gaza and Lebanon, the two Gulf Wars and Afghanistan, Matthew was appointed as the first Bill Graham Centre/Massey College Resident Visiting Scholar in Foreign and Defence Policy in 2018.*

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