

# Military Aircraft: Symbols with Diverse Meanings

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**M**ilitary aircraft are more than just pieces of inanimate hardware. They are powerful cultural symbols that invoke incredibly diverse and often strikingly contradictory meanings. How one responds to the sight of a military aircraft depends on the context in which one experiences it, as well as one's world view and previous life experiences. In our society, one of the few contexts in which military aircraft are encountered is at so called air shows.

## Military Equipment

To the professionals who manage and wage wars, air shows are a valuable opportunity to publicly display the essential tools of "air power." They see military aircraft as practical equipment that is central to the success of almost any military operation. They know that the role of aircraft in warfare has rapidly increased in importance over the past 100 years, and they cherish the chance to showcase their hardware to the public.

To them, military aircraft are seen as the technological solutions to specific combat situations. For instance, some aircraft are used to conduct reconnaissance and spy missions. Others are used as vehicles to move soldiers and equipment to battlefields thousands of kilometres from home. Others are essential in "forward air control," marking enemy targets with smoke or flare bombs. Others are used to drop a mind-boggling array of weapons on the enemy. Others are used to escort and protect bomber aircraft during their missions. Others, like the Tutor aircraft used by the Snowbirds aerobatic team, are training aircraft used to ensure that Canadian fighter pilots can successfully use CF-18s to bomb targets as they did in Iraq and Yugoslavia.

From their perspective, warplanes are practical, high-tech tools essential in gaining a quick victory over the enemy. They are symbols of air superiority, military power and the strength of one's country. They help us to protect our values and way of life.



## Killing Machines

To thousands of refugees who regularly flee to Canada to escape from war and repression around the world, military aircraft are just the opposite. Having been on the receiving end of such weapons systems, victims of war see warplanes as the vehicles that dropped bombs on their communities, or brought invading troops, tanks and other deadly hardware used in the invasion that forced them to escape.

Warplanes are the harbingers of unimaginable suffering. They heralded the injury, disfigurement and death of loved ones, the destruction of ones home, neighbourhood, place of work, schools and hospitals. Indeed, warplanes represent the devastation of one's entire community and the obliteration of ones way of life.

It may seem inconceivable to such victims that Canadians would see such weapons systems without even thinking for a moment about the incredible human misery and suffering that these devices have spread throughout the world. They might reasonably wonder how any civilized or caring person could attend, or even condone, festivals devoted to warplanes and those who fly them.

For victims of war, warplanes call to mind the pain and destruction

that they experienced in war. Warplanes are potent symbols that invoke sadness, despair, horror, terror and even the loss of one's potential, or hope for the future. Warplanes represent a hell of fire and death rained upon on the earth.

## Sources of Entertainment

Military air shows represent another world altogether. To the enthusiasts who attend these festivities, military aircraft are seen as a wonderful source of family fun and entertainment. These annual events showcasing the world's most advanced aircraft. They represent the pinnacle of advanced technology and civilization itself. They just happen to be military planes because the military just happens to have the world's fastest and most graceful aircraft. When spectators see military aircraft perform aerobatic feats, they stand transfixed and mute. They are wrapped in awe and dumb-struck by powerful majesty of aircraft technology.

Air shows are mass public events that are fun for the whole family. Like a country fair, there are lots of people milling about amidst concession stands loaded with cotton candy, souvenirs and junk food. There are often midway rides with free rides for kids. Camouflage face painting and

military-style obstacle courses are also a great hit. All these exciting activities and the loud upbeat music are just the backdrop for the celebration

of air power. In this show-biz atmosphere, military pilots are the star performers. They pose for photo ops next to their planes and, like heroes, they sign autographs for adoring fans.

Military aircraft streak across the sky faster than the speed of sound. They are seen as gleaming objects of art performing high-tech ballet to the sound of rock music. They are the ultimate symbols of fast-paced action, entertainment and a life-style that just can't be beat.

## Tools of War and Propaganda

To many who are interested or engaged in peace, human rights, social justice, development, the environment and many other issues, the warplanes exhibited at military air shows call to mind a litany of reasons to oppose war. They were used in countless invasions, interventions and wars that have killed literally millions of innocent people in the past few decades alone. These warplanes have been used to suppress national liberation movements, prop up brutal military dictatorships and ensure "stable" regimes where our corporations can safely plunder the resources of other nations. They have destroyed societies, undermined economies and devastated ecosystems. They also symbolize the incredible waste of money and human resources that have been poured into the military industrial complex while the social programs have been neglected and undermined.

Air shows are military propaganda exercises masquerading as entertainment. They glorify and romanticize war technology, and war itself, by camouflaging tasteless and tacky displays of raw military might as if they were innocent family festivals. They are all glory with none of the gore.

Air shows sanitize horror. There's plenty of hype and hoopla without a trace of the misery and devastation of war. The horror of war is

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hidden behind a veil. Air shows are insidiously used to build public acceptance, consent and support for military institutions, their operations and their growing demands for bigger budgets. The onslaught of military propaganda that bombards air show audiences is relentless. Any thoughts of war, human misery or the many unjust reasons why one society bombs another to rubble are duly avoided. Although air shows parade the most advanced killing machines ever created, spectators are oblivious to this reality. While enjoying these spectacles of war technology, airplane enthusiasts overlook the troubling and embarrassing truths of history.

In a very real sense, air shows facilitate an extreme form of holocaust denial. These are strong words, I know, but the reality is that millions of innocent people have been killed during the past fifty years by the same kinds of warplanes that provide family entertainment at air shows.

What's worse, air shows not only hide the holocaust, they shamelessly turn it into a kind of paradise on earth. Weapons systems are converted into beautiful works of high-tech art. The deadly tools of war become exciting and fun symbols of family values.

Military air shows are such blatant, tasteless examples of propaganda that they invite, indeed oblige, people of good will to respond. Military air shows present our communities with the daunting challenge of confronting the instruments and institutions of war. By coming face-to-face with warplanes, and those who venerate them, we can expose some of the many contradictions that divide our world.

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## Quiz:

### Why Should Military Air Shows be Opposed?

Military air shows should be opposed because they:

- Showcase the world's deadliest war machines, including those designed to "deliver" nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction.
- Display types of warplanes that have killed literally millions of innocent civilians.
- Exemplify a culture of violence so pervasive that war technology is used for public "entertainment."
- Pose as educational events to teach children and youth about aviation, science and technology.
- Associate positive feelings of fun and joy with technology that causes grief and misery.
- Are one of the most effective tools for recruiting children and youth.
- Glorify war machines and romanticize as heroes those who wield and use deadly weapons.
- Completely ignore the many tragic human costs of war.
- Are ecologically destructive. (Some warplanes burn more fuel per hour than the average US car in a year.)
- Promote war as the best means of resolving conflicts while totally ignoring peaceful means.
- Waste taxpayers' money that should be spent on socially useful social programs.
- Provide marketing opportunities for military corporations to peddle their deadly products of war.
- Are the biggest military propaganda events in existence.
- Are dangerous to spectators and performers when airplanes crash.

## Military air shows are valuable opportunities for:

### •Education:

To raise public awareness about peace, social justice, human rights, development, the environment, and many other issues,

### •Protest and Resistance:

To oppose war, militarization, injustice, globalization, violence in enter-

tainment and the military's tremendous waste of global resources.

### •Community Building:

To strengthen existing groups and to build new networks, bonds and coalitions within the community of those trying to promote a peaceful and just world.