

# Who's Involved in Military Air Shows and Why?

By Richard Sanders, Coordinator, Coalition to Oppose the Arms Trade (COAT)

A variety of different private groups, corporations and government institutions collaborate to make military air shows among the biggest mass public entertainment events in Canada. The following pages outline some of the major players and their roles.

“Snowbird demonstration involves nine jets flying for approx 0.8 of an hour. The forecast AVPOL burn rate for 431 (AD) Sqn is 1047 / hr. Therefore approx 7540 litres of fuel is used in each show. The amt of transit fuel attributed to a specific show is difficult to calculate, because the Team will typically perform anywhere from 7 to 14 shows after departing and before returning to 15 Wing Moose Jaw. All total for the 2000 season, however, 431 (AD) Sqn spent approximately 1370 hours, or 1.4 million litres of fuel, getting the aircraft to and from airshows.”

**Source:** Response to COAT's Access to Information request

## (1) Government: *Footing the Bill for Fuel and other Expenses*

### **Federal:**

**Direct Grants:** This spring, the Auditor General Sheila Fraser fueled opposition to Liberal government corruption and cronyism. Much attention was focused on dubious payments to Groupaction (a company that donated generously to the Liberal war chest). However, the *Globe and Mail* obtained hundreds of Public Works documents exposing other examples of unexplained billing and political interference. For example, the federal government gave \$739,000 to a Quebec air show, for which "no project file exists"

Although the feds give direct grants to some Canadian air shows (through Human Resources Development Canada), indirect government subsidies are perhaps even more necessary for these privatised propaganda events.

**Indirect Subsidies:** Indirect support takes many forms. For instance, the government often gives charitable status to the private, non-profit organizations that sponsor air shows.

One of the federal government's most significant contributions to the military air show industry is the subsidization of jet fuel burned by government warplanes flying to and from these spectacles. Although air show organizers usually pay for the fuel that is burned by warplanes *during* their performances, the federal government covers the much greater cost of jet fuel used to fly between these events.

Through an Access to Information request, the Coalition to Oppose the Arms Trade learned that Canada's military aerobatic team of nine aircraft -- the Snowbirds -- burned 1.4 million litres of jet fuel while flying between

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air shows in the year 2000. Because the cost of jet fuel was about \$1.35 per litre in 2000, this means that the federal government paid about \$1.9 million on fuel for the Snowbirds alone. The Department of National Defence also revealed that the Snowbirds burn about 7,540 litres of fuel per performance and that they perform 7 to 14 times per year in Canada. This means that, in total, air show organizers paid for between 50,000 and 100,000 litres of the fuel in 2000, i.e., between \$67,000 and \$135,000. Meanwhile, the federal government paid for *one or two dozen* times that much for the fuel to get these aircraft to and from Canada's military air shows. This is a major subsidy that organizers absolutely need to maintain their operations. The Snowbirds also perform at many military air shows in the U.S.

But this is just the tip of the iceberg. The Snowbirds' Tutor aircraft are only one of many different types of Canadian warplanes that regularly entertain at military air shows across Canada and the US every year. They also pay for the fuel used to get all of the other RCAF warplanes back and forth between Canadian and US military air shows.

While air show organizers are expected to pay for meals, hotels and

other limited expenses incurred by Air Force personnel during military air shows, the government pays for all other expenses, including salaries, and the maintenance of military aircraft.

There is a strong campaign now underway to mobilize public support for a government plan to buy new aircraft for the Snowbirds team. Links to online petitions are now being prominently displayed on the web sites of major air shows across Canada. This is a public cover for the Canadian military's efforts to get new training aircraft for Canadian air force pilots. The Tutor aircraft used by the Snowbirds are also the training aircraft used to prepare Canadian fighter pilots so they can fly the CF-18s that have been used in numerous bombing raids against Iraq and Yugoslavia.

This spring, when insurance companies increased their fees due to post-September 11 concerns about threats to warplanes, air show organizers lobbied the federal government to pay these added costs. However, only a few Canadian air shows (including those in London and Leamington Ontario) were subsequently cancelled for this year. Taxes should be spent on useful things, like health care, housing, education and the environment not war propaganda.

### **Municipal:**

Municipal governments sometimes give grants to air show organizers under programs supporting community festivals. For instance, military air shows in Ottawa and Hamilton have received tens of thousands of dollars per year. Most air shows receive some support from municipal and regional governments.