

One on one with the Chief of the Air Staff

Lieutenant-General Ken Pennie, CAS, recently spoke with Air Force Editor Holly Bridges. Here are excerpts of that interview.

HOLLY BRIDGES: What are your first impressions of the organization now that you have visited most of the wings and deployed units?

CAS: Certainly I have seen the professionalism of our people out there and they're doing a tremendous job, but there's no doubt that we're fragile. Our financial situation has obviously put a lot of pressure on a lot of people and they're coping remarkably well. We have a good organization with a lot of excellent people committed to serving their country and committed to doing what they can with what they've got and that's one of the stories that needs to be reinforced. We're doing the best we can with what we have.

HB: Is there anything that has surprised you?

CAS: The biggest thing I've probably noticed since coming back into the Air Force is the inability of the organization to have dealt with the consequences of the budget reductions in a more significant way. And that's something we're trying to resolve right now by following through on initiatives already in place, by establishing our doctrine, our vision, our future, where we're trying to go, what we're trying to be. We've put a lot of work into that transformation since I've been here.

HB: Yes, certainly we're in this period of tremendous change and transformation and you hear that almost on a daily basis at the headquarters level. When you get out to the wings, though, I think you would agree that the average member might not describe the Air Force in a way that points to the future.

CAS: I understand the frustration that's out there. I go to wings and I see it, I hear it. But I think one has to look at the positive side. We have delivered. We've delivered Sea King dets, TAL dets, Op APOLLO, a whole list of things. Every capability the Air Force has, has been utilized somewhere in the world over the past few years. And we've done an excellent job. Notwithstanding all the pressures and how tough it is, we are delivering what the Government of Canada asks us to do. And we're not just doing it, we're doing it exceptionally well, perhaps too well, that's our biggest problem.

HB: I've heard you say that we're a victim of our own success.

CAS: Yes. We do things so well it's hard to explain, on the other hand, why we need so many more resources. We know what we could do with more resources, we know how much easier it would be. In a larger context, when you cut an organization in half and double its operational tempo you have to anticipate some consequences. And we're now dealing with those consequences and doing what we can to aggressively try to fix them. And so now, and the CDS supports this, we are trying to aggressively address the quality of our operational life of our people and that's what Air Force transformation is all about. We are trying to find a way to address overall the quality of operational life of our people by making internal reallocations and that means making some tough choices. Nobody wants to have less of something, but we've only got a fixed budget. So as an Air Force we have to determine how we want to address that. Basically we have to deal with the Department, get the Department to accept or reject the list of what we come up with, and then go into the Defence Review. It's no easy challenge when you have to make significant adjustments that could potentially effect local communities. But I would say in a general sense we probably have more infrastructure than we need. This ultimately will involve some infrastructure cuts.

HB: Base closures, maybe?

CAS: The Defence Minister has said that no Canadian Forces bases will be closed. This is something that would require a government decision. But, we will look at anything that makes sense, anything that allows us to move to an operational posture where we can deliver similar capabilities albeit somewhat less, but to use the resources



LGen Ken Pennie flies the CH-149 Cormorant during a recent visit to 9 Wing Gander.

Le Lgén Ken Pennie, aux commandes d'un CH-149 Cormorant, pendant une visite effectuée récemment à la 9^e Escadre Gander.

we have, to allocate so that we can achieve a better operational life. But it is more than just money. We are also looking at more efficient ways of doing things such as how we train. How many aircrafts do we need and what types? Where should they be based? How should they be equipped and manned? How do we deploy? Everything we do is being examined. The entire process we are going through is about redistribution of assets, not cuts. It's about reallocation, not curtailment.

HB: Does that point to the expeditionary concept?

CAS: Yes, it's part of our concept, part of our vision. It's not actually delivering more than we've delivered. It means delivering what we're doing, but having a more systemic way of doing it. So any individual will know when they're in the window to deploy and when they're not in the window to deploy, so they'll know when to start their French language training, their professional development training and when they're going to be expected to deploy. The way I see organizing this is that people will spend a certain amount of time vulnerable to deploy if it's required and then will come off that posture and someone else will stand up. So we have a series of organized numbers of people who rotate through this deployability window in a systemic way so we're not doing it on an ad hoc way.

HB: Let's talk about retention and recruitment. What is your sense as to how we're doing?

CAS: Certainly we've had a lot of challenges with a lot of military occupations, including pilots for example. We're still aggressively trying to recruit and train pilots because we've now gotten rid of that training backlog in Moose Jaw. In terms of other occupations that are even more stressed, we're looking at those very carefully. The whole 500 series, for example, is critical to the functioning of the Air Force. I am satisfied that our team is working on this very aggressively to shorten the timelines to get people fully qualified. So it's a challenge and I'm confident we're working our way through that challenge.

HB: Would you go so far as to invite some of those folks who are close to their 20-year mark to stay in?

CAS: I would invite them to stay as long in the Air Force as they are comfortable doing so. We have a lot of things on the capital front that are looking very positive. It's

happening more slowly than we would like to happen, but it is happening.

HB: What are your thoughts about strategic airlift? Can we, should we be the kind of Air Force down the road that can deploy if we're still only using the Hercules?

CAS: We can deploy effectively now using our Airbus and our Hercules and contracted aircraft. I think strategic airlift in Canada is something that needs to be better understood. I can't think of anywhere else in the world that is harder to support an operation in than Afghanistan and we're doing it all by air—Airbus and Hercs—and we're doing it effectively. The first step toward moving forward is to replace those Hercules that are doing fixed wing search and rescue. That will allow us to replace those aircraft with presumably a twin-engine aircraft that has similar capabilities. Then we could retire the oldest of the Hercs and take some pressure off the fleet. The second part is to replace the rest of the Hercules. We're going to use the same office and we're going to manage the two projects simultaneously. Actually there are three with the strategic air-to-air refueling for the Airbus which is already out of the block. In terms of the Hercs, we haven't even defined the requirement yet, once we do that departmentally, get that approved and once that's nailed down, we can go fill that requirement.

HB: Given the challenges you've mentioned, given the transformation that's coming, how do you hope or intend to position the Air Force here at home and internationally?

CAS: My emphasis is on quality. It always has been. Our comparative advantage has always been our quality and so one of our biggest concerns is maintaining our quality. We are spending too much of our energy running the Air Force day to day and not enough focusing on the kind of Air Force we want to be. We're fixing that.

HB: In the meantime, what message would you like to pass along to members on where we are now and where we are going?

CAS: Stay the course. When I go out to any part of our operation and any time our senior leaders go out and visit our deployed operations and come back to Canada they are impressed with what we do. I think we're very highly respected. It's recognized we have some significant challenges to deal with and I think it's our job to work through those challenges to make the Air Force a better place.