

Exercise Maple Flag: Canada and the U.S. master military manoeuvres

The idea that "the military always trains to fight the last war" took a pounding at CFB Cold Lake, Alberta, this spring, when American pilots and ground crew flew north (and in one case south) to join their Canadian counterparts in Exercise Maple Flag D-1.

For a month, fighter pilots tackled one another above Cold Lake's 10,000-km² range, in exercises designed to hone their combat skills against other aircraft and ground threats under realistic battle conditions. Many exercises involved tactics developed in response to the latest generation of modern weapons.

Maple Flag was spawned from Red Flag, code name for the ongoing tactical exercise created by the United States Air Force Combat Maneuvers Center at Nellis AFB, Nevada.

U.S. Air Force and Marine Corps pilots have been learning lessons from their "combat" experiences above the desert sands since 1975. Divided into Red defending and Blue attacking forces, the pilots battle for superiority above sophisticated electronic warfare ranges.

While the Blue forces try to knock out targets, which include a tremendous array of built-to-scale airfields, missile sites, rail yards, tunnels and even troops, Red Force aircraft strike back, supported by ground threat simulators.

Last fall, Canadian and British detachments went to Nellis, turning Red Flag

into an international event. This year Canada and the U.S. agreed upon a joint exercise at Cold Lake.

Survivability the issue

The rationale behind the creation of Red Flag was based on statistics which show that most aircrew are shot down within their first ten missions. In response the USAF developed exercises to improve survivability by exposing pilots to a wide range of realistic combat situations.

At Nellis, pilots practise tactics gleaned from Vietnam and recent Middle East conflicts, as well as tactics designed to beat weapons and situations they still haven't encountered in actual combat.

The Cold Lake range is an empty expanse of wooded hills and muskeg. Spring weather varies from long, sunny days to dour periods of low cloud cover. Fog sometimes obscures lakes and rivers, as it did during the first two weeks of Maple Flag (while the ice was still breaking up).

Five Canadian fighter squadrons were involved. Pilots arrived from 433^e Escadrille, based at CFB Bagotville, Quebec, and another group from 409 Squadron in Comox, British Columbia, joined Cold Lake's own 417 Squadron and 419 and 434 Squadrons.

American participants arrived from widely scattered bases. They included detachments from the Marine Corps sta-

tion at El Toro, California, from David Monthan AFB, Arizona, from Langley AFB, Virginia, and from Bergstrom AFB, Texas. Some made the trip from Elmendorf AFB, Alaska.

Action stations

By the end of April the routine was set: two major missions each day and a videotaped debriefing in the late afternoon. Scenarios, missions and even the lineup of aggressors and defenders changed daily.

Missions required careful preparation, taking into account the type of ordnance to be carried, route to be flown and procedures for attack. In order to increase effectiveness and decrease the risk of airborne confusion, formation leaders had to be familiar not only with their own mission, but with that of accompanying formations. A mass launch followed the pilot briefings, and once over the range the war began.

Making the low level ingress (range entry) which characterized air combat during recent Mid-east conflicts, the ground attack pilots started to hunt for the elusive targets. Avoiding a net of hovering fighters directed by ground controlled intercept (GCI) radars, each pilot would "pop up" to about 1,500 feet in the target area, sight the target, release his ordnance and rejoin his section.

But, as in real war, not all ground attack missions went smoothly. Fighter pilots flying a combat air patrol over the target area often took their toll of attacking aircraft.

No official tallies of kills and killers were kept during Maple Flag. The daily debriefing invariably included tales of victory and woe from both sides. But who won or lost was never the issue. Why someone won or lost was the real concern.

To the majority of American pilots, the exercise was familiar. Many of the U.S. forces are veterans of Red Flag, held ten times a year. But the flying freedom afforded by Cold Lake's isolated location came as a pleasant surprise.

Mass takeoffs unencumbered by the restrictions imposed in heavier travelled areas turned into dramatic international events. Pairs of *Eagles* roared down the runway only moments before camouflaged *CF-5s* hurtled along behind them, followed by flights of *Skyhawks*, silver *CF-104s* and so on.

The short trip back and forth to the range requires only visual flight rules. The



A USAF Corsair fires a Canadian-made CRV-7 rocket above the Cold Lake ranges. It was the first time that foreign forces had used the Canadian-designed rocket.

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