

## QUEBEC FIRM TRAINS TOP GUNS

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IAN BARRETT FOR THE TORONTO STAR  
Top Aces president Didier Toussaint (front),  
with partners Paul Bouchard (middle) and  
Dave Jennings, with one of their eight  
Alpha jets.



**TORONTO STAR**

Situation: Cold Lake, Alta.

Altitude: 40,000 ft.

Airspace: Above Canadian Forces Base, Canada's only tactical bombing range.

Marc Taillefer is in attack mode. The retired air force fighter pilot is skirmishing with two CF-18 fighter jets, which have his Alpha jet in their sights.

"It's like a knife fight in a phone booth," says Taillefer of the dogfights that could be over in five minutes. He manoeuvres fast, pulling up hard to the right. He loses them.

The hour-plus combat exercise ends, as everyone heads back to the tarmac. In a few hours, it'll start all over again.

In this war game, Taillefer plays the bogey, the advanced fighter pilots are his students, and the lesson is the art of war.

"It's a very, very tight environment where you're pulling a lot of Gs (gravity)," he says.

Taillefer is one of 15 aerial battle coaches who fly for Top Aces, a small aerospace consulting firm based in Point Claire, Que.

It's the first and only Canadian civilian company hired by the national defence department to provide airborne combat training support to the entire armed forces: air force, army and navy.

The arrangement is called Contracted Airborne Training Services (CATS), a move by a cash-strapped Canadian military to cope with shrinking budgets and staff. An Alpha training jet, for example, costs about \$10,000 an hour to fly, roughly one-third the corresponding cost to fly a forces fighter jet.

Top Aces is owned by a trio of former "top guns," the crème de la crème of Canadian fighter pilots: company president Didier Toussaint, 37, a retired air force major, and partners Paul Bouchard, 37, and retired captain Dave Jennings, 35.

The three go back 20 years to Royal Military College in Kingston. Their friendship "gelled," says Toussaint, after all three were selected for a fighter weapons instructor course in, coincidentally, Cold Lake.

No mere desk jockeys, they're all flying missions right along with their team of 12 experienced former CF-18 fighter pilots, 90 per cent of them also top guns. Toussaint had a 15-year career in the military, and he and Bouchard both flew peacekeeping missions in Bosnia. All three have also flown for Air Canada but are taking a five-year leave of absence while they pursue their new venture.

The company is at the vanguard of a global trend to outsource defence services.

"If we're talking strictly combat support, the Americans have been using industry for a number of years ...," says Brian Watson, director of major service procurement (air), for the national defence department.

"All nations are basically looking at doing the same type of thing, using industry in support functions. I think we are one of the leaders in this."

In the past, the Canadian military has conducted training through joint exercises with the U.S., which also contracts out some services, says Watson.

Now, it will continue some joint training exercises with the U.S. military but, "We won't be requiring U.S. contractors now as a stopgap measure, because we will have our own contracts with a Canadian company."

Though it was last March when Top Aces beat out four other companies to land the \$93.9 million CATS deal, they've only been flying combat exercises in Canada for two months now. They would have begun earlier, but they had to wait for their eight Alpha jets — manufactured in Germany, imported from the U.S., and costing \$1.5 million apiece — to get approval from the U. S. state department.

Rather than sitting idle during that delay, they headed to the U.S., training the Canadian army's forward air controllers in Arizona's Yuma Desert, where conditions are similar to those in Afghanistan.

After that, they flew to San Diego and took part in joint training with the U.S. and Canadian navy, providing the air component.

Now their mission is to fly coast to coast honing the skills of Canada's already operational army, navy and air force.

This spring they'll take part in "Maple Flag," billed by the defence department as an annual "six-week international air combat exercise" that's expected to attract more than 5,000 military personnel from allied countries around the world.

Top Aces will play the role of "Red Air," or the enemy. Along with U.S. fighter jets they'll provide air and ground threat during the main exercise, according to military personnel.

Awarding the service to Canadian industry gives the military more control and flexibility over training times and service, says Watson. "Any time we can award contracts into Canada and create employment in Canada, it's just good news.

***'... you run out of money and you have to start looking at other areas to solve your problems.'***

Retired major general Lewis Mackenzie

"It's government policy to pursue alternative service delivery when it makes good sense, when we can show a good business case for pursuing it. There's very strict treasury board guidelines on how one puts together a case for alternative service delivery and what has to be followed."

And not just in Canada.

Top Aces has already had offers from U.S. military and private aerospace companies, says Toussaint. "Europe, Great Britain and the U.S. are definitely the markets we're looking at."

Not everyone is happy with the CATS arrangement.

"I really wish we didn't have to do it," says retired major general Lewis MacKenzie.

But as a pragmatist, he knows it's the only viable option. The defence budget, MacKenzie explains, has shrunk 27 per cent since 1993. "We've slashed the F-18 squadrons and numbers dramatically," he says, adding, "We're short pilots.

"During my career, when the numbers were there and the budget was there to cope with the Cold War, we did (combat support training) ourselves. But if I was sitting as the minister of national defence or the chief of defence staff, when you work your way down and run the priority list, you run out of money and you have to start looking at other areas to solve your problems.

"When I left in '93, we had 86,000 troops. Now we're down to 55,000 (troops). That's for all three — the army, navy and air force, plus the green trades, the doctors, lawyers and dentists."

The infantry — what MacKenzie calls "the guys with the bayonets" — "is 2,000 smaller than the (7,000-strong) Toronto police force," he says.

Until 1999, Canadian Forces Challenger aircraft and T-33 jets provided combat support training via an internal squadron.

After the Defence White Paper in 1994 called for reduced defence spending, the military was obliged to find new ways to provide alternate service delivery.

MacKenzie reasons that outsourcing airborne combat training to a group of young, retired Canadian fighter pilots such as Top Aces, who've got the training and the experience, makes "good use of those resources." So far the CATS concept is working out. Top Aces has been doing "very well in the delivery of service," says Lt. Col. David Hughes, chief of staff for the directorate of forced air generation for the Department of National Defence. "They also support naval ships to get them ready for deployment."

The staging ground for a Top Aces mission could be Cold Lake or Bagotville, Que., Victoria or Halifax, but the routine is the same. Each mission runs from 1 1/2 to two hours. They run missions two to three times a day during a training exercise that, on average, lasts one to two weeks.

At 7 a.m., Toussaint and his team are at the air base for a co-ordination briefing with both sides to decide what role they'll be playing and where they'll be staging the mission.

Then the team meets alone to decide tactics.

By 8:30 a.m. they're in the air.

Their role is to prepare the troops for overseas deployment.

They simulate attacks on the CF-18 pilots. "We play the bad guy in that role," says Toussaint.

Swooping down in some cases from 40,000 feet to one mile, the Top Aces will play enemy bogey to the navy ships. They'll fly a variety of patterns to see how the radar and weapons systems operators on board ship react as they try to electronically target the Alphas and simulate destruction. Or they might be towing a target — say, a banner — for navy target practice.

They'll possibly fly their main good guy role as close air support to the army. That's when the Alpha jets play the role of CF-18 pilots coming to the aid of military ground forces under attack, says Bouchard, who had a 13-year stint with the military.

We would be the aircraft they "practise talking on" before they left for Afghanistan, he says.

By that he means their pilots will be talking by linked radio to the forward air controller with the troops on the ground, who co-ordinates air-to-ground operations. "If you had an army in trouble on the ground (and) if they had a forward air controller with them, this guy could call in air support to engage the enemy," says Bouchard. Before summer, they expect to do a joint training exercise with the army, navy and air force. "We'll provide the bogeys again for that," says Toussaint.

For half of the practice missions, the military's electronic warfare officers, who are captains and majors in the air force specially trained in jamming radar and communications will be sitting in the backseats of the eight Alpha jets, says Toussaint.

They wrap up each practice mission with a 1 1/2- to two-hour debriefing "to get the lessons learned," says Toussaint.

For Toussaint a practice mission is almost as adrenaline-pumping as a real one. "Once you go airborne, it's the real stuff," he says. "You have CF-18s flying on one side defending a target or attacking a target, and we're on the other side.

"The scenarios start to be realistic at very long range, and get as close as 1,000 feet (away)," says Toussaint.

"That is very close."