

War is in the air: Montrealers divided on recreational flyovers.

Two military jet flyovers in the last few weeks had Montrealers reflect on this popular tradition of major sports events.



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*A CF-18 Hornet fighter jet taken from the Kondiaronk Belvedere during a flyover in the fall of 2024.
Photo courtesy of Nils D'Hondt, from the Montreal Spotters group.*

On June 6, two CF-18 fighter jets took off from the Bagotville military base and flew over the Percival Molson stadium at 7:35 PM, right as the crowd finished singing the Canadian national anthem, kicking off the Alouettes' home opener.

The traditional pre-game flyby is an iconic rendezvous for fans of Montreal's star football team, named after the lark emblem of the 425th Royal Canadian Air Force squadron, the country's first French-Canadian squadron formed in 1942.

On June 15, the Grand Prix gave F1 fans and Montreal residents yet another flyover, when nine red-white-blue CT-114 Tutor aircrafts from the Canadian Forces Snowbirds pierced the cloudless sky at 1:30 PM.

"A rare and impressive sight"

Military jet flyovers are frequent in the summer, when airshows and sports season bring people together for large popular gatherings. Every year, the RCAF allocates aircraft and personnel to "a small number of non-aerobatic tactical demonstrations", according to its

Facebook page. These flyovers often make a vivid impression from the ground, as the roar of jet engines engulfs the city and swift aerial maneuvers captivate residents' attention.

"Usually, you only see these jets at airshows or military bases," engineering student and aviation hobbyist Nils D'Hondt explains, "so it's truly a rare and impressive sight to spot them flying low above the town!" D'Hondt, who likes to hike up Mont-Royal to take pictures of the jets from the Belvedere, is a member of the 55th Avenue Montreal Spotters community, a group of pilots and hobbyists sharing a passion for aviation.

It can be tricky to time the perfect picture, as the planes are incredibly fast, and their precise location impossible to predict. "In the case of CF-18, the pilots never disclose their flight path in advance because these are active fighters," says Pierre-Olivier Veilleux, who manages the Quebec Airshow social media.

"A way to normalize military presence in civilian public space"

But not everyone shares D'Hondt's and Veilleux's interest in flyovers. Some Montrealers are bothered, or even disturbed, at the sound and sight of military aircrafts flying over residential neighborhoods.

It is the case of Martine Eloy, activist in Échec à la Guerre, a Montreal-based anti-military group. Eloy says she sees fighter jets flyovers as being part of a militarism continuum. "Showing off these military aircrafts in the context of popular recreational events is one way to normalize military presence in civilian public space," she says.

For the military personnel involved, flyovers are not purely for the show. In addition to being opportunities for close-range target training for the pilots, they're also a chance for the army to inspire new ambitions. Veilleux says flyovers promote the RCAF to a younger audience of potential recruits, adding that there is a concern that Canada may face a deficit of "both civilian and military pilots" in the near future.

"People are grateful to get a heads up"

Trevor Kjorlein, founder of Plateau Astro and local space educator, regrets that Montrealers aren't adequately warned about these flyovers. He says that it's easy to get startled "when the jets fly by, loud and scary," even though "we have the tools to warn people that it's going to happen".

These last few years, Kjorlein has used his platforms of 15000 followers combined to spread reliable information about flyovers, including the date, time and probable flight path of the aircrafts.

"People are grateful to get a heads up," Kjorlein says. "I have never experienced war," he adds, "but Montreal welcomes a lot of refugees who've lived in war zones. I have to imagine that some people get flashbacks when these jets fly over."