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RCAF service, summiting mountains are complementary passions, RCAF captain says

News Article / October 4, 2016

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By Lieutenant Guy Bernard

Captain Antoine Labranche, a CH-146 Griffon pilot with 438 (Ville de Montréal) Tactical Helicopter Squadron and an avid mountaineer, has just summited three legendary European peaks.

Born in Granby, Quebec, and raised in Stanbridge East, Captain Labranche enlisted as an infantry officer in the Reserve Force in 2006, while studying history at Concordia University in Montreal. He graduated in 2009 and shortly thereafter transferred to the Regular Force to pursue a career as a pilot. Subsequently, he was assigned to 438 Squadron. He was most recently deployed in June 2016 on Operation Nevus 16, in Canada's High Arctic.

His plan was ambitious – to scale Mont Blanc in France, the Matterhorn in Italy and the Eiger in Switzerland. In a conversation beforehand, he looked off into the distance – as he always does when talking about his passion for mountain climbing. "I'd like to use this expedition to carry the 438 Squadron flag to these three mountain tops again," he said. "I think that the image of planting the squadron's colours on these major peaks illustrates the effort the unit has been making as a result of the change in leadership and our new assigned tasks."

Meeting challenges

438 Squadron has met some challenges recently. It integrated two new flights: Tactical Aviation, a group responsible for developing the planning and delivery of air taskings across the spectrum of conflict and helping to train aviation gunners and pilots to command various types of missions; and Air Test and Evaluation, a team that tests state-of-the-art equipment on the Royal Canadian Air Force's entire fleet of CH-146 Griffon helicopters. These changes required a great deal of effort and adaptation on the part of personnel, in terms of both knowledge and training.

And the squadron has welcomed a new commander, with a new vision, in the person of Lieutenant-Colonel Martin Pesant.

The stage was set for nourishing Captain Labranche's desire to conquer new summits, proudly bearing the squadron flag. And conquering these legendary mountain peaks meshes with his career as an aviator, he believes. "The mental and physical abilities required to execute operations or to take on a mountain," he says, "are values incarnated in the vision of the Royal Canadian Air Force and in my approach to mountain climbing. One passion feeds the other."

He tailors his physical training to the mountains he wants to summit, and never neglects his cardio, whether on deployment or in garrison, even if it means going for his morning jog in the ruins of a Cold War facility in Greenland, as he did during Operation Nevus 16.

"I would say that I am fairly balanced between rock climbing, ice climbing, mixed multi-pitches, bouldering, and high-altitude mountaineering, the last being my greatest strength and exposure," Captain Labranche says. "I also believe that some of my skills learned in the military, from both a survival and a professional aspect, have helped me in mountaineering. In some cases, like meteorology for the Mont Blanc ascent, my skills have enabled a safe summit, and in other cases, have saved my life. I called out the window of opportunity with regard to weather for the Mont Blanc ascent."

Climbing team

Image Gallery



(/assets/AIRFORCE_Internet/images/nouvelles/2016/10/capt-labranche-oct-eiger-summit.jpg)

Related Links

[Antoine Labranche's Expeditions \(available only in English\)](http://www.antoinelabranche.com)
(<http://www.antoinelabranche.com>)

[Eiger \(available only in English\)](http://www.summitpost.org/eiger/1)
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[438 Tactical Helicopter Squadron \(http://www.rcf-arc.forces.gc.ca/en/1-wing/438-squadron.page\)](http://www.rcf-arc.forces.gc.ca/en/1-wing/438-squadron.page)

[CH-146 Griffon \(http://www.rcf-arc.forces.gc.ca/en/aircraft-current/ch-146.page\)](http://www.rcf-arc.forces.gc.ca/en/aircraft-current/ch-146.page)

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Three mountaineers accompanied Captain Labranche on his Eiger climb; the resulting team possessed a wealth of skills and experience.

Stéphanie Maureau, from France, is very strong in climbing and dry-tooling (rock climbing using ice axes and wearing crampons), and is a champion in ice-climbing competitions. She is also only the second woman in the last 25 years to be certified as a mountain guide by the International Federation of Mountain Guide Associations (IFMGA).

Guillaume Omont, also from France, is a serious-minded, modest mountaineer. He has climbed various hard pitches and routes in the Alps, including the North Face of the Grande Jorasses (a mountain in the Mont Blanc massif on the boundary between France and Italy), and the North Face of the Eiger. He has strong skills in navigation, route-finding, and rock- and mixed ice-climbing, and he, too, is an IFMGA-certified mountain guide.

Alina Zagaytova, from the United States, recently summited Denali in Alaska, North America's highest peak. Before that, she summited the highest peak of Antarctica, Mount Vinson. She has climbed all over the world, specializing in high-altitude mountaineering. Her current project is the Seven Summits – climbing the highest peak of each continent; she has climbed six of seven. Her eyes are set on tackling the looming heights of Mount Everest in the Himalayas next spring.

Upcoming challenges

With his expedition in the Alps now behind him, Captain Labranche is planning his conquest of Alpamayo and Huascarán in Peru, as well as Illimani, Huayna Potosi and Sajama in Bolivia. And you can bet he will have his squadron's flag close at hand. But for the time being, after his two weeks of "rest" in the European Alps, he is all set to take on the advanced tactical aviation course, coming up in winter 2017.

438 (Ville de Montréal) Tactical Helicopter Squadron is a Royal Canadian Air Force unit based at Saint-Hubert, Quebec. Equipped with CH-146 Griffon helicopters, the squadron supports a variety of missions, taskings and operations locally, across Canada and elsewhere. With reservists making up 50 percent of its strength, 438 Squadron embodies the Total Force concept, wherein members of the Regular and Reserve Forces work in tandem to achieve the RCAF's operational objectives.

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Date modified:

2016-10-05