

1-20-2012

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Recommended Citation

Windsor, Lee A. (2000) "Professionalism Under Fire: Canadian Implementation of the Medak Pocket Agreement, Croatia 1993," *Canadian Military History*: Vol. 9: Iss. 3, Article 3.
Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/cmh/vol9/iss3/3>

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Professionalism Under Fire

Canadian Implementation of the Medak Pocket Agreement, Croatia 1993

Lee Windsor

For many Canadians, the Somalia Affair became a symbol of their armed forces in the 1990s. Intense media coverage of a Somali teen's murder by Canadian paratroopers, its cover-up by senior bureaucrats and officers at National Defence Headquarters and a series of subsequent scandals shook public confidence in the nation's military institutions. Negative coverage particularly in the first half of the 1990s created an image of military incompetence and unprofessionalism, vividly captured in letters to the editor to major newspapers across the country. In recent years that image was balanced with more positive ones of Canadian Forces personnel protecting the peace in the Former Yugoslavia, Africa, and East Timor. Nevertheless, the spectre of Somalia still lingers in the minds of many both in and out of uniform.

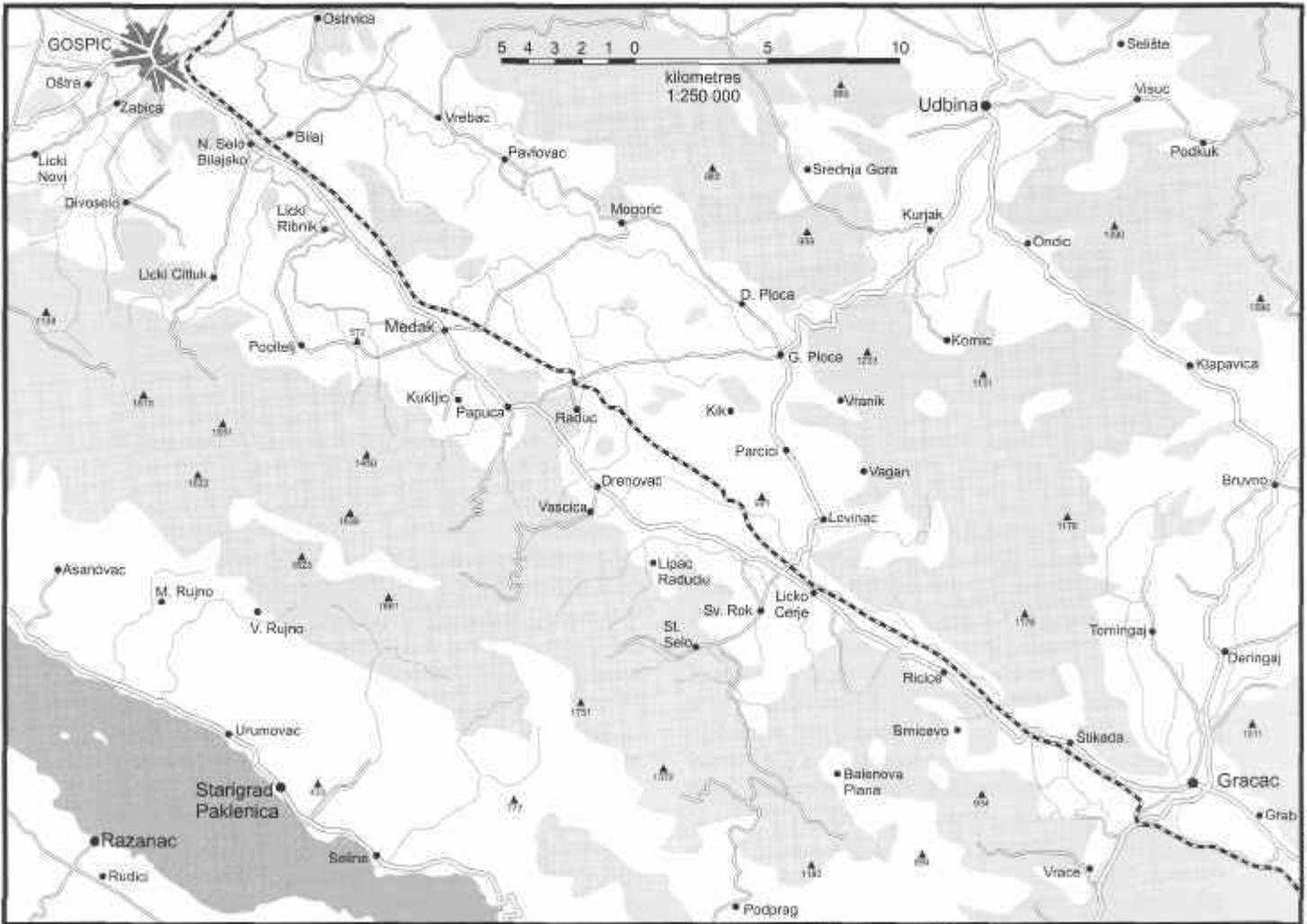
The strong presence of Somalia in the national collective memory is perhaps partly a result of the Report of the Commission of Inquiry into the Canadian deployment to East Africa, revealingly titled *Dishonoured Legacy: The Lessons of the Somalia Affair*. This report is one of the few publicly accessible, quasi-scholarly accounts of a Canadian military operation in the last decade which is based on an allegedly full appreciation of primary sources. Essentially, the report represents a first draft of Canadian military history since the end of the Cold War.

Composed by a commission of two jurists and a senior journalist, the report lent credibility to public perceptions that the Canadian Forces in the 1990s were deficient and in danger of collapse. The commissioners claimed that during Operation Deliverance (the mission to

Somalia) "systems broke down and organizational discipline crumbled" within the Canadian Airborne Battlegroup, and that "planning, training, and overall preparations fell far short of what was required....We can only hope that Somalia represents the nadir of the fortunes of the Canadian Forces. There seems to be little room to slide lower."¹ The report implies that Canada's military personnel were poorly trained, incompetently led, badly equipped, and quite often racist. *Dishonoured Legacy* is especially influential as an historical text since it passes criticism of the Somalia operation to all of Canada's military institutions based on an admittedly incomplete investigation of criminal activity and cover-up during the mission of one battlegroup on a foreign deployment.

In fact, Operation Deliverance was only one of dozens of missions carried out by Canadian soldiers, sailors, and aircrew during the past decade. Before accepting the commission's condemnation of the professionalism and leadership of the armed forces, and of the army in particular, it would be useful to scrutinize other military activity during the same period. The Balkans are a good place to start. Indeed, Canadian experience in the Former Yugoslavia is more representative of the nation's military experience in the 1990s than the rather unusual case of Somalia.

Since 1992, tens of thousands of Canadian military and naval personnel have endeavoured to restore peace to the Balkans. They have acted as peacekeepers, negotiators, aid workers, and quite often as combat soldiers. Initial examination of a number of Canadian missions



The Medak Pocket

Croatia

September 1993

-  Main road
-  Secondary road
-  Rail line
-  Spot height (in metres)
-  Ground above 900 m



Maps drawn by Mike Bechtold ©2000

to the region in 1992-94, including those at Sarajevo, Srebrenica, and the Medak Pocket, seem to contrast with the Somalia Commission's findings about poor leadership and training. What follows is a closer investigation of Canadian efforts to implement the Medak Pocket Agreement in 1993 to determine if the nation's armed forces were truly at their "nadir" during the fateful year of the Somalia scandal.

In mid-September 1993 United Nations Protection Force (UNPROFOR) soldiers from 2nd Battalion, Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry (2 PPCLI) advanced into the disputed Medak Pocket in southern Croatia with orders to implement the latest cease-fire between Croatian Army troops and Serb irregular forces. 2 PPCLI were reinforced with two mechanized companies of French troops. The Canadians, well schooled in the delicate art of "peacekeeping", discovered their negotiation skills and strict impartiality were not immediately required the Medak Pocket. Instead they found themselves calling upon their primary war-fighting skills when Croatian Army units opened fire with machine-guns, mortars and artillery in an effort to stop the Canadian advance. To complete their assigned mission the Patricia's were required to threaten the use of, and ultimately use, deadly force against Croatian units. However, the true test of military professionalism and discipline came after the smoke cleared, the Croatians backed down and the Canadians immediately reverted to their role as impartial peacekeepers in their dealings with individuals who only moments before had attempted to kill them.

Resolute Canadian and French action came at a time when the UN reputation in Croatia was at a low ebb due to repeated failures to secure the infamous United Nations Protected Areas (UNPAs). Colonel George Oehring, commander of UNPROFOR Sector South, claimed the Princess Patricia's "won for the whole mission a credibility and respect that will be long remembered by the opposing parties and much facilitate our future efforts here."² For their efforts, 2 PPCLI was awarded a United Nations Force Commander's Commendation from French General Cot, the first of its kind of one of only three awarded in UNPROFOR's history.

Of course, the Canadians originally went to the Former Republic of Yugoslavia to protect a

fragile truce, not to impose peace on warring factions locked in a bloody civil war. Until the early 1990s Yugoslavia was a federation of six republics including Croatia, Serbia, Montenegro, Slovenia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Macedonia, all quite similar in language, culture and custom. Despite the presence of ultra-nationalist movements in each republic, the Yugoslav federation existed harmoniously earning international acclaim and the privilege of hosting the world at the 1984 Winter Olympics.

The collapse of centralized communist authority in Yugoslavia during the late 1980s brought nationalists in each republic into mainstream politics. In Serbia, Slobodan Milosevic and in Croatia Franjo Tudjman, rose to power by destroying the carefully constructed Yugoslav identity in favour of a new nationhood based on blood and religion. In the process, Serbia, most powerful of the six republics, attempted to take control over the crumbling federation. This did not appeal to growing nationalist movements in Croatia and Slovenia resulting in declarations of independence in 1991, followed closely by a similar move in Bosnia. Croatia and Bosnia contained large numbers of ethnic Serbs, hostile to the federal breakup. Croatian and Bosnian Serbs established paramilitary forces to resist their respective new governments leading to two distinctly separate civil wars.

During the opening months of these wars, the Yugoslav National Army (JNA), on orders from Belgrade, openly intervened to prevent the breakup of the federation. JNA involvement usually meant assisting Serb militias in Croatia and Bosnia. However, the regular army was a mirror of the old federation and thus suffered from the same problems of divided loyalties. Non-Serb officers and senior NCOs left the JNA to join the new national armies of their home republics. This exodus of non-Serbs destroyed cohesion in the JNA, thus eliminating the only modern professional military force in Yugoslavia. With no army left to implement its goals and an economy on the verge of collapse, Serbia gradually withdrew from conflicts in Croatia and Bosnia, leaving Serb minorities there to fend for themselves against the newly created Bosnian and Croatian armies. Serb militias acquired weapons, vehicles, and even volunteers from the JNA as it withdrew, while newly created Croatian and Bosnian forces received equipment from



CF Photo Unit RES6-CD-049 Photo 47

A rifleman from the 2nd Battalion, Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry near Medak, equipped with the C-7 automatic rifle.

Croatian government in Zagreb and minority Serbs who sought independence from the new state. The peace agreement included establishment of a UN patrolled buffer zone in under Chapter VI of the UN Charter.⁴ Both parties welcomed the cease fire, when in fact it held, as an opportunity to build their military capabilities until such time as victory could be assured. This was the environment faced by Canadian soldiers making up UNPROFOR's Canadian Battalion Number 1 in 1993.

The second rotation of CANBAT 1 was based on the "regular force" 2nd Battalion of Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry. However, of the 875 soldiers making up the battlegroup, only 375 actually came from that unit. One hundred and sixty five came from other regular force units and assignments. The remainder consisted of 385 reserve soldiers who had volunteered from militia units across the Canada. Due to the requirement for highly skilled and experienced regular soldiers in support and technical trade positions within the battlegroup and the overall shortage of combat infantry soldiers in the Canadian Army, the majority of those reservists served in the rifle companies. In fact, reserve soldiers made up 70 percent of rifle company strength during the mission. This includes seven out of the 12 platoon commanders who came from militia battalions as Reserve Entry Scheme Officers (RESO).⁵

Reserve augmentation was not new in the Canadian Army. For decades, under-strength regular battalions had their ranks filled out with reservists before deploying to Cyprus. Indeed, after much debate in the Canadian defence community, providing regular unit augmentation with individual soldiers became a primary role for reserve regiments in the 1990s. Augmentation was particularly vital during the time of immediate post-Cold War conflict proliferation, a corresponding spike in the number and intensity of peacekeeping missions combined with shrinking personnel pools and budgets. This was especially true in 1993 when the army, now known as Land Forces Command, was stretched nearly beyond its means; providing two battlegroups to the Former Yugoslavia (the other in Bosnia), one to Somalia and a number of other units, detachments and

outside sources like Germany and the United States. However, equipment alone does not build an army. It would take years before the various militias and armed gangs would coalesce into professional military forces.

For most of the period between 1992-95, the Yugoslav wars of succession were waged by amateurs. When the JNA was removed from the equation, they took with them the normal codes of conduct held by modern professional military officers. Rival militias fired weapons in the vicinity of opposing troops, more often than not, intent on killing civilians. The result was to create a pattern of combat where military casualties were few. The new armies knew how to kill, but not how to wage war against other soldiers properly. Unprotected civilians were a different matter. And so, the objective in these wars was not to defeat the opponent's combat power but to consolidate new ethnic nation-states by killing or driving out those who did not fit.³

The United Nations Protection Force (UNPROFOR) entered this storm in 1992, first in Croatia and later in Bosnia. In Croatia, the UN brokered a cease-fire between the new

Lieutenant-Colonel James Calvin, commander of the 2 PPCLI Battlegroup

individual soldiers to a myriad of missions around the world. Nevertheless the 2 PPCLI Battlegroup in Croatia contained the highest concentration of reserve soldiers on an operational mission to date. The standard of Militia performance in a tense and demanding theatre like Croatia, remained to be seen.

The 2 PPCLI Battlegroup spent the first three months of 1993 conducting preparation training first in Winnipeg, and later in Fort Ord, California. Much of this time was spent working the large reserve compliment up to basic regular force standards for section and platoon battle-drills. There was no time to properly exercise companies, let alone the whole battalion.⁶ Besides, section and platoon skills were generally all that is required of soldiers manning observation posts on UN peacekeeping duty. No one could know that the 2 PPCLI platoons would be called upon to gel together and go into action as a full battalion.

2 PPCLI moved to Croatia at the end of March 1993, replacing 3 PPCLI on what Land Forces Command referred to as Operation Harmony. At that time, UNPROFOR's CANBAT 1 was responsible for a UN Protected Area in Sector West, in the northwestern corner of Croatia. It was there that Lieutenant-Colonel James Calvin, commanding the 2 PPCLI Battlegroup, and his troops developed a reputation among the warring parties and their fellow UN contingents for being fair, but tough.

Unlike units from most other international contingents, Canadian battalions operated with its full compliment of war-fighting weaponry and equipment. Rifle companies travelled in M-113 Armoured Personnel Carriers (APCs) configured in an American armoured cavalry fashion with an armoured cupola offering some protection for crewmen manning the powerful Browning .50 calibre machine-gun. The companies also carried along with them C-6 medium machine-guns and 84 mm Carl Gustav anti-tank rocket launchers to add to platoon weaponry consisting of C-7 automatic rifles and C-9 light machine-guns.

Rifle company firepower was amplified by the heavy weapons of Support Company including 81mm mortars and TOW (Tube-



launched, Optically-tracked, Wire-guided) anti-armour guided missiles mounted in armoured turrets aboard purpose-built APCs.⁷ Canada was among the first member nations to deploy blue-helmeted soldiers with this kind of firepower when UNPROFOR first deployed to Croatia in 1992. This sort of stance was not initially well received in UN Headquarters in New York, where the traditional notion of lightly armed blue-bereted peacekeepers prevailed.⁸ However, by 1993, the value of well-armed forces in the Former Yugoslavia, where the consent of the warring parties was not always apparent, was well understood.

Once on the ground, 2 PPCLI earned their tough reputation not only with their equipment, but by their demonstrated willingness to use it. Not long after their arrival, the battalion conducted a major defensive exercise in the sector. The exercise was intended partially to complete the battlegroup's collective training and improve force cohesion, but also to demonstrate to the Croats that an attack into the UN Protected Area in Sector West would and could be resisted by the UN.

The Patricia's vigorously enforced weapons bans in their area of operations, seizing contra-band arms of all types from both warring factions. Colonel Calvin also, on his own initiative, developed a procedure to deter Croat and Serb patrolling and raiding within the Protected Area. Previously, belligerent soldiers detained by the UN after engaging in such activity would be returned to their own authorities for punishment. Calvin began releasing detainees to the opposing forces with UN civilian police keeping a close eye to ensure punishment was not "terminal."⁹

After five months of in-theatre training coupled with hands on practice, the 2 PPCLI Battlegroup became one of the most effective and respected units in all of UNPROFOR. It was for that reason that the new Force Commander, French Army General Cot, selected them to move to Sector South to undertake one of the more difficult assignments in United Nations peacekeeping history.

Unlike 2 PPCLI's relatively tranquil former area of responsibility, Sector South was still a war zone. It was here that Croatian Serbs most fiercely resisted the notion of living under Zagreb's rule. Croatian and Serb troops routinely exchanged small arms, mortar and artillery fire all over the area. This steady exchange of fire was punctuated in 1993 by several major Croatian offensives, including "Operation Maslencia" in January. At Maslencia, French troops guarding the UN Protected Area were forced to abandon their positions when faced with heavy Croatian fire. The French withdrawal allowed advancing Croatian units to occupy the supposedly de-militarized buffer zone. This event destroyed Serb confidence in the force mandated to protect them. It also taught the Croatians that a few well directed bullets and shells would send the blue-helmets packing anytime they wished to remove prying UN eyes.¹⁰

Nonetheless, by summer of 1993 both sides had been pressured by the international community into a new ceasefire in Sector South known as the Erdut Agreement. Under the terms of this agreement, Croatian forces would withdraw from many of the territories gained in the Maslencia offensive. The Canadian battlegroup, reinforced with two mechanized French companies brought in from Bosnia and

northern Croatia, was ordered to ensure that Croatia followed through with the agreement.

General Cot anticipated that Croatian troops would be reluctant to withdraw from their hard-won gains. This is why he chose the well armed and highly effective CANBAT 1 to implement the agreement and restore UN presence in Sector South. Cot expected and even hoped for trouble as he was looking for an opportunity to win back UN credibility lost in January.¹¹ He would get his wish.

While Cot expected trouble, he may not have been aware of the extent to which Croatian forces used the Erdut negotiations to shield preparations for a renewed offensive in Sector South. On 9 September, as lead UN elements moved into the village of Medak, the Croatian 9th "Lika Wolves" Guards Brigade commenced its assault on the salient section of front known as the Medak Pocket. Intelligence assessments later indicated the Croats were most likely attempting to push back the frontline so that their operational zone headquarters in the town of Gospic would be out range from Serb gunners located in the long narrow Medak salient.¹² They may also have intended to drive a corridor to the Dalmatian coast, or draw attention away from domestic political controversies back in Zagreb.

The Lika Wolves Guards Brigade were well supported with tanks and artillery, including a squadron of former East German Army T-72s as well as older model Warsaw Pact armour. However, while the Croat force contained all the trappings of a modern mechanized army, it applied its combat power in very rudimentary fashion. Artillery was used to lay down a simple creeping barrage while the infantry and armour advanced without any degree of co-ordination. As Croat armour pushed down the main road along the valley between Gospic and Gracac, a Croat light infantry force operating in the mountains to the south moved to close off the Medak Pocket from the opposite direction. The even more poorly organized and equipped Serb defence collapsed under the crude, but effective Croat onslaught.¹³

The Croat preliminary barrage on Serb defences in the Medak Pocket commenced as lead elements of 2 PPCLI were moving up to the

CF Photo Unit RE96-CD-049 Photo 20



An Eastern bloc T-72 main battle tank, similar to those deployed by the Croatian army in the Medak area.

front, through the Serb rear area, in preparation to implement the Erdut agreement. The outbreak of heavy fighting required a rapid and dramatic adjustment to Canadian plans. Trained to react quickly to unexpected developments on a fast-moving battlefield, the Patricia's easily managed the adjustment. Forward platoons immediately commenced construction of fortifications to protect against the bombardment. The well-drilled Patricia's took advantage of every lull in the barrage to further sandbag andrevet positions. Over 500 mortar, field and medium shells fell in an area the size of Parliament Hill around Lieutenant Tyrone Green's 9 Platoon from Charlie Company within the village of Medak itself. This did not deter Green and his men from carrying out their newly assigned tasks of gathering intelligence on the developing battle and recording cease-fire violations. It is a tribute to their high-intensity war fighting skills, including a thorough appreciation of the effects of artillery, that only four Canadians were wounded during the shelling.¹⁴ If the Croats expected their barrage on Serb defences would also drive off the UN, they were wrong.

Serb reinforcements poured into the Medak Pocket from all over Yugoslavia and in two days managed to stop the Croatian advance cold, but not before the ten kilometre long and five kilometre wide salient had been pinched out and the front line straightened, roughly 3000 metres northwest of Medak. Fighting raged on in a bitter

stalemate for two more days until Serb artillery opened fire on the Croatian city of Karlovac, and then launched a FROG long range missile into a Zagreb suburb. Serb retaliation coupled with growing pressure from the international community was enough to convince President Tudjman to abandon the offensive and withdraw his forces to their pre- 9 September startline.¹⁵ A verbal agreement to that effect was signed into the "Medak Pocket Agreement" on 13 September. It would be up to the reinforced Canadian battlegroup to ensure all parties complied with the new terms.

Up to this point, 2 PPCLI had just been passive - if direct - participants in the Medak Pocket action. However, that soon changed. At 1630 on 14 September, 1993 Lieutenant-Colonel Calvin held an Orders Group ("O" Group) with his subordinate officers and NCOs to review plans for the coming operation. The new withdrawal agreement was to be implemented in four phases. The first step of occupying Serbian frontline positions would be made by 2 PPCLI's Charlie Company and one French company on 15 September. Phase 2 would see Charlie Company, under the watchful eyes of the anti-armour platoon, establish a crossing point in the no-man's-land between the opposing armies on the main paved road running the length of the valley floor. In phase 3, Delta Company and the second French Company from FREBAT 3 would move along the road, through



Sergeant Rod Dearing's section of 7 platoon, posing in front of their trenches the morning after their firefight with elements of the 9th Croatian Guards. Bearing is second from the right, with his helmet removed. Five of Dearing's riflemen were reservists.

CF Photo U
RE96-CD-0
Photo

the secure crossing point and on to occupy the forward Croatian positions. 2 PPCLI's Reconnaissance Platoon and the battalion tactical headquarters would follow Delta company into the pocket. The last step would be to oversee the Croatian withdrawal to their pre-9 September positions thereby completing the separation of forces and establishing a new demilitarized zone. The Patricia's Alpha and Bravo Companies, which only just arrived in the area from Sector West, would secure the remainder of the CANBAT 1's area of responsibility during the operation. Unfortunately the Canadians would have to do without its 81 mm mortar platoon. Since the unit was due to rotate home in only a few weeks, the tubes had already been shipped back to Canada.¹⁶

In the hours prior to the operation General Cot personally flew into the area to speak to Colonel Calvin, essentially taking overall command of the operation and eliminating the link to Sector South Headquarters in Knin. Too much was riding on the coming events to have any delay in the reporting chain or any misunderstanding about what was to happen. The Force commander reminded Calvin of how vital it was that his battlegroup succeed in order to restore UN credibility. Cot also indicated that

details of the Medak Pocket Agreement had not likely made it from Zagreb down to the frontline Croatian soldiers that would be soon encountered. General Cot strongly implied that force may have to be used to ensure their compliance with the agreement. He reminded Calvin that the UN rules of engagement allowed to blue helmeted Canadian and French troops to return fire in kind if they or their mandate were threatened.¹⁷ The mission was clear and the stage set.

The M-113 Armoured Personnel Carriers of Charlie Company rolled forward on 15 September on schedule. Not long after setting off, Lieutenant Green's 9 Platoon came under small arms and machine gun fire from the Croatian lines. At first it appeared that General Cot was right about the Croat frontline units not being advised that the Canadians were coming. The solution to this problem seemed obvious. Get the white painted armoured vehicles out in the open where there would be no mistake that it was UNPROFOR advancing, rather than a Serb counterattack.

Large blue UN flags were fixed to radio antenna and the carriers driven out of a tree line into the open. This brought an increase in Croat fire, including heavy machine gun, rocket

propelled grenades and 20 mm anti-aircraft gunfire. It was now obvious that the Croatians had no intention of letting the Canadians advance. All along the Charlie and FREBAT 1 Company front, the blue helmets halted in whatever defensive positions they could find, roughly along the former Serb line. For the next 15 hours, the Croatians shot it out with Canadian and French troops.¹⁸ Interestingly enough, of all the weapons used against the advancing UN troops, the deadly T-72s known to be in the area did not make an appearance. Perhaps Croat officers were aware of the potency of the TOW anti-armour missile system, especially when manned by Canadian crews, and were unwilling to risk their precious new vehicles.

It was not exactly a battle, at least not by the standards of western armies where positions are attacked with fire and movement. There were no infantry assaults or sweeping tank thrusts to seize ground held by the UN. That is not how war is waged in the Balkans. Ground combat in the Former Yugoslavia consisted of both sides attempting to make opposing positions untenable by bringing maximum fire to bear. Conversely, as soon as a position became too dangerous due to accurate and sustained fire, it was abandoned. Any movement that involved placing troops in the open was avoided. Weapons were plentiful in the region but soldiers, especially of the trained variety, were not. This way of war may also be a vestige of Tito's guerilla military doctrine that formed the basis of the old Yugoslav National Army in which many of the officers and NCOs on both sides had served.

The argument then is that by Balkan definition, the Croat firefight with Canadian and

French soldiers was indeed a battle. It surely seemed that way to Sergeant Rod Dearing's section of 2 PPCLI's 7 Platoon on Charlie Company's left near the village of Licki Citluk. It was there that some of the heaviest firing took place, often at ranges of 150 metres. At one point in the evening Croat mortars and 20 mm autocannons went to work on the Canadian trench line. Croat infantry tried repeatedly to flank Dearing's section, but each time they were driven off by Canadian rifle and machine-gun fire directed by a Starlight telescopic night vision sight.¹⁹ In the early hours of 16 September, when Croat troops made one last attempt to push out the Patricia's, Private Scott LeBlanc leapt out of his trench blazing away at the attackers with his belt-fed C-9 light machine-gun. Leblanc's audacious act was apparently enough to convince the Croats that these Canadians were not about to give ground and that it was time to pull back.²⁰ Regardless of how this action compares to other larger battles in Canadian military history, for the riflemen of Charlie Company, it was war. Five of Dearing's men were reservists, including LeBlanc.

Over on the UNPROFOR right, the French Company was having better luck. Each of their mechanized platoons was equipped with one VAB infantry fighting vehicle mounting a 20mm autocannon in an armoured turret. When hostile fire was returned with this powerful and accurate weapon, Croat troops were less inclined to offer resistance.²¹

The firefights lasted all night and early into the next morning. During the night Colonel J.O.M. "Mike" Maisonneuve, UNPROFOR's Chief Operations Officer, arrived from Zagreb in an effort to talk down the Croatians. Eventually,

French Army platoons under Canadian command at Medak rode in VAB Armoured Personnel Carriers. One in each platoon was armed with a 20 mm autocannon (shown above). These were used with great effect against Croat attackers.



Maisonneuve, Lieutenant-Colonel Calvin, and a senior UN Military Observer drove down the main road to meet with the local Croat commander. Operational Zone Commander General Ademi, rough equivalent to a NATO corps commander, agreed to the meeting and let the Canadian delegation pass through the lines to his headquarters in Gospic. After much heated discussion, Ademi agreed not resist phase 2 and that the Canadians could establish the crossing point that night without Croatian interference. Phase 3 would commence at 1200 the following day when Delta Company would pass through the crossing point to move into the Croatian trench line.²² During the night, Major Dan Drew and his Delta Company Headquarters moved up the road to the crossing point. The remainder of the company would join him in the morning for their 1200 departure time.

The Patricia's rose to a horrifying sight on the morning of 16 September. Smoke could be seen rising from several villages behind Croatian lines. Explosions and an occasional burst of automatic rifle fire could also be heard. It suddenly became clear why the Croats resisted the Canadian advance. Those villages were inhabited predominantly by Serbs and Croatian Special Police were not yet finished ethnically cleansing them.

Colonel Calvin clamoured for action and immediately recalled Colonel Maisonneuve to meet again with General Ademi. Unfortunately, with only four widely separated companies and no supporting tanks or artillery, Calvin's force had no chance in a frontal attack against the entire Croatian 9th Brigade which had tanks and heavy guns. Even if the Canadians did have the strength, it would be far beyond the scope of UNPROFOR's mandate to deliver a full attack. Returning aimed fire was one issue, but launching an assault was another. There was little the Canadians could do but sit back wait for the 1200 timing. As they waited they listened helplessly to the explosions and shooting and imagined what was happening to the Serb civilians to their front.

Delta Company rolled ahead on schedule at noon mounted in their M-113s and accompanied by several TOW anti-armour vehicles. They no sooner started down the road in column before

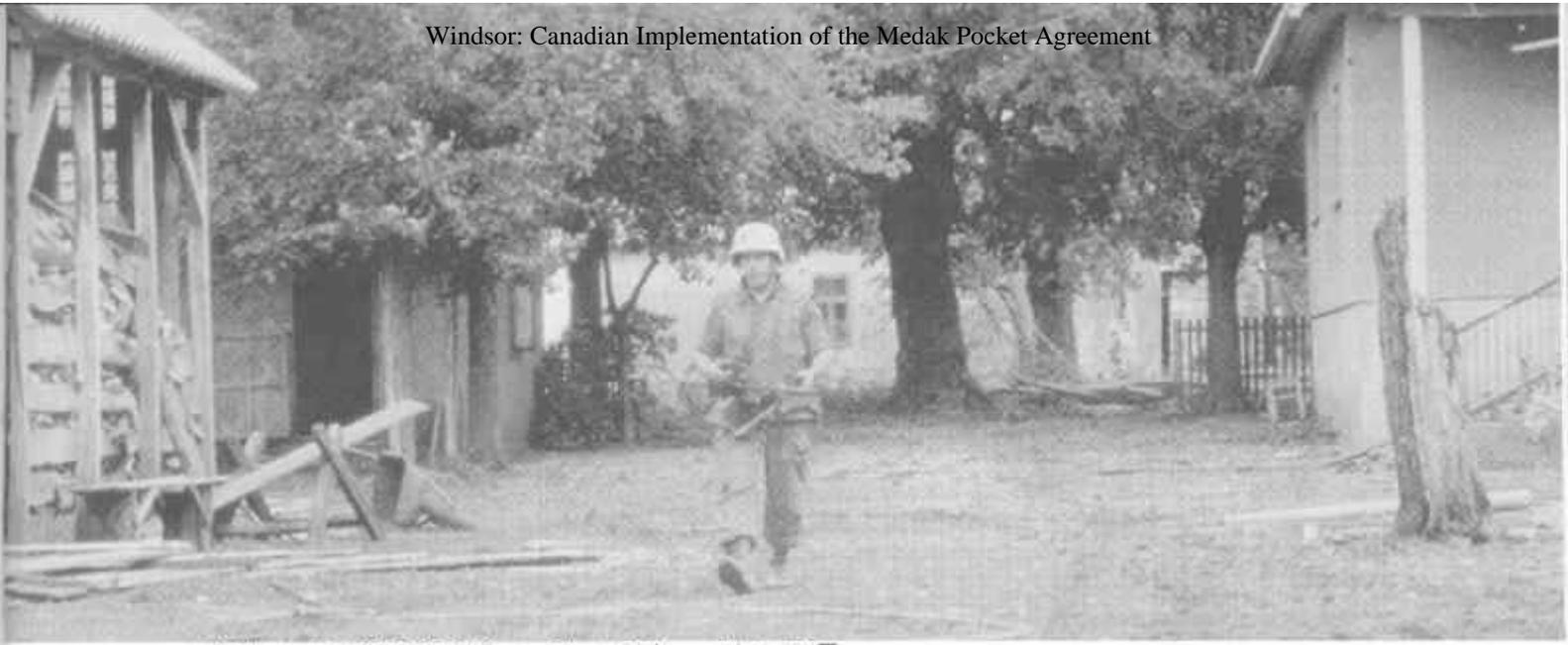
they ran into a Croatian roadblock. To the left of the road sat a very modern and very deadly T-72 main battle tank, a gift from Germany. On the right side of the road, two towed anti-tank guns and a bank of Sagger missiles were aimed at the Canadian column. A company of Croatian infantry protected by a hastily laid mine field that completed the obstacle.

The senior Croatian officer on the barrier refused Major Drew's demand that his company be allowed to pass. Weapons on both sides were made ready for action. This tense Mexican standoff lasted over an hour. Throughout the standoff, the well trained and highly disciplined Canadian riflemen maintained their cool while the Croats grew increasingly uneasy. Essentially the resolute and stern-faced Canadians began to stare down the Croats manning the roadblock.²³

During the tension, Colonel Calvin arrived on the scene. He argued heatedly with the ranking Croat officer, Brigadier General Mezić.²⁴ Mezić was General Ademi's senior liaison officer. His presence at the road block indicated that the Operational Zone Commander had no intention of keeping his word. In fact, Mezić was stalling to give Croatian Special Police the time they needed to destroy evidence of ethnic cleansing.

Shortly after 1300, Calvin took a gamble to break the deadlock and avoid a bloody point-blank shootout in the middle of the road. Some 20 international journalists had accompanied Delta Company, all seeking to cover the story of the Croatia's latest invasion of the Serbian Krajina. It was time to bring them into action. Calvin called the media crews to the front of the column and held a press conference, complete with cameras, in front of the roadblock. He told the reporters what Croatian policemen were doing on the other side of the barricade and had the camera's film the Croatian's obvious interference with the UN's effort to make peace.

The cameras broke the increasingly shaky Croat resolve. By 1330, Delta Company was on the move. Calvin's imaginative ploy was too late to stop the ethnic cleansing of Serb villages in the Medak Pocket, but it did allow the blue-helmets to reach most of the villages before all traces of Croatian atrocities could be erased.²⁵



CF Photo Unit RE96-CD-049

Photo 49 ▲

Photo 42 ▼



Above 81 left: Soldiers from 2 PPCLI survey battle-damaged buildings along the line of confrontation in the Medak Pocket.

Unfortunately, the battlegroup was also held up later in the afternoon by senior UN officials who insisted that they stick to a rigid time table for advancing into the pocket, a timetable that did not take into account that with every wasted minute, more evidence was destroyed. It was not **until 17** September that UNPROFOR soldiers occupied the whole area.

The next few days were the most difficult for Canadian soldiers involved in the Medak Pocket operation. Their job was now, along with civilian

police officers and UN medical officers, to sweep the area for signs of ethnic cleansing. The task was enormous. Each and every building in the Medak Pocket had been levelled to the ground. Truck loads of firewood had been brought to start intense fires among the wooden buildings. Brick and concrete buildings were blow apart with explosives and anti-tank mines. The Croats completed their task by killing most of the livestock in the area. That was the small-arms firing heard on 16 September. In addition, oil or dead animals were dumped into wells to



Canadian Colonel George Oehring took command of UNPROFOR Sector South subsequent to Medak. Oehring reported a significant improvement to UN credibility among the warring factions following the operation. Here Oehring (centre) takes then Vice Chief of the Defence Staff, Vice-Admiral Larry Murray (second from right) on tour in Sector Headquarters in Knin.

make them unusable for Serbs entertaining any thought of return.²⁶

Only 16 Serb bodies were found scattered in hidden locations. The open ground was littered with rubber surgical gloves. Calvin and his men believed the gloves indicated that most Serb dead laying in the open were transported elsewhere and only those hidden in basements or in the woods had been left behind in haste. A mass grave containing over fifty bodies was later located in the vicinity. The bodies recovered included those of two young women found in a basement. They had apparently been tied up, shot and then doused with gasoline and burned. When found, the bodies were still hot enough to melt plastic body bags. At another location, an elderly Serb woman had been found shot four times in the head, execution style.²⁷

While the job of gathering evidence may have been the most difficult for the Canadians, haunting many of the young soldiers to this day, it was of critical importance. The Medak Pocket provided the world with the first hard evidence that Serbia, although probably the largest, was not the sole perpetrator of ethnic cleansing in the Balkans. Also, the meticulous Canadian procedures used to sweep and record evidence in the area became standardized in UNPROFOR, perhaps providing some degree of deterrence to those who may fear being called before a war crimes tribunal.

Canadian action at Medak earned back some of the respect for the United Nations lost at Maslencia. That same month, a Canadian officer, Colonel George Oehring, took over as

commander of Sector South. Oehring was in a better position that anyone to feel the effects of Medak.

Medak restored UNPROFOR's credibility resulting in renewed dialogue leading to a local informal cease-fire in November, a more formal and wider one at Christmas, and a "bilateral", universal cease-fire signed in Zagreb on 29 March, 1994. Everybody hated us in September 1993. I was stoned and threatened during my first trip to Zadar to meet the Croat commander there. Medak changed all this. The Serbs, right up to my departure a year later, would spontaneously mention *the* resolute fairness of the Canadians at Medak, while the Croats, although grudgingly at first, came to respect the Canadians in Sector South.²⁸

Unfortunately Medak did not go far enough in wiping away the memory of Maslencia. The Canadians may have documented Croat war crimes, but they could not stop them, adding to the sense of insecurity among the Serbs.²⁹ However, Jim Calvin and his men can take comfort in the knowledge that they did everything within their means to keep order in Croatia. The international peacekeeping community was not yet ready in 1993 to take the kind of resolute steps seen last year in Kosovo. It would take several, much larger massacres around the world before international political will could be mustered to intervene and stop ethnic cleansing.

The joint Canadian-French operation at Medak represents a watershed in the development of international conflict resolution. It will be many years before scholars will be able to fully explain the ongoing transformation in

the nature of modern military peace support operations. Sources are not yet available and not enough distance has been established to present a clear, accurate historical picture.

The Medak Pocket Operation also occurred at the beginning of the transition period. The Canadian battlegroup possessed a high degree of combat power and a demonstrated willingness to use it. However, most other contingents in UNPROFOR were totally unprepared in regards to equipment, training and political will to engage in the types of action carried out by the Canadians at Medak.

Analysis of activities engaged in by Canadian troops at Medak offers an alternative view to the conclusions of the Somalia Report. Operations in UNPROFOR's Sector South demanded the full range of capabilities possessed by Canadian soldiers, from fortification construction, marksmanship, and mechanized mobile combat to negotiation and basic investigation techniques. In all these categories, Canadian military leadership and training was of the highest standard. Contrary to the findings of the Somalia Inquiry, the Canadian Army in 1993 contained dedicated, skilled, and well-disciplined professional soldiers. These troops were led by competent, educated, and highly capable officers and senior NCOs.

Medak and Somalia were obviously not the only two Canadian military operations in the last decade. A great deal more research is necessary before a final verdict can be passed on Canadian Forces effectiveness in the 1990s. One thing is clear, however. An institution capable of producing soldiers who could perform effectively in the difficult and constantly evolving conditions at Medak was probably not as close to collapse as some may think.

Notes

This article is based on research conducted for the Conference of Defence Associations Institute.

1. Commission of Inquiry into the Deployment of Canadian Forces to Somalia, *Dishonoured Legacy: The Lessons of the Somalia Affair*. (Ottawa: 1997) p. xxix
2. Memorandum, Colonel G. Oehring to UNPROFOR Deputy Force Commander Major-General J.A. MacGinnis, 1 October 1993.
3. Overview of Yugoslav break-up based on UN Reports and print media analysis conducted while author served as CF operations analyst for Conference of Defence

Associations Institute, 1996-98. For more information on the topic see: Susan L. Woodward, *Balkan Tragedy: Chaos and Dissolution after the Cold War*. (Washington: Brookings Institution, 1995); and *The United Nations and the Situation in the Former Yugoslavia*. (New York: UN Dept. of Public Information, 1995)

4. Troops deployed under Chapter VI of the *United Nations Charter* are mandated to impartially support peaceful resolution of disputes between parties, as opposed to deployments under Chapter VII which allows the use of force to restore international peace and security.
5. Interview with now Colonel J. Calvin, Kingston 1997. Reserve combat arms officers enrolled in the RESO program receive virtually identical training as their regular force counterparts up to platoon/troop command level.
6. Interview with Calvin.
7. War Diary [WD], 2 PPCLI, Operation Harmony Rotation 3, Mar-Oct, 1993.
8. Lewis MacKenzie, *Peacekeeper: The Road to Sarajevo* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1993).
9. Major Dawn M. Hewitt, USAF, *From Ottawa to Sarajevo: Canadian Peacekeepers in the Balkans* (Kingston: 1998) pp. 55-57.
10. Interview with Colonel G. Oehring (Retired), Kingston 1997.
11. Interview with Calvin; Medak Pocket Hearing, Standing Committee on Defence and Veterans Affairs [SCONDVA], 1998.
12. UNPROFOR Intelligence Summary, WD 2 PPCLI, September 1993.
13. Interview with Calvin.
14. SCONDVA Hearing.
15. Colonel J.O. Michel Maisonneuve, "Unity of Action in ex-Yugoslavia," *Defence Associations National Network News* (Winter 1995/96).
16. WD 2 PPCLI, Medak Pocket After Action Report, 1993 Section 5.
17. SCONDVA Hearing.
18. WD 2 PPCLI, Medak Report.
19. Hewitt, *From Ottawa to Sarajevo* p. 64.
20. SCONDVA Hearing.
21. Interview with Calvin.
22. Interview with Calvin.
23. Interview with Calvin.
24. WD 2 PPCLI Medak Report.
25. SCONDVA Hearing.
26. WD 2 PPCLI, Medak Report.
27. Interview with Calvin.
28. Letter from Colonel G. Oehring to Minister of National Defence, December 1996.
29. "It was impossible to have any meeting or negotiations with the Serbs without having '22 January, 1993' (Op Maslencia) discussed ad nauseam." WD 1 PPCLI, End Tour Report Op Harmony, Rotation 4, October 1994.

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