

THE MEDAK POCKET *

Lee A. Windsor - Former Assistant Programme Coordinator- Conference of Defence Associations Institute

AA soldier must have confidence in his own, his section and platoon and higher=s ability to apply deadly force and protect itself. Only when they posses that high level of confidence born from skill at arms will they be able to apply that deadly force calmly and with absolute precision@

Colonel James Calvin, 1998

Introduction

For many Canadians, Somalia has become a symbol of their armed forces in the 1990's. The 1997 *Report of the Commission of Inquiry into the Deployment of the Canadian Forces to Somalia* claimed that during Operation Deliverance Asystems broke down and organizational discipline crumbled....@ in the Canadian Airborne Battlegroup, and that Aplanning, training, and overall preparations fell far short of what was required.@ The report passes this assessment on to all the men and women of the Canadian Forces. AWe can only hope that Somalia represents the nadir of the fortunes of the Canadian Forces. There seems to be little room to slide lower.@ Public bombardment with popular media with images of Shidane Arone=s beaten body and senior officers testifying before the ASomalia Inquiry@, coupled with official condemnation from the Commissioners has reshaped the opinion of a generation.

The commissioners arrived at their harsh assessment after examining a series of specific negative incidents on an otherwise successful mission. The message conveyed to the public by the Somalia commissioners is clear. The Canadian Forces of the 1990's are poorly trained, incompetently led, badly equipped and full of barbarians and racists. It seemed obvious that without immediate and radical government intervention the institution would decay to the point of absolute ineffectiveness. This message became embedded in Canadian popular culture in the 1990's.

The story of the Somalia Asignificant incident@ and subsequent coverup by senior officers and bureaucrats is not reflective of the Canadian Forces as a whole. Indeed, the key to understanding this nation=s military experience in the 1990's lies in the Former Yugoslavia. Since 1992, Canadian soldiers, sailors, and aircrew have been working to restore peace to that region. They have acted as peacekeepers, negotiators, aid workers, and quite often they were forced to be soldiers. On the whole, the story of Canada in the Balkans is one of professionalism, skill, and achievement. This paper will explore a specific example intended as a counter-balance to Somalia. Events in the Medak Pocket

of Croatia took place only short months after the Airborne Battlegroup returned from Africa.

In mid-September 1993 United Nations Protection Force (UNPROFOR) soldiers from 2nd Battalion, Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry advanced into the disputed Medak Pocket with orders to implement the latest cease-fire between Croatian Army troops and Serb irregular forces. They were reinforced with two mechanized companies of French troops. The Canadians, well schooled in the delicate art of Apeacekeeping@, discovered that their negotiation skills were not immediately required there. Instead they found themselves back in their primary war-fighting role 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 the Croatian Army. However, the true test of military professionalism and discipline came after the smoke cleared, the Croats backed down and the Canadians immediately reverted back to their role as impartial peacekeepers in their dealings with individuals that minutes 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 successfully secure the infamous United Nations Protected Areas (UNPA=s). Colonel George Oehring, commander of UNPROFOR Sector South claims Athis unit won for the whole mission a credibility and respect that will be long remebered by the opposing parties and much facilitate our future efforts here.@ For their efforts, 2PPCLI 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.

The Context

This paper will examine events that led to open combat between units of the Croatian army and a reinforced Canadian battlegroup. Who exactly were the warring parties in this part of the Balkans? What were their intentions? How was the United Nations attempting to resolve the dispute? What was the mandate of UN Peacekeeping Forces, including Canadians, in this region? Why were Canadian troops selected to move into the most hotly disputed sector in Croatia and how did they come to find themselves shooting it out with the Croatian regular army? These questions will be explored here.

Most would agree that knowledge of these matters is essential to appreciating the significance of Canadian operations in the Medak Pocket. However, many of us believe we already possess that knowledge based on western media coverage of the breakup of Yugoslavia. This becomes problematic when we consider how badly the popular press has and continues to mis-interpret events in the Balkans. The result is that popular assumptions on the cause and course of the Yugoslav crisis are either inaccurate or in some cases, complete myth. Examples of mistaken impressions include the notion that Serbia is the obvious villain and that Yugoslavia's troubles are the result of violent Serbian expansionism. Another common myth is that ethnic tensions in the region

simmered for centuries and that the wars and genocide campaigns of the early 1990's were inevitable and unstoppable. These faulty assumptions arise from an oversimplification of complex problems, flavoured with bias towards one side or another depending on the location of the field reporters. Also at work is an attempt to justify the unwillingness in the international community to intervene effectively until hundreds of thousands were already dead.

Shedding light on western misconceptions of the Yugoslav wars will thus be a fringe benefit of our study of the Medak Pocket. Indeed one of the significant Canadian achievements during the operation was to catch Croatian forces in the act of ethnic cleansing. The Princess Patricia's uncovered the first substantial evidence that Serbs were not the only party guilty of this war crime, shattering the image of the Yugoslav wars as a simple struggle of good versus evil.

A Federation Divided

Until the early 1990's Yugoslavia was a federation of regions not unlike Canada and the United States. This union consisted of six republics including Croatia, Serbia, Montenegro, Slovenia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Macedonia. Contrary to the fashionable view, the six republics are quite similar in language, culture and custom. In spite of the presence of ultra-nationalist movements in each republic, the Yugoslav federation existed harmoniously earning international acclaim as well as the privilege of hosting the world at the 1984 Winter Olympics.

The collapse of centralized communist authority in the late 1980's brought the nationalists in each republic, out of the fringes and into the mainstream. To strengthen their support, nationalist leaders such as Slobodan Milosevic in Serbia and Franjo Tudjman in Croatia, manipulated history to make their supporters fear fellow Yugoslavs in the other republics. Each rose to power in their respective republic by destroying the carefully constructed Yugoslav identity in favour of a new nationhood based on blood and religion.

Serbia, being the most powerful of the six republics, attempted to take control over the crumbling federation. This did not appeal to the 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 each contain large numbers of ethnic Serbs, hostile to the breakup of the federation. 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 suffering from the same problems of divided loyalties. Non-Serb officers and senior NCO's left the JNA to join

the new national armies of their home republics.

This exodus destroyed the professional cohesion of the JNA, thus eliminating the only professional force in Yugoslavia capable of conducting modern military operations. With no army left to implement its goals and an economy on the verge of collapse, Serbia gradually withdrew from the 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 the newly created Croatian and Bosnian armies received equipment from 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.

This meant for most of the period between 1992-95, the Yugoslav wars were waged by amateurs. Rival militias fired their weapons in the vicinity of the opposing side, more often than not, intent on killing civilians. When the JNA was removed from the equation, they took with them the normal codes of conduct held by professional military officers. The result was to create a pattern of combat where military casualties were few. The new armies did not know how to kill other soldiers properly. Unprotected civilians were a different matter, however. The Serbs in Bosnia sought to kill all the Muslims and Croats in their area, or at least drive them into refugee camps somewhere else. Likewise, the Croats were looking to kill or otherwise evict all the ethnic Serbs living in their newly independent nation. The objectives in this war were not to defeat the opponents combat power but to kill their families so the soldiers would have no home to return to.

In Go The Blue Berets

Into this storm went the United Nations Protection Force in 1992, first into Croatia and later into Bosnia. In Croatia, the UN brokered a cease-fire between the new Croatian government in Zagreb and the Serbs minority which sought independence from the new state. The peace agreement included the establishment of a UN patrolled buffer zone in the traditional peacekeeping pattern under Chapter 6 of the UN charter. Both parties welcomed the cease fire as an opportunity to build their military capabilities until such time as victory could be assured.

This brings us to the Medak Pocket in 1993. At this point in the war weapons are pouring into Croatia from the Germans and Americans who view Croatia as the underdog in a struggle with Serbia proper. By September, 1993 Croatia is ready for a limited demonstration of its new military muscle.

That demonstration came in the form of an attack on a Serb salient in the frontline in UN Sector South known as the Medak Pocket. The assault was delivered by a Croatian infantry brigade supported by armour and a large concentration of mortars and artillery. The 9 September attack surprised Serb militiamen, and made good progress, closing off the salient and straightening the front. After two days though, Serb reinforcements arrived from other parts of the country bringing the Croatian advance to a halt. After the

Serbs fire several Frog-7 missiles into Zagreb, the Croatian Army is ready for a new cease fire and to withdraw to their 9 September start line. The withdrawal would be overseen by UN peacekeeping forces in the form of a Canadian mechanized infantry battlegroup reinforced by two mechanized companies from the French Army.

The problem for the Canadians was that neither side had any respect for the United Nations. Earlier that year, in January, Croatian troops launched a limited attack to seize a power dam and reservoir. When UN forces in the area found themselves in the path of the Croatian advance they promptly withdrew, destroying their credibility among the Serbs whom they were tasked with protecting. The Croatians learned the lesson that if they did not want the UN around, a few rounds at a white painted vehicle would send them running.

When Canadian troops first moved into the Medak area to implement the cease fire, Croatian special police had not finished ethnically cleansing three Serb villages seized during the initial assault. If they were discovered, Croatia's image as a victim of Serbian aggression would receive a crippling blow. Their solution was to engage the Canadians in hope that a few well placed rounds and a UN casualty or two would scare them off, just as it had the previous January.

Unknown to the Croatians at Medak was that the new UN Force Commander, French Lieutenant-General Jean Cot planned to turn up the pressure on the warring parties to cease hostilities. His decision to insert the well armed Canadian battlegroup into the Medak Pocket as a formed manoeuvre force, instead of stringing them out in isolated observation posts, was part of his overall policy of enforcing international agreements and restoring UN credibility.

The Princess Patricia's were the best choice for the job being fully mechanized in M-113 Armoured Personal Carriers and possessing a platoon of mobile armoured TOW anti-tank missile systems. In addition to being well trained and combat ready, the Patricia's had already developed a reputation in Croatia for taking a tough line against cease fire violators. General Cot was sure that the Canadians would not back down in the face of any intimidation in the Medak Pocket. Events later proved him right. So it was that Canadian troops found themselves engaged in action with units of the Croatian Army and special police.

Preparations for Deployment

Of the 875 Canadian soldiers who served in the battlegroup sent to Croatia for Rotation 3 of Operation Harmony, based on 2nd Battalion of Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry, only 375 actually came from that unit. 165 came from other regular force units and assignments. The remainder of the battlegroup consisted of 385 reserve soldiers who had volunteered from militia units across the Canada.

Due to the requirement for highly skilled regular soldiers in support and technical trades in 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% of rifle company strength during the mission. This includes 7 out of the 12 platoon commanders who came from militia battalions.

This sort of reserve augmentation was not new in the Canadian Army. For decades, under-strength regular battalions would have their ranks filled out with reservists before deploying to Cyprus. Indeed, after much debate in the Canadian defence community, regular unit augmentation with individual soldiers has become a primary role for reserve regiments. Post-Cold War conflict proliferation and the resulting spike in the number and intensity of peacekeeping missions, combined with a shrinking defence budget and regular army, meant that in the 1990's militia augmentation became vital. This was especially true in 1993 when the Canadian Army 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 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. Militia performance, especially in a tense and demanding theatre like Croatia, remained to be seen.

The mixed bag force 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 the companies, let alone the whole battalion. Besides, section and platoon skills were generally all that is required of soldiers manning observation posts on UN peacekeeping duty. Who could know that the 2 PPCLI platoons would be called upon to gel together and go into action as a full battalion.

No-Nonsense Reputation

2 PPCLI moved to Croatia at the end of March, replacing their sister unit, 3 PPCLI as First Canadian Battalion UNPROFOR. At that time, CANBAT 1 as it was known in theatre was responsible for a UN Protected Area in Sector West, in the north-western corner of Croatia. It was there that Colonel Calvin and his troops developed a reputation among the warring parties and their fellow UN contingents for being tough.

Unlike units from other international contingents, the Canadian battalion operated with its full compliment of war-fighting weaponry and equipment. Rifle companies travelled in M-113 Armoured Personnel Carriers (APC=s) configured in an American armoured cavalry type fashion with an armoured cupola to allowing the powerful Browning .50 calibre machine-guns to be operated under fire. The companies also carried along with them C-6 medium machine-guns and 84mm 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 augmented 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. 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. 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 known.

2 PPCLI's reputation was earned not only by 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.

CANBAT 1 vigorously enforced weapons bans in their area of operations seizing contra-band arms of all types from both Croats and Serbs. Colonel Calvin also, on his own initiative, developed a procedure to deter patrolling and raiding within the UNPA. 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=.

After five months of in-theatre training coupled with hands on practice, CANBAT 1 became one of the most effective and respected units in all of UNPROFOR. It was for that reason, that the new Force Commander, General Cot, selected them to move to Sector South to undertake one of the most difficult assignments in United Nations peacekeeping history.

The Plan

Unlike CANBAT 1'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 over 1993 by several major Croatian offensives, including Operation Maslencia in January. It was during that mission that French troops withdrew when faced with heavy Croatian fire, leaving Serbs in the UNPA to be ethnically cleansed. This event destroyed Serb confidence in the force designed to protect them and taught the Croatians that any time they wished to have UN troops out of the way prior to an attack, a few well directed bullets and shells would send the blue-helmets packing.

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 task, along with

their French reinforcements was to ensure that Croatia followed through with the agreement.

General Cot anticipated that in practice, 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 a UN presence in Sector South. Cot expected trouble and he was determined not to be the one to back down when it came. General Cot's assessment was more than born out when the Croatian 9th ALika Wolves@ Guards Brigade commenced its assault on the Medak salient on 9 September, just as the lead Canadian platoon was moving into the village of Medak.

The renewed outburst of heavy fighting meant a significant alteration of the Canadian plan. The lead platoons immediately commenced construction of fortifications to protect against the shelling. At every lull in the barrage, the Patricia=s worked at sandbagging and revetting their position. Over 500 heavy shells fell in an area the size of Parliament Hill around Lieutenant Tyrone Green=s 9 Platoon from Charlie Company. It is a tribute to their high-intensity war fighting skills, which included a thorough education on the effects of artillery, that only four Canadians were wounded during the shelling.

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 long salient had been pinched out and the front line straightened just in front of Medak itself. The 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. This Serb retaliation coupled with growing pressure from the international community on President Tudjman, was enough to convince the Croatians to withdraw to their pre- 9 September startline. This verbal agreement was put to paper and signed into the AMedak Pocket Agreement@, which the Canadian battlegroup was responsible for implementing.

At 1630 hrs on 14 September, 1993 Colonel Calvin held an Orders Group (AO@ Group) with his subordinate officers and NCO=s to review plans for the coming operation. The agreement was to be implemented in four phases. The first step would be made by 2PPCLI=s Charlie Company and a French company from FREBAT 1 which would occupy Serbian frontline positions. On 15 September. Phase 2 would see Charlie Company, under the watchful eye of the TOW Anti-armour vehicles, establish a crossing point on the main paved road running the length of the valley floor in the no-man=s land between the opposing armies. In phase 3, Delta Company and a French Company would move along the road, through the secure crossing point and on to occupy the forward Croatian positions. 2PPCLI=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 had only just arrive in the area from Sector West, would secure the remainder of the CANBAT 1's area of responsibility

during the operation.

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 Colonel Calvin of how vital it was that his battlegroup succeed in order to restore UN credibility. Cot also indicated that detailed 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 by reminding 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 was threatened. The mission was clear and the stage set.

Charlie Company Firefight

The M-113 Armoured Personnel Carriers of Charlie Company rolled forward on 15 September to carry out the initial phase of the operation. 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 that the Croat frontline units had not been 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 counter-attack..

Large blue UN flags were fixed to radio antenna and the carriers driven out of a tree line into the open. This brought a storm of return fire, including heavy machine gun, rocket propelled grenades and 20mm 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. For the next 15 hours, the Croatians shot it out with Canadian and French troops.

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 the opponents position untenable by bring 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 trained infantry, 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 NCO's on both sides had served.

The argument then is by Balkan definition, the Croatian firefight with the Canadians and French was indeed a battle. It surely seemed that way to Sergeant Rod Dearing's section of 2PPCLI's 7 Platoon on Charlie Company's right in 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 Croatian mortar crews went to work on the Canadian trench line. Regardless of how the action compares to other larger battles in Canadian military history, for the riflemen of Charlie Company, it was war.

The firefights lasted all night and earlier into the next morning. Colonel J.O.M. AMike@ Maisonneuve, UNPROFOR's Chief Operations Officer, arrived from Zagreb in an effort to talk down the Croatians. Maisonneuve, Colonel Calvin and a senior UN Military Observer drove down the main road to meet with the local Croatian commander.

General Ademi, Operational Zone Commander, rough equivalent to a NATO corps commander agreed to the meeting and let the Canadians 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 hrs the following day when Delta Company would pass through the crossing point to move into the Croatian trench line. 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 hrs departure time.

Mexican Standoff

The Patricia's rose to an horrifying site on the morning of 16 September. Smoke was rising up 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 Croatians resisted the Canadian advance. The villages were inhabited predominantly by Serbs and Croatian Special Police had 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 did have tanks and heavy guns. There was little the Canadians could do but sit back wait for the 1200 hrs 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 at noon right on schedule mounted in their M-113's 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 and the Canadian column. A company of Croatian infantry protected by a hastily laid

mine field completed the obstacle.

The senior Croatian officer 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 Croatians grew increasingly uneasy. Essentially the resolute and stern-faced Canadians began to stare down the Croatians manning the roadblock.

During the tension, Colonel Calvin arrived on the scene. He argued heatedly with the Croatian commander, Brigadier General Mezic. Mezic 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, Mezic was stalling to give Croatian Special Police the time they needed to destroy evidence of ethnic cleansing.

Shortly after 1300 hrs, 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.

Calvin called to the front of the column and held a press conference, complete with cameras, in front of the roadblock. He told the reporters of 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 Croatian resolve. By 1330 hrs , Delta Company was on the move.

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

Gathering Evidence

For the soldiers involved in the Medak Pocket operation the next few days were the most difficult. They were tasked, along with civilian police officers, and UN medical officers, to sweep the area for signs of ethnic cleansing. Their 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 blown apart with explosives and anti-tank mines.

Only 16 Serb bodies were found, all in hidden locations while in the open, the ground

was littered with rubber surgical gloves. Calvin and his men believe the gloves indicate that most Serb bodies in the open had been transported elsewhere and only the ones hidden in basements or in the woods had been left behind in haste. The bodies that were recovered included those of two young ladies 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.

The Croatians 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 make them unusable for Serbs entertaining any thought of return. These are the objectives of Balkan warfare. Rather than destroy the opponent's military forces in combat, armies in the Former Yugoslavia seek to make the land of opposing civilians uninhabitable.

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 was not the sole perpetrator of ethnic cleansing in the Balkans, deconstructing the myth that the Yugoslav wars could all be neatly labelled as Serbian wars of aggression and expansion.

The meticulous procedure used to sweep and record evidence in the area was also standardized in UNPROFOR, perhaps providing some degree of deterrence to those who may fear being called before a war crimes tribunal.

Medak's Legacy

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 than 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.

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. However, Jim Calvin and his men can take comfort in the knowledge that they did everything within their means to keep the peace in Croatia. The international peacekeeping community was not yet ready in

1993 to stop that kind of action. It would take several more and larger massacres around the world before international political will could be mustered to intervene and stop ethnic cleansing.

The joint Franco-Canadian 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, not enough distance has been established to present a clear, accurate picture. The transition is also still ongoing. However, it is still possible to make some generalizations about the changes the world has witnessed in the way the international community conducts Apeacekeeping@.

During the cold war, peacekeeping forces were lightly armed, offering little deterrent value, yet they were still effective due to the constant deterrence provided the east-west nuclear standoff. After the Cold War, the United States emerged as a world policeman along with NATO. NATO peacekeepers are equally successful and equally rarely engaged by former belligerents because they enter a zone with maximum firepower and thus deterrent power.

In between these two sharply defined periods in the history of peacekeeping was a rough and difficult transition period in which western armies attempted to use tried and true methods of Pearsonian peacekeeping, but without the Cold War structure to reinforce them. Their authority was questioned and they increasingly became the targets of hostility rather than just innocent bystanders. This period lasted until the deployment of NATO=s Dayton Accord Implementation Force (IFOR) in 1996. This combat ready force entered the fray with clear political backing and a clear mandate.

The Medak Pocket Operation occurred during this 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.

Canadian Forces in the 1990's

The activities engaged in by Canadian soldiers at Medak offer some sharp lessons about how military forces should be trained and equipped in the 1990's and beyond. Medak demanded the full range of capabilities possessed by Canadian infantry, from fortification construction, marksmanship, and mechanized mobile combat to negotiation and basic investigation. The lesson from this operation is obvious. To maintain a credible presence between warring factions, peacekeepers must be soldiers first and foremost, trained and equipped for war.

Well educated soldiers trained and equipped for war can do everything short of war including peacekeeping and disaster relief. Combat training skills are easily transferable to a whole range of tasks Canadian troops may be asked to perform. The reverse is not

necessarily true. A lightly armed force trained and developed solely for peacekeeping cannot function in war or even in warlike conditions. How would such a constabulary have performed when faced with the heavy shelling encountered by Lieutenant Green and his men in Medak? Would it be able to hold its ground in firefight when outnumbered and outgunned as were Sergeant Dearing and his section?

Medak also challenges the growing school of thought, led by Alec Morrison of the Lester B. Pearson Peacekeeping Training Centre, which contends that Canada can make a much better use of its peacekeeping resources and experience by focussing on providing command, control, communications and logistic units to operations. Proponents of this school argue that other nations, eager to learn from Canada should provide the combat troops. Such an arrangement almost emerged in Zaire in 1996.

There can be no question that Canada has much to offer to any international peace force with regards to support functions. However, without a willingness to assume responsibility for some of the frontline work, such a contribution is meaningless. Medak demonstrated that a difference that can be made by a combat ready, yet professional and disciplined mechanized team in a highly tense environment. The Canadian battlegroup ordered to move south in 1993 was selected precisely because they were modern, well armed combat troops.

Conclusion

The greatest lesson to be learned from the Medak Pocket operation is that contrary to the findings of the Somalia Inquiry, the Canadian Army in 1993 consisted of dedicated, highly trained, superbly disciplined soldiers. These troops were led by competent, well educated, highly capable officers and senior NCO=s. Medak is also not the only example of Canadian military effectiveness in recent years. Indeed, a great deal more research is required to highlight the achievements of the Canadian Forces in the 1990's. Perhaps when enough examples of courage, heroism and professionalism reach the public, the damage done by the Somalia inquiry can be undone and Canadians can once more be proud of their military institution.

* The study on the "*Medak Pocket*" was made possible, in part, by a grant from the Department of National Defence.