

The Uses of Oral History:

Some considerations with regard to the Canadian Experience in the former Yugoslavia

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Previous writers who have examined the Canadian Forces' experience in the former Yugoslavia have highlighted the professionalism with which the Canadian Forces approached their assigned task of attempting to provide an interposition force between the various warring factions on the ground. As a result, the limited historiography that has emerged to date out of that conflict has been one that highlights the experience of units which deployed to the Balkans as part of battle groups under the banner of the UN Protection Force (UNPROFOR) mission, with considerable attention paid by Canadian writers to the experiences of the Second Battalion, Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry (2PPCLI) at Medak Pocket in 1993. Although this historiography emphasises the role played by deployed formations, there is little attention devoted to the role of individuals outside of these missions. The paper which follows attempts to show how interviews with Canadians who served in these individual roles, either as members of the Canadian Forces or the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) can help to shed further light on the story of the Canadian experience in the former Yugoslavia. This paper shows how this is the case in two sections. The first of these examines a number of existing historical work on the Canadian experience in the Balkan conflict and discusses what treatment it has received from historians. The paper's second part draws on individual interviews by the author with individuals who were deployed to the former Yugoslavia to explore details of related to the first section and also helps to shed some light on aspects of the Canadian experience that have been touched on in the existing literature. This paper then concludes by reviewing and drawing together the material discussed in the first two sections and attempts to show how this material is useful because it helps to further our knowledge of the existing history of the Canadian participation in the Balkan conflict.

The Canadian Experience in the former Yugoslavia through the Eyes of Historians

Perhaps the best place to begin any discussion of Canadian military history is by looking at the works of two of its most eminent historians: Desmond Morton and Jack Granatstein. Both authors have written surveys of Canadian military history that feature discussions of the Canadian role in Bosnia, situating it within the post-Cold War climate of the early 1990s. This is described by Morton as a period characterised by spending cuts that initially affected defence expenditures in Canada by replacing manpower with better equipment under the government of Brian Mulroney¹ that later saw even greater cuts to the Forces under Jean Chretien's Liberal government.² Despite these cuts, which required a greatly reduced Canadian Forces to "fight alongside the best, against the best,"³ the Canadian government increased its foreign deployment of troops on UN-sanctioned missions.⁴ Considering the reasons for this high deployment tempo, Granatstein viewed it as the result of a sense that participation in peacekeeping operations as the niche which best fitted the Canadian Forces.⁵ These politically popular deployments of an overstretched and under-equipped force would push the Canadian Forces to breaking point, and as deployments took a toll on personal lives, large numbers of reservists were eventually integrated into the units deploying to the former Yugoslavia.⁶ Despite the challenge of doing more with less, CF units that deployed met the challenges of their deployment with immense professionalism, a point highlighted by Morton in his mention of the Medak pocket

¹ Desmond Morton, *A Military History of Canada* (Toronto, ON: McClelland and Stewart, 2007) 275-6.

² Ibid, 281-85.

³ Ibid, 284.

⁴ Ibid, 277-81.

⁵ Jack Granatstein, *Canada's Army: Waging War and Keeping the Peace* (Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press 2002) 397-8.

⁶ Ibid, 396.

engagement,⁷ and by Granatstein when he discusses Canadian operations undertaken to protect UN Protected Areas.⁸ This discussion of the CF's professionalism is especially present in the work of other Canadian authors who have examined part of the role of the Canadian Forces in Bosnia, specifically 2PPCLI's actions at Medak pocket.

In 1998, Lee Windsor published an article that discussed the events of the Medak pocket engagement in detail, stating that his main goal in writing "Professionalism Under Fire: Canadian Implementation of the Medak Pocket Agreement" was to counter the negative portrayals of the Canadian Forces' that had emerged from the Somalia Affair and the subsequent commission of enquiry.⁹ To contrast this negative image, Windsor chose to highlight 2PPCLI's effectiveness and professionalism first as an interposition force¹⁰ and later as a combat force that would force its way into Medak pocket, restoring UN credibility through its determined effort to push into the Serb Krajina.¹¹ Windsor's account of Canadian professionalism is explored in greater detail by Carol Off, whose book "The Ghosts of Medak Pocket: The Untold Story of Canada's Secret War" exhaustively documents the experience of 2PPCLI before, during, and after its deployment to Bosnia. There are two aspects in particular of Off's work which highlight the unit's professionalism that was first explored by Windsor. The first was the grueling, albeit effective, pre-deployment training, the purpose of which was to create cohesive units and sub-units which could perform their assigned duties at a high standard,¹² a need that had been

⁷ Morton, *A Military History of Canada*, 278.

⁸ Ibid, 400-2.

⁹ Lee Windsor. "Professionalism Under Fire: Canadian Implementation of the Medak Pocket Agreement," *Canadian Military History* Vol. 9 No.3 (Summer 2000) 20.

¹⁰ Ibid, 27-8.

¹¹ Windsor, "Professionalism Under Fire," 29-33.

¹² Carol Off, *The Ghosts of Medak Pocket: The Untold Story of Canada's Secret War* (Toronto, ON: Random House, 2004) 89-91.

identified early on by Colonel James Calvin the battalion's Commanding Officer.¹³ The second instance where Off describes the professionalism of the Canadian Forces is where she discusses the extended firefight in which a section that included a significant number of reservists under the command of Sergeant Rod Dearing, himself a full-time soldier, was able to suppress Croatian fire intended to force the UN to back away.¹⁴

Further accounts of Canadian professionalism under fire in the Balkans are available to us through the work Sean Maloney and John Llambias who, in "Chances for Peace: Canadian Soldiers in the Balkans, 1992-1995," conducted numerous in-depth interviews with Canadian Forces members who had served in the Balkans, including 2PPCLI's commanding officer, Colonel James Calvin. During the course of the interview, Calvin himself emphasised the important role that even fairly junior soldiers had played at Medak pocket, particularly in his discussion of one non-commissioned officer, Sergeant Rudy Bajema who was present in the Medak pocket area manning a forward observation post.¹⁵ The high quality of information that was produced by Bajema's reports was fundamental for UN negotiators in the Croatian capital Zagreb who were attempting to negotiate a ceasefire to allow UNPROFOR troops to enter the Medak Pocket and who required up to date information on what was occurring in the area.¹⁶

More personal accounts of the Bosnia experience, such as James R. Davis' memoirs "At the Sharp End: A Canadian Soldier's Story" provide details of the sort of standoffs that could occur between Canadian peacekeepers and paramilitary factions on the ground in Bosnia,

¹³ Ibid, 83.

¹⁴ Ibid, 182-6.

¹⁵ Sean M. Maloney and John Llambias, *Chances for Peace: Canadian Soldiers in the Balkans, 1992-1995- An Oral History* (St Catherines, ON: Vanwell Publishing Ltd, 2002), 118.

¹⁶ Off, *The Ghosts of Medak Pocket*, 155-6.

thereby corroborating the heightened state of preparedness that troops who deployed to Bosnia needed to maintain. One such incident that was recounted by Davis was a standoff just outside Sarajevo where a column of Canadian Armoured Personnel Carriers and the relief convoy to which it was providing protection were surrounded by a Serb paramilitary group under the command of a drunk, a tense standoff which would only be resolved through the personal intervention of General Lewis Mackenzie himself.¹⁷ What is also interesting about the incident related by Davis is that at one point, staring down the barrel of the gun of a Serb militiaman, Davis calmly looked him in the face and pushed the gun aside.¹⁸ Perhaps most notable of all is General Lewis Mackenzie's account *Peacekeeper: The Road to Sarajevo* which drew attention to the complexities of UN operations in the former Yugoslavia, especially when Mackenzie summed up the dysfunctional nature of the UN command system that had to coordinate the actions of troops on the ground in Bosnia from its New York headquarters.¹⁹

Another aspect of the Canadian experience in the former Yugoslavia that has largely eluded the eyes of historians and journalists who have had been the Canadian contribution to the UN civilian police (UNCIVPOL) mission in the Balkans. Seen by later authors as the harbinger to a new kind of peacekeeping that would require the use of skills that were less military in character, UNCIVPOL operations, including those attached to UNPROFOR and its successor the International Police Task Force (IPTF) which was formed under the auspices of the Dayton Accord, were given a variety of tasks that, in the view of Bhutros Buhtros Gahli, the UN

¹⁷ James R. Davis, *At the Sharp End: A Canadian Soldier's Story* (Vancouver, BC: Douglas and McIntyre Ltd, 1998) 177-87.

¹⁸ Ibid, 178-9.

¹⁹ Lewis Mackenzie, *Peacekeeper The Road to Sarajevo* (Vancouver, BC: Douglas and McIntyre Ltd, 1993) 330-2.

Secretary General, required the presence of police personnel who were both skilled and experienced.²⁰ Prior to creating a civilian police observer force destined for service in the former Yugoslavia, the UN had successfully employed CIVPOL operations since the 1960s in a variety of theatres with a variety of roles. Largely unarmed and with very limited powers of arrest and detention, CIVPOL personnel were found to be a useful asset that could be employed in conjunction with military forces who were deployed in a peace-keeping role.²¹ Within the context of the former Yugoslavia, CIVPOL personnel were required to monitor such local police forces as existed to ensure they were complying with human rights guidelines set out by the UN.²² The specific experience of the RCMP in CIVPOL was one that was characterised by an aggressive “can do” attitude instituted by UNCIVPOL’s commissioner Michael O’Reilly, himself a member of the RCMP. O’Reilly insisted that such an attitude on the part of UN police observers was necessary because it was the best way of ensuring that the police monitors could effectively implement their mandate.²³ In order to ensure this, O’Reilly made certain that he had access to high-calibre police officers from the various national contingents, eventually finding a way to provide supplementary training to those from other countries who did not necessarily even have such basic skills as driving or the ability to speak English, let alone more advanced police skills.²⁴

²⁰ Duncan Chappell and John Evans, “The role, preparation and performance of civilian police in United Nations peacekeeping operations,” *Criminal Law Forum* 10 (1999): 172-3.

²¹ *Ibid*, 180-201.

²² *Ibid*, 227-8.

²³ *Ibid*, 238-9.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 239-244.

The Canadian Mission in Bosnia: The Individual Experiences of Major General Ed Fitch, Colonel Paul Crober and Captain Al Giesbrecht

So far this paper has conducted a brief survey of the available literature on the Canadian participation in the former Yugoslavia. Much of this material, perhaps out of necessity, has focused on the role of larger formations of troops and has had to focus on certain aspects of the Canadian mission to the exclusion of others, often incorporating what individual views are collected into a broader discussion of topics such as the Medak pocket engagement. By contrast, the memoirs and oral histories that have been assessed provide useful details on some of the major functions of the CF's work in the former Yugoslavia, that could be usefully expanded through further interviews. The section which follows, attempts to do this by drawing on interviews with Major General Ed Fitch who deployed as the UNPROFOR chief engineer in 1995, Colonel Paul Crober who deployed to Sarajevo as a senior operations officer in 1993 and Captain Al Giesbrecht deployed as a civilian police observer with UNCIVPOL.

By the time he deployed to the former Yugoslavia, Major General Edward (Ed) Fitch, had been a military engineer for twenty nine years, during which time he developed the various skills, military and professional, that he would come to use in the course of his deployment to the former Yugoslavia, first as chief engineer to UNPROFOR and then, during the second half of his tour, as assistant chief engineer for IFOR under British Brigadier-General Moore-Bick.²⁵ When asked what he thought the most important skill he had acquired prior to his deployment to Bosnia, Fitch replied. "Probably the most important skill was an ensemble: being skilled in my

²⁵ Major General Edward Fitch, Personal Interview, 23 March 2011.

N.B. IFOR (Implementation Force) was the NATO – led successor force to UNPROFOR which began operating in 1996 was responsible for implementing the 1995 Dayton Accord which ended the war in the former Yugoslavia.

profession both as an engineer and as a soldier.” Fitch relates how the confidence that came out of extensive professional development, even when it came to “as prosaic a skill as knowing how to use my personal weapon,” could have a telling impact that was communicated through the confidence it conveyed when dealing with the “thugs and bandits who inhabit that country [the former Yugoslavia] and claim to be its rulers,” adding that by transmitting this confidence, one could impose one’s will on people who “if they smelled fear would eat you for breakfast.” Fitch’s personal presence and professionalism was not confined to what he termed “get your will done” whilst dealing with “thugs and bandits.”²⁶ Deploying as chief engineer to UNPROFOR at the end of 1995, later becoming deputy chief engineer for IFOR after the implementation of the Dayton Accords,²⁷ Fitch also participated in what other sources have described as an IFOR program aimed at redeveloping sections of the former Yugoslavia’s civil infrastructure, among which its bridges.²⁸

The importance of building bridges was something that Fitch still regards as fundamental. As a military engineer who appreciated the importance of rivers as obstacles to military movement, the demolition of bridges was something that to be accomplished as part of his engineer training that required, among other tasks, denying infrastructure to the enemy.²⁹ But with the implementation of the Dayton Accords, Fitch and the troops under his command were now “knitting the country back together” as the reconstructed bridges meant crossing rivers that had previously been natural military obstacles. Re-bridging was not only an opportunity to use his professional skills, but was also an opportunity to apply leadership across a broad, multi-

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Anatol Rapaport, “Peace Definitions and Concepts of,” in *Encyclopaedia of Violence, Peace and Conflict* ed. Lester R Kurtz, 748 (Academic Press: Maryland Heights, MO, 1999).

²⁹ Major General Edward Fitch, Personal Interview, 23 March 2011.

national force, some of whose contingents came from former Warsaw-Pact countries, in which according to Fitch, the military culture did not encourage initiative at lower levels meaning that during their deployment to the former Yugoslavia, some of the deploying units had to be shown how to operate independently. In particular, Fitch recalls a Hungarian engineering contingent whose experience of military engineering had previously been determined “a set of orders that looked like a phone book,” which was symptomatic of the military culture in which they had spent their careers in which everything was “coordinated at a very high level.” Fitch found that after this Hungarian contingent had been shown how to operate independently, they acquired a whole new attitude towards their work, which Fitch described with the following recollection: “They loved it! They could feel they were really engineers.”³⁰ The retired General also recalls having a very positive experience working with a Romanian engineering unit, whose soldiers “would do anything I asked of them,” whose equipment was described as “few but crude” as opposed to other engineering contingents, such as those from the German army who refused to carry out tasks such as filling gabions, a type of bridging support structure resembling wire baskets filled with stones, on the grounds that it was considered “prisoner work.”³¹

The ability of then Colonel Fitch and of his commanding officer in IFOR, the British Brigadier Moore-Bick to lead and mentor contingents from so many diverse backgrounds also had an objective that went beyond the immediate needs of their mission in the former Yugoslavia. As Fitch pointed out, “for many of these people, NATO had been the enemy for all of their adult lives.” As a result the positive interaction between contingents from these backgrounds and ones from NATO would be, in the words of the IFOR corps commander as

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

related by Fitch, “setting the conditions for peace in Europe for the next century.”³² The experience of operating in as complex a command structure as that of the UN and later NATO was also a formative experience for Fitch, who learned through his own experience and that of others that “there is a technique for working in highly political, largely dysfunctional multi-national headquarters.” This technique of identifying like-minded individuals from various national departments “who shared your vision, who could see what you were trying to accomplish,” so as to cut through the highly bureaucratized and largely ineffective UN processes, which if followed to the letter would result in a lack of action being taken on a particular project. Fitch recounted that he would later take this technique and apply it during his posting to National Defence Headquarters in Ottawa, where he found that he could apply it to working with individuals in other government departments that did not necessarily share the military’s position on a given issue.³³ Although Fitch did not elaborate on how he applied this technique in a Canadian setting, his recollections speak to a point raised by later authors, such as Colonel Bernd Horn, who have discussed the importance of consensus-building and negotiations to institutional leadership within the Canadian Forces, especially where military leadership must cooperate with other agencies such as the Cabinet or the Treasury Board in order to achieve their aims.³⁴

Major General Fitch’s experiences on the ground provides a sense of the challenges inherent to working in multi-national forces and how these could be effectively overcome through the application of professional experience and properly applied leadership. Furthermore,

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Bernd Horn, “Institutional Leadership: Understanding the Command, Management and Leadership Nexus,” in *Institutional Leadership in the Canadian Forces; Contemporary Issues*, ed. Robert W Walker (Canadian Defence Academy Press: Winnipeg, 2007), 100.

when talking about his memoirs at the beginning of this section, Fitch also discussed the importance of dealing with the various “thugs and bandits” that he encountered. Just how dangerous these people could be was something that Colonel, then Major, Paul Crober would deal with during his time as one of the main operations officers for UNPROFOR in Sarajevo. A career armoured officer who had previously held a variety of staff and operational postings both in Canada and abroad, Crober deployed to Sarajevo in the late summer of 1993 into a position that eventually found him acting as the chief of operations for UNPROFOR due to staffing issues that arose in UNPROFOR headquarters. According to Crober, the fundamental division of labour that existed within the operations cell at UN headquarters was divided between routine convoy operations that kept the UNPROFOR troops supplied and other matters which affected the running of these convoys. Crober’s position, on the other hand, involved what he referred to as the “operations for everything else - all the so-called ancillary stuff, all the firefights, the massacres, all the so-called ancillary stuff that rolled around and in most cases prevented the operators who were looking after the convoy system from doing it,”³⁵ this is to say that Crober was in a position in which he was able to observe many of the operations involving UNPROFOR contingents and the factors which affected them.

Among these interruptions to the UN convoys, Crober turned to the issue of the challenge posed to the UN by the various ethnic paramilitary groups present in Bosnia. One group that was mentioned in particular is what Crober referred to as the 7th Muslim Brigade, who during one encounter stopped a mixed group of personnel from UNPROFOR and United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) of which Crober was a part. These paramilitaries, some of whom had experience in other theatres such as Chechnya and Afghanistan and who had come to

³⁵ Colonel Paul Crober, Personal Interview, 19 March 2011, 18:00 - 20:30

Bosnia with the intention of fighting the Croats and the Serbs on behalf of the Bosnian Muslims, were adamant that one of the group's members, a French officer attached to UNHCR and who was wearing civilian clothes at the time, was a "Serbian spy". Refusing to leave the French officer in the hands of the paramilitaries, who according to Crober would have likely been executed had he been left at the roadblock, the mixed group was released by the Muslim paramilitary group after the personal intervention of the Bosnian President Izetbegovic, acting through UN Civil Affairs staff in Sarajevo, secured the group's release.³⁶ Another example of the encounters that occurred between UNPROFOR troops and paramilitary factions is recounted by Crober. Discussing the UN's prompt repairs to a road sabotaged by a Croatian paramilitary group, Crober recounts how an enraged paramilitary commander, who Crober notes was also responsible for the atrocities at Stupni Do,³⁷ attempted to intimidate a senior British officer "by putting his Tommy gun up to his ear and letting off an entire magazine," an action that was greeted by the officer with apparent indifference, in Crober's experience, the only way of dealing effectively with "that sort of behaviour."³⁸

Both of the instances discussed above point to the importance of the sort of confidence discussed by Fitch. The incessant harassment of UN troops by ethnic paramilitary factional groups could also affect the professional performance of Canadian battalions attached to UNPROFOR. When asked about this, Crober's response was to emphasise the importance of leadership, a good example of which, according to Crober, could be found in Colonel Jim Calvin's actions at Medak Pocket, an operation which according to the Crober "under anybody

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid., During the interview Crober does not recall the name of the individual. According to the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia's Case information sheet, this person is Ivica Rajic, who plead guilty to his role in leading the massacre at Stupni Do in 2005.

http://www.icty.org/x/cases/rajic/cis/en/cis_rajic.pdf

³⁸ Ibid.

else it might not have run that way.”³⁹ Along with this, Crober emphasised the importance of good training, which he described “as very good in those times of [fiscal] restraint.”⁴⁰ Issues related to poor performance and breakdowns in Canadian discipline, for instance the alleged incidents of fraternization between nurses and soldiers along with purported patient abuse which occurred at the Bukovici mental hospital,⁴¹ are attributed by Crober to the 12^{eme} RBC being undermanned while trying to take on the responsibilities of their predecessor unit which was considerably larger. Although Crober emphasised the quality of troops who deployed to the former Yugoslavia, he also discussed how the high operational tempo led to the 12eme RBC troops getting “beat into the ground” as a result of being under-manned and over-tasked.⁴²

Crober was unwilling to place the blame exclusively at the feet of the commanding officer of the unit involved in the Bukovici hospital incident, however. The incident, in which members of the CF were accused of inappropriate behaviour including the consumption of alcohol while on duty, inappropriate liaisons with nurses and physical abuse of mental patients at the hospital, seems to belie the picture of a professional organization that has emerged over the course of this paper, although as will be shown later on, an alternative analysis can be offered of the incident. Despite his earlier emphasis on the importance of leadership in the Balkans, Crober points out that the reasons for the breakdown of discipline at the Bukovici hospital needed to be traced back to staffing and command decisions in Canada that led to the deployment of inadequate formations to the former Yugoslavia and elsewhere, rather than as a result of the inherent problems with the

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Anthony Depalma, “Canada Accuses 47 of Misconduct in Bosnia,” *New York Times*, 18 January 1997, accessed at www.nytimes.com (Accessed 30 March 2011).

⁴² Colonel Paul Crober, Personal Interview, 22 march 2011.

quality of manpower who were available to the Canadian Forces at this time.⁴³ Although this incident could be seen as a slur on Canadian professionalism in the Balkans, it is worth noting that Crober's observations are similar to those brought up by this paper's earlier treatment of Jack Granatstein, in that 12^{eme} RBC pressed into service to fulfill a UN commitment, despite the unit's manpower issues. It may therefore be more appropriate to view the Bukovici episode as an aberration, rather than the norm of how Canadian Forces personnel reacted to the pressures of deployment to the Balkans and is more indicative of how such breakdowns could occur in the Balkans and elsewhere.

The final person who will be considered in this assessment of oral interviews is Captain John Albert (Al) Giesbrecht, who prior to becoming an officer in the Canadian Army reserves had served a lengthy career in the RCMP which included a deployment to the former Yugoslavia as part of the Canadian CIVPOL contingent as a UN civil police officer of the sort described by Chappell and Evans. Already an experienced officer with twenty years of policing, Giesbrecht volunteered to go to the former Yugoslavia because he "had reached a point in my career where it was time for a change and I wanted to see some of the world that I had never seen before."⁴⁴ Like the others interviewed for this paper, Giesbrecht found that he drew on many of the abilities he developed during his years of service. When discussing what skills he drew on, Giesbrecht emphasised the sort of skills that "were acquired over the course of a life time," such as report writing, interviewing, observation, the ability to deal with people.⁴⁵ This experience would be particularly helpful in dealing with a local population from a variety of backgrounds that at times could be make life difficult for CIVPOL officers who were going about their duties.

⁴³ Colonel Paul Crober, Personal Interview, 22 March 2011.

⁴⁴ Captain Al Giesbrecht, Personal Interview, 9 March 2011.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

For instance, Giesbrecht discussed dealing with Croatian police who would insist on searching UN vehicles, despite their not being authorised to do so, leading Giesbrecht to make a personal decision to allow the searches, which should have been conducted by other UN personnel. Partially due to the lengthy commute that would have been involved to Bali Manastir where he was stationed and partially because his own personal reputation as a “square shooter” with no involvement in illicit activities, such as the black thriving black market, Giesbrecht explained that he made a personal decision to allow these searches to occur in order to make it easier to enter the areas where he was performing his duties.⁴⁶

On the topic of dealing with inter-ethnic strife that was rampant in the former Yugoslavia, Giesbrecht recalled that the notorious war criminal Arkan and his paramilitary group the “Tigers” had been active in the area before his arrival. Although he never encountered any of these paramilitary groups during his time in the former Yugoslavia, “our good luck,” Giesbrecht described how the local population was afraid of them or “anybody who was outside of a... you know a recognised authority, you have to be careful around people like that [paramilitaries].”⁴⁷ Going into further detail on the issue of ethnic cleansing, Giesbrecht described working in the areas of Serbian Krajina in Croatia and noticing such signs of ethnic cleansing as burned out houses which were a part of a deliberate intimidation towards Serbs in the Krajinas.⁴⁸ Further incidents of ethnic tension that Giesbrecht observed included a death in Bali Manastir, that although labelled a suicide by local police, was clearly not due to the fact that the victim was a Serb living in a Croatian area who had been shot several times in the back. In addition to this, Giesbrecht recalled assisting in the evacuation of an elderly Serb woman who had lived around

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

Bali Manastir all her life, and who Giesbrecht realised would be harassed and eventually killed if she stayed on in the area.⁴⁹ A frustration that was added to the observation of such behaviour was the fact that other UN agencies, even CIVPOL headquarters, could do no more than lodge complaints with the Croatian authorities, who would invariably take no action, to the point where Giesbrecht recalled “You would be reporting the same stuff over and over again and nothing would happen.”⁵⁰

Conclusion

The above paper has provided a discussion of the historiography of the Canadian mission in Bosnia, highlighting a narrative which emphasised the professionalism of Canadian personnel deployed to the Balkans. One aspect that was also touched on is the inter-ethnic strife that would shock the outside world into eventually supporting the use of measures that were more forceful than the original Chapter 6 peacekeeping mission under which UNPROFOR troops, who were deployed as an interposition force, could only use force in self-defence.⁵¹ This strife is touched on by authors such as Morton, who mentions it briefly when discussing the context into which Canadian troops deployed.⁵² Besides perhaps the above extract from Davis and a section of Carol Off’s book where she describes the roadblock confrontation that Colonel

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Smith, Rupert *The Utility of Force: The Art of War in the Modern World* (New York, NY: Allen Lane, 2005), 335.

N.B. A chapter 7 mission is one in which militaries are deployed under UN Security Council authority to conduct combat operations, resulting in a potentially more robust force being deployed.

⁵² Morton, *A Military History of Canada*, 278.

Calvin had with Croatian forces while trying to enter into the Medak pocket,⁵³ there is very little sense in the written history of the conflict of what it meant to operate in an environment ridden with ethnic tensions that went back hundreds of years and how this could result in the predominance of what Major General Fitch would term “thugs and bandits” of the sort who would hold up Crober, or harass civilians in the way discussed by Giesbrecht.

To provide a sense of what it meant to operate in such an environment, perhaps the best place to turn is to oral accounts given by those who were deployed to the former Yugoslavia. Each person who was interviewed for this essay provided an account of their individual observations of the ethnic conflict that constituted the part of the reality faced by Canadians and non-Canadians who were deployed to Yugoslavia. Their perspective is also interesting in that, although like those soldiers who deployed as parts of units with specific tasks to accomplish, they deployed as individuals within UN and NATO operations where the work brought them face-to-face with the complexities involved in dealing with a society as divided as that of the former Yugoslavia. In the face of a society that could be hostile to UN personnel, these individuals found themselves falling back on the professional skill sets they had acquired over the course of their careers. By providing these accounts of how skilled professionalism and experience enabled them to do their jobs, the interviews provided by Fitch, Crober and Giesbrecht not only confirm the narrative of professionalism discussed in the first section of this essay, but are also useful because they provide a means of enhancing our understanding of written accounts of the Canadian military experience in the former Yugoslavia.

Through such varied accounts as the discussion of bridging operations, the chaotic nature of the UN staffing system in Sarajevo or the challenges facing a Canadian policeman

⁵³ Off, *The Ghosts of Medak Pocket*, 188-9.

engaged in monitoring a war-torn country we can attain a better understanding of this experience. Perhaps the best way to sum up these contributions is to paraphrase the words of Alfred Thayer Mahan, as quoted by the historian Edward Coffman. Mahan insisted in his memoirs “If you want contemporary colour, contemporary atmosphere, you must seek it among the impressions which can be obtained only from those who have lived a life in particular surroundings.”⁵⁴ Coffman’s use of Mahan is appropriate here because it conveys to us the particular value that oral history can have in filling the gaps left in written history, whereby the “contemporary colour” as in the interviews drawn on in the second section of this essay, even when only part of their content is drawn on, can help to shed light on the Canadian military experience in the former Yugoslavia.

⁵⁴ Edward M. Coffman, “Talking About War: Reflections on Doing Oral History and Military History,” *Journal of American History* 87, no. 2 (September 2000): 591.

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