

## The Canadians at Medak Pocket: Fighting for Peace

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In September 1993, the men of a Canadian infantry battalion serving with the United Nations Protection Force (UNPROFOR) in the former Yugoslavia conducted offensive operations against Croatian military forces in a mission which has remained shrouded in secrecy. Though accounts have slowly emerged over the years, the context and implications of the Medak Pocket operation are still relatively unknown to Canadians since the government of the day sought to downplay Canadian involvement.

Three weeks ago the Hague tribunal unsealed indictments of Croatian Generals Rahim Ademi and Ante Gotovina were revealed. In the months ahead, the full horror of what Croatian forces did to several hundred Krajinan Serbian civilians will finally become public knowledge. The Canadian Army's role in trying to prevent this massacre and then limit its effects by using military force will also come to light nearly eight years after the event.

The operation at Medak Pocket conducted by 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry was the first time since 1974 that Canadian soldiers in a formed unit were involved in a sustained firefight. The previous instance occurred when Turkish forces invaded Cyprus. UN troops were squeezed between the Greek and Turkish forces. The Canadian Airborne Regiment, in an unacknowledged action, was inserted into Nicosia Airport. Canada's Airborne soldiers fought against Turkish paratroopers to protect the UN's fragile position: many were wounded and at least three were killed.

We are too used to the contrived cultural image of Canadian soldiers as UN peacekeepers. Indeed, that image is based on an obsolete notion of peacekeeping dating back to 1956. By the 1990s, peacekeeping as we knew it radically changed for those practicing it, but the image had not. The events in the Medak Pocket may therefore come as a shock to those who believe that the use of military force is something Canada ‘just doesn’t do.’

In January 1993, Croatian forces attacked Kenyan and French UN forces which were arrayed in the Zone of Separation between Krajinan Serb forces (backed by Belgrade-controlled army units) and the Croatian Army (HV): this action seriously eroded confidence in UNPROFOR throughout Croatia and Bosnia. The UN, therefore, needed spine and muscle put into Sector South to rebuild up its credibility. Led by Lieutenant-Colonel Jim Calvin, 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion PPCLI (which consisted of both regular professionals and Militia citizen soldiers), was ordered in July to move from their positions in the north near Zagreb down to the Krajinas region in southern Croatia. In the face of the Croatian attack, the Krajinan Serbs retained control over their areas and even made territorial gains which threatened Croatia as a unified entity, particularly the economically valuable Dalmatian coast. The Vance Plan, which established UN protected areas in Croatia, did not include all areas which contained Krajinan Serb civilians, however. Errors in mapping coupled with practical circumstances produced ‘Pink Zones’ which lay outside UN jurisdiction. One of these zones was in a valley containing Serb villages clustered around the hamlet of Medak. Swollen with refugees, there were some 1200 people living in the valley. Medak also controlled a road which led through the mountains to Knin, the Krajinan Serb seat of power.

As part of a series of ‘salami tactics’, the Croatian Army and special police forces chipped away at the Pink Zones to improve their military position, waiting for the day in which a fresh offensive would crush the defiant Krajinan Serbs, who didn’t help matters by mortaring Croatian supply lines and firing a FROG-7 rocket at Zagreb. A Canadian UN military observer then

compromised Croatian plans to mount a tank attack near the town of Plaski. General Bobetko, the Croatian Army commander, insisted to UNPROFOR commander French General Jean Cot that he had no offensive intentions. After 24 hours of shelling up and down the Sector South area, Croatian forces swung southeast and attacked into the Medak valley on 9 September 1993.

The situation was grave. The Krajinan Serbs took over their UN-controlled weapons storage sites and sent twelve tanks and hundreds of troops to Medak. They were not going to allow the events of January 1993 to be repeated and they had no faith in the UN's ability to protect them. The Croatians were prepared to attack the Serbs elsewhere in Sector South which would have escalated into war. This in turn would have caught the UN troops in the middle everywhere on a front several hundred of kilometers long.

General Cot and his Canadian Chief of Operations Colonel Michel Maisonneuve brokered a ceasefire. Maisonneuve established a withdrawal plan with Croatian generals Ademi, Stipetic, and Commodore Demazet, an operation to be overseen by UN troops. The Croatian forces were equipped with tanks and infantry fighting vehicles, however, and most UN contingents did not have armoured vehicles or anti-tank weapons. The only fully equipped unit trained to warfighting standards was 2 PPCLI, which was subsequently selected to carry out the mission with two French infantry companies attached.

The Patricias and their French compatriots moved up to the Serb lines, passed through them. Part of the UN force turned around to hold the Serbs back, while the other part rolled up to the Croatians and started to follow the withdrawal. The problem was that Ademi was stalling. Canadian soldiers reported that there were large explosions and automatic gunfire coming from behind Croatian lines in the Serb villages. Col Maisonneuve confronted Ademi and warned him that if his forces were engaged in ethnic cleansing, it was in contravention of international law. Lieutenant-Colonel Calvin's men then ran into Croatian intransigence when a tank unit would not move back.

He then ordered TOW missile launchers to prepare to destroy the vehicles and then brought in CNN. The Croatian vehicles withdrew when they realized they would be humiliatingly destroyed by Canadian missiles on international television.

The Canadian troops were extremely upset and wanted to attack through the Croatian lines to stop the killing. When they prepared to do so, the Croats initiated a 15-hour firefight in which three Canadians and seven French soldiers were wounded. The officers and men of 2 PPCLI returned fire and started to move forward. It was not easy doing so as the Canadian soldiers were riding in armoured vehicles painted white and wearing helmets painted blue set against the dark green mountains in the valley. The Thin White Line inched forward as the Croats withdrew. As Lt-Col Jim Calvin told me back in 1993, "We pressed up to Liki Citluk and that's when we started seeing the ethnic cleansing close up. It was just getting dark; between 1800 and 1900 it's dusk this time of the year around the end of September. The fires were still burning in all of the buildings with most of the roofs caved in and there was a loathsome smell of death. You didn't know what it was then but you sure found out later on when the bodies started showing. All of the cattle had been killed and were lying on the roads and fields. As the sun set, with all of this smoke hanging in the air, burning buildings, and bodies around, it was really a bizarre scene to drive into."

In the end, only thirty civilian bodies were recovered in the hills. With the exception of a handful of souls, the people of Medak disappeared and were never heard from again. Hundreds of bloodied surgical gloves were recovered by UN clean-up teams which indicate that the corpses were removed for disposal elsewhere. A number of dead women were found in the basement of a house: an unsuccessful attempt to burn their mutilated nude corpses had been made.

The Croats claim that UN forces killed twenty-seven of their soldiers: Canadian estimates were much higher, placing the number of dead at 100.

Usually in an action such as this there is a ratio of three wounded for each killed. The lessons of Medak are clear: sometimes Canada must kill for peace. We cannot shirk that responsibility by wishing it away in the pursuit of some unattainable and idealistic cultural image.

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