



SCATTERING CHAFF: Canadian Air Power and Censorship during the Kosovo War by Bob Bergen

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Like an Overnight International Courier

On the evening of 24 March 1999, the day NATO's Operation Allied Force bombing campaign began, CTV's Joy Malbon was in London, England, where she had worked in the television network's London bureau since 1997. Malbon was telephoned by her news director in Toronto and was told to travel immediately to the US Air Force base in Aviano, Italy, to cover the Canadian military's first participation in an aerial bombing campaign in Europe since 1945. Then a seventeen-year veteran of the Canadian news business, Malbon was no stranger to the Canadian Forces. She had covered their deployment to assist with the Manitoba flood disaster in 1997 and attended the war correspondent course put on by the Forces at the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry Battle School at Camp Wainwright, Alberta, in May of that year. Well versed in working on the fly, Malbon called her cameraman and headed straight to the airport for a flight to the Italian port city of Trieste, on the extreme north of the Adriatic Sea.

We flew commercially to Trieste where we rented a car for the drive to the Aviano air force base. We basically followed our nose through the signs and when we got there nothing had been set up. I recall it being very late or early in the morning, maybe three in the morning, something like that. There was a huge field across from the American air force base in Aviano where ABC and a few others were setting up their satellite dishes. What I recall is, my first impression, is

actually seeing a Stealth fighter fly overhead. I'd never seen such a thing.¹

There is a lot of Canadian journalism history that preceded Malbon's arrival in Aviano. It has been recognized that since the Crimean War, journalists covering wars shape public opinion and the policies of governments and their militaries.² It is a profound understatement to say that when the Kosovo air war broke out in March 1999, much had changed in the news media since William Maxwell Aitken became Canada's "Eyewitness" to the First World War under the authority of the Canadian War Records Office in London.³ From 1914 to 1919, newspapers were the only widely available news media. Even during the Chanak affair in 1922, the licensing of commercial radio broadcasting had only just begun, and it would be a year before radio stations were operating in every Canadian province but Prince Edward Island and Nova Scotia.⁴ By 19 August 1942, both print and radio reporters were on the beaches at Dieppe, when hundreds of Canadians were slaughtered in a failed raid on the German-held French coast during the Second World War.⁵

Television had only begun to become commercially available in Canada in the early 1950s when Canadian soldiers were sent to the Korean War "police action."⁶ The year 1982 marked a milestone for the news media when the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* enshrined freedom of the press and other media of communication as a fundamental freedom in the Canadian Constitution.⁷ By the beginning of the 1991 Persian Gulf War, the modern Fourth Estate⁸ had enormous communications tools at its disposal, including satellite telecommunications enabling live television broadcasts of the American bombing of Baghdad. When the war in Kosovo broke out in 1999, the Internet, computerized email, and cellular telephones had all been added to the news media's resources, although the iPhone had not yet been invented. All three elements of the Canadian Forces—the air force, the navy, and the army—had come to know at different points in time that, like it or not, they would have to deal with the news media on operations. Six modern examples will illustrate.

First, during the 1991 Gulf War, the Canadian Forces learned that significant public support for the war effort was generated by news media coverage, which was extensive. Journalists from the CTV and Baton

television networks and the CKAC radio station, and print journalists with the *Toronto Sun*, the *Toronto Star*, the *Free Press*, *Reader's Digest*, *Le Soleil*, Associated Press, Reuters, and the *Financial Times*, were in Bahrain. Journalists from the CBC, CTV, The Journal, CHCH, and Radio Canada television stations; Broadcast News, CBC, CJMS and KKAC radio journalists; and print journalists from Canadian Press, the *Toronto Sun*, the *Toronto Star*, *Maclean's*, Southam, the *Province* (Vancouver), and *Journal de Quebec* were in Qatar.⁹

Television pool journalists from the CBC and Radio Canada and print journalists from the *Toronto Star*, the *Free Press* and the *Province* (Vancouver) were aboard Canadian ships. Television journalists from the CBC, Radio Canada, The Journal, and CTV, and one CBC radio journalist and print journalists from the *Toronto Sun* and *Maclean's* were in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, while journalists from CBC radio network and print journalists with Southam, the *Globe and Mail*, *Maclean's*, and *Le Soleil* were in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. That commitment by the various Canadian news media outlets to cover the Gulf War did not come cheaply. Not only can war journalism be dangerous from time to time, it is expensive. It involves international travel and often inflated living and travelling costs. In 1991, Gulf War pool journalists aboard the Canadian ships alone estimated their costs at \$50,000 each.¹⁰

The Canadian Forces learned during the Gulf War that ten full-time public affairs officers were insufficient to meet the news media's demands and they needed augmentation by reservists.¹¹ As mentioned above, in Chapter 6, they learned that restrictive Canadian media policies that prevented the release of target information and accompanying video which illustrated that point were inconsistent with what their more experienced allies were doing. One section in the after-action report's appendix also dealt with the identification and hometowns of military personnel causing a few instances of harassment of family members back in Canada.¹² An appendix to the public affairs action report said: "We should standardize with our allies who have had more operational experience than we have and adopt their more liberal release of info policies."¹³

Second, in 1997, the navy published *Adjusting Course: A Naval Strategy for Canada*, in which it said the lessons of the 1991 Gulf War and the Canadian Forces disaster in Somalia were clear. It said in part: "military

forces will be called upon to respond to a greater range of situations based upon a broader conception of security, and the commanders of those forces must anticipate and plan for intense media coverage in future military operations as an integral element of operational strategy.”¹⁴

Third, in March 1997, the Canadian army’s lessons-learned centre devoted an entire edition of *Dispatches*, its internal briefing document, to the proposition that the media can have a significant impact on military operations and the politics of the Canadian Forces. It cited changes in defence ministers, resignations of senior officers, and the disbandment of the Canadian Airborne Regiment as examples of the news media’s power to focus the Canadian public’s attention on military issues. The power of the news media, it said, “comes from its ability to select *what* is reported and *how* it will be reported.”¹⁵ As a result, it said the importance of public affairs preparedness could not be overstated. It added:

To be effective, media relations must be planned for and practiced. It cannot be an after-thought or something to be addressed once in the area of operations. Unfortunately, soldiers who spend so much of their careers planning for operations and anticipating courses of action often get caught off guard by the media because they did not anticipate media interest in their operation nor were they prepared to deal with this interest. Ignoring the media will not make them go away, it guarantees that “our” side will not be heard.¹⁶

Fourth, the Canadian army had taken concrete, proactive steps to raise the bar on the quality of military journalism by offering a war correspondent course at the Princess Patricia’s Canadian Light Infantry battle school in Camp Wainwright, Alberta, in 1995 and again in 1997. The concentrated five-day courses were offered to seventeen working journalists in 1995 and in 1997 to ten working journalists, twelve journalism students, and three others with an interest in the course contents. The course contents included convoy discipline, mine recognition and dealing with minefields, live-fire weapons recognition, negotiating belligerent checkpoints, combat

first aid, combat-related stress, and field craft that included eating, sleeping, and living in a war zone.¹⁷

Fifth, the most powerful indication that the Canadian army planned to take command of the news media's presence during operational missions emerged in army planning documents in 1998. They show that the army viewed public affairs to be a command prerogative that should not be left in the hands of media specialists alone. The goal was to project an image of the army as progressive, sustainable, and combat-capable. The plan stated:

Public affairs is an important tool that a commander must understand and know to use in support of the operational mission. For many years we have taken the reactive approach to public affairs and have been often outmaneuvered in national or international issues. Successful commanders will often take the proactive approach to ensure the right message is provided to the media.¹⁸

Sixth, also in 1998, Canadian Forces adopted public affairs (PA) guidelines for operations, effective January 30, known as DAOD 2008, that required the Forces to integrate public affairs policy and direction into "all aspects of military doctrine, as appropriate, to ensure that PA is fully integrated into CF military planning, decision making, standard operating procedures, and operations."¹⁹ Included in DAOD 2008 were guidelines in the event of escalating military tension or war that required the deputy chief of defence staff to fully integrate public affairs into military doctrine and the director general of public affairs to draft and implement a national public affairs plan.²⁰ Within the guidelines, it clearly recognized the key priority of any Forces operation was to achieve its mission, but, at the same time, it recognized there would be heightened media and public interest. The challenge for the Forces was to inform Canadians of the national and operation dimensions "in a manner that is accurate, complete, timely and respectful of the principles of openness, transparency and operational security."²¹

It is clear, however, that the document recognized that the requirements for openness and transparency and operational security could be

conflicting imperatives. By operational security it meant “the principle of safeguarding the integrity of a military operation or activity, and/or the safety of the CF members and other personnel involved in the military operation or activity.”²²

In short, there was a lot of journalism and policy context history for the public affairs activities that could have shaped what took place in Aviano, Italy, and in Ottawa in the months leading up to the outbreak of war on 24 March 1999, and afterward.

Malbon could not file her own televised report on the first night they arrived because they had to wait for CNN and ABC, with which CTV had contracts, to set up their satellite dishes. Instead, her Toronto desk had her file a report by cellular phone that could be incorporated with video images the network had received from an American network.

They basically told me the pictures they had. I believe they had shots of the Stealth fighter. We were taking pictures as well, but we couldn't send anything just yet. We ended up giving those pictures to ABC once they got their stuff up and running early in the morning. Toronto would get it as well because they share pictures on feeds.²³

Though she filed a report on Aviano, Malbon really wanted Canadian CF-18s on camera and to interview some of the pilots, even if only in general terms.

We wanted to speak to the Canadian pilots because, as I recall, this was the first time that Canadians were actually carrying bombs and that was a huge deal in Canada. We wanted to talk to them about that, we wanted to talk to them about their role. I mean, the target was Yugoslavia, everybody knew that. We didn't need to know specifically what the targets were but my role was to get to the Canadians. Other people were doing big-picture stories about the war, the bombing, there were all sorts of technical briefings in London, in Canada, in the US about what was going on

in Washington. My role was specifically to get to the Canadians and find out what we're doing there.²⁴

Unfortunately, all the journalists who arrived en masse in Aviano were kept in the field more than three kilometres from the action, which was on the tarmacs and in the hangars on the north side of the base. The field was on the south side of the base across the main road from the administration building. The journalists weren't getting past the American military's heavily armed security checkpoint. All Malbon wanted to do was speak to some Canadians—anyone. “We were told the Canadian in charge, Dwight Davies, would come to speak with us. I remember that because another Canadian journalist from London had arrived, as well, and that's what she heard, too. He was going to speak to us at four in the morning. So, we waited, and we waited and he never showed.”²⁵

Malbon wasn't alone in her frustration. For several days, the only news for journalists involved in covering the worsening crisis in Kosovo was bad news. Hours before the bombing campaign began, the Yugoslavian government seized many western television news outlets' equipment, including a transmission facility operated by the European Broadcasting Union, used by ABC, CBS, NBC, and CNN. Some western reporters in Kosovo were threatened at gunpoint and fled.²⁶ Others were accused of being spies or having double assignments in the region, including Anthony Lloyd. Lloyd was a foreign correspondent for the *Times* (London) and a former lieutenant in the British Army's Royal Green Jackets who fought in the 1991 Gulf War.²⁷ After the first night of bombing, some journalists staying at the Pristina Grand Hotel had their equipment broken by police. Two were arrested, one was beaten, a television crew was shot at, and another's Land Rover was stolen by soldiers. Some journalists were dragged out of their hotel rooms at gunpoint and had their visas cancelled. While some reporters left the country voluntarily, others were ordered out.²⁸ The CBC's Céline Galipeau was expelled to Macedonia, while the *Toronto Star's* Olivia Ward escaped angry Serbs by fleeing into Hungary just before the second wave of NATO bombs hit.²⁹

Meanwhile, in Ottawa, opposition MPs received the same information about the war as was being provided to the news media. They complained throughout the war, as Official Opposition Leader Preston Manning stated

in the House of Commons: “Mr. Speaker, to date the government has done little or nothing to involve the House in developing Canada’s commitments in Yugoslavia. Most members of the House get more information from television and newspapers than they do from the government on this subject.”³⁰

Outside the House, the opposition had two other potential sources of official information on the military activities. One was the House of Commons Standing Committee on National Defence and Veteran’s Affairs (SCONDVA), which met twenty-six times from March 25 through June 8. Opposition MPs quickly learned that they would only receive bare bones information about military information for operational security reasons from defence minister Art Eggleton or the deputy chief of defence staff, Lt. Gen. Raymond Henault. When questioned about it, Eggleton explained in SCONDVA:

It’s a very serious situation. We want to make sure that we’re not divulging information that gives comfort to the enemy side or that can in any way jeopardize the safety and security of our Canadian Forces personnel. I’m sure the honorable member wouldn’t want us to do anything that would jeopardize their safety and security.³¹

When frustrated SCONDVA members complained about the lack of information they were receiving, Eggleton suggested that they attend the technical briefings being provided to the national news media every afternoon: “You might recognize General Henault, because he is on television every day at one o’clock giving technical briefings, together with staff, as to what is happening.”³²

The first of those technical briefings happened at National Defence Headquarters March 24, on the first day of NATO air strikes against Yugoslavia. Lt. Cmdr. Jeff Agnew, the J5 PA or joint operations public affairs officer, co-ordinated the daily technical briefings. NATO drove the overall public affairs approach for the Kosovo operation and held daily press briefings at its headquarters in Brussels after the bombing campaign started. The Canadian Forces followed suit. Agnew, the lead public affairs officer, monitored the televised briefings in Brussels every day during the

war and press briefings at the US Pentagon to become familiar with issues that were being raised by European and American journalists. Given that he was already familiar with the issues raised by reporters at NATO headquarters and in Washington, he briefed Henault and his staff on what was said by NATO and American commanders, the questions put to them by reporters, and their responses. After those briefings, Canadian commanders attended the technical briefings, which usually began at 1:00 p.m.³³

On March 24, day one of the bombing campaign, Lt. Gen. Henault addressed the news media along with Air Staff Lt. Col. Yvan Houle, a former CF-18 flying instructor. The Air Staff position was created in 1997 to oversee production and training for air personnel. The first several days' briefings set the tone that would persist until the war ended. Most briefings focused on the NATO operations, with limited time spent on the Canadians. For example, Henault and Houle told the media that 130 Canadian military personnel and six CF-18s in were Aviano. All were extensively trained and fully interoperable with their NATO counterparts. Houle, a CF-18 pilot, discussed the CF-18's weapons systems, including its infrared targeting pod and laser designator, "an advanced night-time capability that only a handful of countries bring to this theatre."³⁴ Advanced night-time capability was not the truth, but the reporters were in no position to challenge Henault or Houle and hold them accountable—the primary role of journalists in democracies—because none of the reporters in Aviano was able to learn about the pilots' previous training for night missions or their lack of night vision. The truth was that the Canadian pilots operating out of Aviano were flying as blind as bats without night-vision goggles and, well into the mission, were nearly killed doing it.

Henault and Houle said they couldn't discuss details of the Canadians' first mission, such as whether all the Canadian aircraft had returned. "Again, the aircraft are involved in operations and therefore for operational security reasons, we couldn't divulge it even if we knew," Henault said, explaining that the CF-18s would carry out the full range of missions, including close air support.³⁵ When one journalist asked about targets, they responded that they didn't know. Another asked a pointed question about the CF-18s refuelling at night. "You're coming out of your first combat mission in history, in your history, and the first thing you have to do after you get safely out is to tank at night from a tanker. Is that like the real high

risk, high heartbeat?” Houle replied: “Yeah, refuelling is a tight operation. It requires training and proficiency but if the aircraft is not damaged, that should be a rather routine operation.”³⁶ Nothing more was asked or said about air-to-air refuelling or advanced nighttime capability.

Henault was asked if Canadians higher in rank than Col. Davies were in Europe. “Not in this particular portion of the operation, no,” he replied.³⁷ That was not the truth. The truth was that Brig. Gen. James Cox was in Mons, in NATO’s Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers in Europe (SHAPE), sitting in the same war room with Gen. Wesley Clark, who ran the war.³⁸ Henault was asked if the journalists in Aviano could talk to the Canadian pilots. CTV’s Craig Oliver put the question directly: “Can you make it possible in the post-attack scenario for reporters in Aviano to talk to the Canadian fliers? What happens too often is the Americans open things up. We can go in and talk to American pilots but we can’t talk to our own Canadians.”³⁹ Henault replied: “That’s a very good point. We’ll take that; our public affairs folks are here, and we’ll do what we can to provide access to our pilots and the members of the contingent that are there.” In response to Henault, Oliver replied: “Don’t make that mistake again. It’s infuriating, and it happens too often.” Henault said: “Understood.”⁴⁰

In Mons, Gen. Clark monitored the American news media’s coverage of the bombing campaign. On the first night of the campaign he watched NBC by satellite and became disturbed that anchor Tom Brokaw identified the NATO coalition’s attack as “American-led air strikes.” Clark involved Allied aircraft to pre-empt criticism in Washington that NATO allies were not carrying their fair share of the burden. He had public affairs staff call NBC to correct the report. The network promptly changed the way the strikes were identified.⁴¹ Later, Clark wrote that, from the start of the campaign, he sought to shape the information released about the air strikes. A high level of secrecy initially was meant to maintain surprise and operational security. During the first NATO press conference he attended in Brussels, on March 25, the day after the bombing campaign began, he was asked by a *New York Times* reporter why he couldn’t identify the targets NATO had struck, since the Serbs already knew what had been attacked. Clark explained that such an operation was scrutinized by many nations that might share information. While refusing to comment on the contributions or performance of individual alliance members, he confirmed

information released by the British that a Dutch CF-18 and US jets had shot down Serbian planes.⁴² Within a few days he realized the political need to be more open to build popular American support for sustained operations.⁴³ To that end, he appeared at NATO press conferences four more times before the bombing campaign ended.

On the second day of bombing, March 25, the first news reports from wire services of Canadian participation in the NATO bombing appeared in major Canadian daily newspapers. The sources, in most cases, were defence minister Art Eggleton, Henault, or Capt. Dave Muralt, the Canadian Forces public affairs officer in Aviano. But there were no details about what the CF-18s had done. Most reports were lengthy but contained just one or two sentences reporting that four jets participated in the action and had returned home safely. Most references to the CF-18s appeared in the middle or at the end of the stories. Many Southam newspapers ran virtually the same wire service story, datelined Belgrade, because they all used the same wire service.⁴⁴ A few newspapers noted that the CF-18s had been in Italy since the previous June and everyone in Aviano was happy the pilots had returned safely. Canadian Press's John Ward in Ottawa wrote the original story on the CF-18s quoting Muralt, who was reached by telephone in Aviano. Some newspapers had their own journalists rewrite Ward's story quoting Muralt.⁴⁵

Many newspapers also ran a sidebar—a short, less prominent story accompanying the main news story—about the history of the CF-18s, their role in the 1991 Gulf War, and the precision-guided bombs that were acquired for them two years previously. Some identified Ward as the author, some did not. Only one newspaper, the *Ottawa Citizen*, tied the CF-18s to CFB Bagotville, reporting tension and pride among the base members.⁴⁶ Many carried an accompanying picture of a CF-18 taking off from Aviano during the daytime that was identified as a Canadian fighter plane. Some carried a correction the next day identifying the jet as a Spanish CF-18, some did not. Since television could report on same-day activities at night, the CBC reported Henault's remarks during the March 25 press briefing that Canada now was back in “the club” with the employment of smart bombs.⁴⁷

By then, Henault had obtained more information about the first night's operations. He told the journalists that four CF-18s had participated in

the alliance effort, which struck forty targets and had safely returned. The military's policy, he said, would reflect Clark's wishes by giving Canadians as much information as possible without jeopardizing the safety of the missions.⁴⁸ Clark's wishes were exactly the opposite. At the beginning of the bombing campaign, he tried to limit the amount of information released to the media to retain as much surprise and operational security as possible.⁴⁹ Henault said that Davies would be the designated spokesman for the Canadians in Aviano. "At the moment, we're trying to limit exposure to the pilots for the time being and again, it's for operational security reasons, but ultimately, you will have access to them."⁵⁰

Houle noted that the CF-18s reported some activity from the Yugoslav radar systems, which did not hinder the mission. When asked whether the Canadians had been targeted, were fired upon, or fired in return, Henault said that no aircraft were fired upon, that Yugoslav radar painted the Canadians, and three Yugoslav fighters were brought down. Henault was pressed about Canadian involvement. He said: "They were not involved in that operation."⁵¹ That was not the truth. The truth was that Canadians led that operation and Dutch aircraft shot down the Yugoslav MiG-29 heading toward them. The fourth pilot in formation that night had been fired at with a surface-to-air missile that forced him to take evasive manoeuvres.

When he was asked if there had been any military assessment of the domestic risk to military personnel and their families, Henault replied: "Absolutely. In fact, our director-general of intelligence is at the moment trying to determine if there is any domestic risk. We have to be concerned about that in that we do know that there are many folks in Canada who are not necessarily supportive of the operations that we're doing."⁵² There had been demonstrations against the air campaign in Toronto, Ottawa, and other cities, hence they were being cautious about releasing details such as pilots' names because "we don't want any risk of family harassment or something of that nature, which, again, is part of that domestic risk we face."⁵³

Meanwhile, Malbon struggled for access to the Canadians in Aviano. Because she could not set foot on the base with the heavily armed Americans guarding the entrance, she could only reach them by cell phone. With the help of Muralt, Malbon got on to the base the next day, but she couldn't get access either to the Canadian pilots or the ground crews.

“They offered up a Spanish pilot, but they got antsy because we were near the Stealth. The next boatload of journalists wasn’t given access to that site.”⁵⁴ The Canadian military was reluctant to provide even the barest bones of information the journalists needed to construct a news report. They wouldn’t tell the journalists what the CF-18s were bombing, they wouldn’t let the pilots be photographed, and they wouldn’t give them any of the pilots’ names. “It was explained to me there was a fear of terrorists and some wacko slowing video down and attacking families. So, OK, I bought it.”⁵⁵ However, Malbon’s news desk in Toronto could see that the Spanish and Portuguese pilots were talking openly to reporters.

We were still waiting on a request to interview Canadian pilots and the Toronto desk was telling me: “Wait a second, the Spanish pilots are speaking, so were the Portuguese, why aren’t we seeing our Canadian pilots? Canada was involved in this war and Canadians want to know what we’re doing over there.”⁵⁶

The *Times* of London also shows that some foreign journalists were far more successful at obtaining information than the Canadians. The *Times* identified countries that had struck targets three days into the bombing campaign and named NATO pilots. After a Dutch F-16 pilot shot down a Serb MiG that threatened the Canadians on the first night of bombing, the *Times* ran a picture of a Dutch serviceman painting a MiG symbol on the F-16 of pilot Jon Abma, who shot down the Serb plane. American F-15 fighters were also identified as the jets that shot down two Serb MiG29s in the United Nations no-fly zone over Bosnia.⁵⁷

Desperate for footage of any kind, Malbon approached the Americans because it was their base.

I don’t remember exactly who it was, but what they did is, they’d met us in a jeep at the main road and they took us into the base. They took a lot of us, myself and a few other foreign journalists, and they put us in a big kind of bunker, shelter, whatever, and we had to wait. But I started speaking to this one American guy who took me and my cameraman

in a jeep over to the camp where the Canadians were. He drove close by and we said: “Look, we just want to take a few shots on the base, whatever’s restricted is fine, you know, wide shots are OK, non-identifiables.” We saw a Canadian flag flying there so we asked him to stop. We had to slyly kind of take pictures but the American guy kind of understood our problem and just let us take them, so at least I could say this is where the Canadians are on the American base because we were getting absolutely no access.⁵⁸

Meanwhile, more of Canada’s most prominent journalists were on their way to Aviano, including CBC television’s Middle East correspondent Neil Macdonald. A twenty-seven-year veteran of the news business, he was in Jerusalem when the bombing started. Macdonald was called by the CBC in Toronto and told to make his way to Aviano because CBC correspondent Céline Galipeau—who had been trying to travel to Pristina—had been expelled. Macdonald recalled: “It was evident we were not going to be able to get a Yugoslavian visa for some time. They wanted coverage. Canadian fighters were flying out of Aviano and they thought it seemed logical to put a reporter in there for a while.”⁵⁹

Once Macdonald reached Aviano, his experience was the same as Malbon’s. “The Canadians were being so unco-operative that it was virtually useless being there. They were telling us precisely nothing, basically.”⁶⁰ What frustrated Canadian journalists in Aviano was that their American, British, and Spanish counterparts had tremendous access to their military personnel. Macdonald said:

I did one story sort of rounding up what went on elsewhere in the world and stitching in a bit of stuff from Aviano, but a reporter from the BBC got on a British AWACS and reporters there from other countries were getting quite good access. Long after the Spanish and the Americans had started allowing journalists not only to interview pilots, but identify them, we couldn’t. It got to the point where I went in to Pordenone which is a town nearby and bought a pair of

high-powered binoculars, so I could at least count the number of Canadian jets going out of the base.⁶¹

Colonel Davies began speaking to the media, but he provided them little useful information. Malbon said:

I do remember Dwight Davies calling us on to the base. We were all excited thinking: “Oh, finally we’re going to get something.” There was Neil Macdonald, myself, and some other radio reporters and print reporters from Canada. This was just Canadians talking to the Canadian official in charge. He wouldn’t let us put him on camera and I remember watching Neil get very frustrated because he’s asking things that Canadians want to know. “What are the Canadian pilots’ roles here? What targets? Are we hitting our targets? Are we missing them? Are we part of, from what we’re hearing, civilians and buses being blown up? Was it a Canadian bomb?” He was asking all these things and he was getting: “No comment. No comment. No comment. No comment.” He kind of got a little frustrated there at the time and it just seemed like a total waste of time.⁶²

Back in Canada, public affairs officers at 4 and 3 Wings struggled to develop a media plan while Ottawa tried to develop a coherent media plan for Canada and Aviano. Five days before bombing campaign began, it was an “open secret” in Alberta that CF-18s from Cold Lake would replace the Bagotville jets. However, Ottawa wouldn’t let the public affairs officers comment on the deployment because of “political hurdles.”⁶³

One day after the bombing campaign started, the 4 Wing public affairs officer received persistent telephone calls from the *Edmonton Journal*, the *Edmonton Sun*, CTV National out of Edmonton, CKSA Lloydminster, ITV News Edmonton, CFRN Edmonton, QR77 in Calgary, CBC radio from Edmonton and Calgary, and A Channel Television in Calgary and Edmonton for interviews about the deployment. That officer was locked in a battle with the wing commander to buck Ottawa and confirm the information. “I’m still fighting this battle and trying to convince the WComd

[Wing Commander] that we should do it.”⁶⁴ Unable to interview the military, the journalists talked to local residents in nearby Cold Lake.

In Ottawa, on March 26, the joint operations public affairs officer, Lt. Cmdr. Agnew, issued a directive that illustrated the difficulties in developing a coherent media policy for the aerial bombing campaign. It showed that the Canadians had no plan for handling media requests for access to combatants in Aviano. Two different strategies were developed, one for pilots in Canada and one for overseas.

Peacetime rules apply in Canada. More restrictive rules apply in theatre. No pilot interviews authorized until authorized by NDHQ. Pilot interviews authorized in Canada. Do not talk about future ops [operations] but you may, within op sec [operational security] talk about missions that have been done in the past. Ottawa will brief daily at 1300 [1 p.m.] but may curtail these if nothing new happens and we would just issue a statement.⁶⁵

The 1:00 p.m. daily news briefings in Ottawa continued like clockwork, with the defence minister attending from time to time. Eggleton gave the assurances that the Canadians could maintain their combat posture, artfully providing answers devoid of any information that could reveal the nature of the challenges the Canadians caused by the Forces’ peacetime weapons inventories. For example, one astute journalist asked Eggleton directly: “What is the stockpile of these laser-guided bombs that Canada is using? Do we have a large enough inventory to keep up with this run of bombings for any length of time?” Eggleton replied:

Well, it depends on how long the attacks go on. But we can replenish what we have there and we’ll do so to ensure that we can continue to be part of the mission. In other words, our planes will not be sitting idly by because we have run out of ammunition. It’s our intention to be able to continue with the functions that we’ve been asked to carry out. Thank you.⁶⁶

Journalists' lack of access to aircrews on the ground in Aviano ensured that Canadians would not learn the truth about the shortage of bombs, that they were buying the dregs of American bomb stocks with their government-issued credit cards.⁶⁷ They would not learn about the heroic lengths to which those crews went to keep the CF-18s from sitting idle because they were running out of ordnance. They would not learn about the ground crews' struggles with bad backs or sore feet. It wasn't just Eggleton who avoided revealing the air force's critical deficiencies. On March 26, Henault was asked by a journalist about an air force association claim that half of Canada's CF-18s were grounded due to a lack of pilots. Henault replied:

I think that is an unfortunate statement because we have our CF-18 aircraft fully manned and certainly the operational squadrons are manned such that they can conduct operations like this one very, very successfully. In fact, the six aircraft that are in Aviano have been extended to the September time frame, as you may know, and we've already been assured by the air force that they can continue rotating aircraft and ground crew into Aviano and their maintenance folks, as well. And they can sustain operations in Aviano as long as we ask them to.⁶⁸

That was not the truth. The truth was that the dearth of targeting pods in Canada was stretching pilot training to the limit.⁶⁹ Two days after the bombing campaign began, CF-18s from Cold Lake left Canada for Italy. Two of them were likely to participate in the bombing campaign, which was an obvious news story. After a final debriefing, Capt. Travis Brassington, one of the two pilots who was about to depart for actual combat duty, not only had to say goodbye to his wife and children—knowing soon he would put his life on the line—but he had to deal with the news media, too.

When we left, I remember coming out the door from 441 and the cameras were all there and they were kind of in everyone's face. My kids were really little at the time, like my youngest was just a year old and my oldest was a little over

two years old. They didn't really know what was going on. It was just dad going away again but it was uncomfortable because it was pretty emotional, actually. I remember being fairly choked up and kind of glad that I had a visor to slide down and cover my face 'cause we were, we were kind of heading into the unknown.⁷⁰

Just before takeoff at 8:30 a.m., *Edmonton Journal* photographer Chris Schwarz took a picture on the tarmac of Brassington in the cockpit of his CF-18 with the canopy open giving a thumbs-up sign. Brassington's face was half hidden by his visor and the cutline information accompanying the picture transmitted to Southam newspapers across Canada carried the warning: "Please note: Military personnel would not allow the pilot to be identified for security reasons."⁷¹ The picture ran the next day in the *Edmonton Journal*, the *Calgary Herald*, the *Ottawa Citizen*, and the *National Post* (Toronto). The accompanying stories focused on the anguish of unidentified family members watching their loved ones fly off to war.⁷²

All things considered, Brassington was thankful for his family's sake that his name was not published. He was deployed with a Sea King helicopter squadron during the 1991 Gulf War and remembered pilots' families receiving harassing phone calls. Because the Kosovo conflict was long over, Brassington said he was comfortable years later explaining:

As far as somebody knowing there was me over there, what I was doing was no problem. What we were concerned with, I guess, was sympathizers tracking down the Brassington name—which is [the] only one listed in the phone book in Cold Lake—and phoning and threatening families or harassing families. We'd seen it happen before with what we'd experienced with the Gulf War—some of the names of the guys had gotten out and phone calls would be made to the home. I know when I worked at a Sea King squadron we had quite a few phone calls come in during the Gulf War. I wasn't really interested in dragging my family into this and the system wasn't going to allow it and that was fine.⁷³

That day, March 27, when Brassington's unidentified picture was published, Henault told journalists that the information received about the CF-18 missions out of Aviano was restricted for operational reasons. It began with Henault telling journalists that four CF-18s had departed for missions that night and that their missions were aborted due to poor weather. The journalists were also shown pictures of the Navasat Heliport and Satellite Origin Depot, the Batanika airfield close to Belgrade, and a SAM-6 storage facility that were typical of the kinds of large military facilities NATO warplanes—not specifically Canadian warplanes—would target. One journalist calculated that Canadians had flown twelve missions to date, seven of which had been aborted. He also asked if that was the ratio that had been expected. Henault refused to provide any comparative information. “I can tell you that on these types of operations, there are absolutely no score cards kept. It’s not at all like a baseball game. These are uncertainties that we have to face as we go through operations of this nature.”⁷⁴

But one journalist did his own analysis. *Toronto Star* Ottawa correspondent William Walker had a story published that same day, March 27, which said two of the four CF-18s the previous evening had not dropped their bombs because they could not positively identify “single large military targets. . . . That means three of the first eight bombing missions conducted by Canada’s fighter jets in Operation Echo were unable to hit their targets in the rugged Yugoslav terrain with laser-guided bombs.” The headline read: “Canadian pilots miss military targets.”⁷⁵

Because of that article, Davies chose to curtail giving the media even basic information about the CF-18s’ missions, such as the numbers of pilots who had dropped bombs; how many had hit their targets; how many had not dropped their bombs because they could not identify their targets for whatever reason—including poor visibility; and how many had returned to Aviano without dropping their bombs. A *Toronto Star* reporter, Rosie DiManno, first reported on Davies’ decision on March 30, quoting Davies, who said: “My young aviators are reading articles in the press that say Canadian pilots can’t hit a huge military complex with precision-guided munitions. That demonstrates to me an appalling lack of concern for the guys flying these missions.”⁷⁶ Davies was referring, in DiManno’s copy,

to more than one article and, evidently, was not pressed for more information about the pilots who allegedly were affected by negative coverage.

Back in Canada, the news media compared the access of their journalists to the Canadian pilots to the policies of the American military, which, they claimed, was not only allowing print and broadcast interviews but the identification of pilots as well. The question was put directly to Henault on March 28 as to why Canadians couldn't have similar access. He responded:

I would say to that, that we have a very small fighter pilot community in Canada and it's very easy to identify where that particular pilot may have come from. I think you are only too aware of the number of bases that we have or the wings that we have that conduct fighter operations. American pilots giving interviews is a little less of a compromise. It is difficult with a 220 million population to identify more categorically where a pilot may come from and from where he's operating. That's really the reason behind which we're still maintaining some operational security in that respect.⁷⁷

The Canadian journalists' increasing frustrations at not gaining access to the Canadian personnel in Aviano was relayed to their colleagues in the Ottawa press corps. The latter pressed air force commanders and the military's top brass for access to the CF-18 pilots. CTV's Jim Munson, for example, led off the media's questions during the March 31 daily technical briefing by asking Jurkowski about access to the pilots in Aviano. Jurkowski maintained the Forces were not allowing journalists access to the pilots at that time for reasons of security.

As you know, we have a very small fighter pilot community that fly out of only limited numbers of locations and because of mission security and security for themselves who could be very easily identified, and for their families, we have for the moment not allowed journalist interviews with fighter pilots. We are balancing these factors and when the balance is right, and we will try and do this as quickly as

possible, you will certainly have access to the pilots. When that is going to be I can't say for certain.⁷⁸

One week into the bombing campaign, internal briefing notes show the chief of the air staff and his deputy wanted to know the rationale for the restrictive public affairs communications policy for Operation Echo.⁷⁹ Behind the scenes, the highest-ranking air force officials were deeply concerned about the lack of media access to pilots in Aviano. It had also been discussed in meetings with Eggleton, Baril, and Henault, who had consulted with Davies in Aviano and the 3 Wing and 4 Wing commanders. A March 31 briefing note is the second indication that the top brass in Ottawa had no plan for news media requests for access to pilots and ground crew in Aviano. Lt. (Navy) John Coppard, the director of air force public affairs, told the chief of air staff: "J5 PA has indicated the DCDS [Deputy Chief of Defence Staff] will provide guidance to CAS [Chief of Air Staff] as soon as a policy has been decided upon."⁸⁰ The specific concern was that "the pilots in the missions over Kosovo are not being given any opportunity to speak to the media, security considerations notwithstanding."⁸¹ It added: "The matter of increasing the exposure of pilots to the media is a high political and military priority."⁸²

After much consultation, Henault cleared ground crews in Aviano to speak to the news media. As for pilots, several options were considered, the preferred one being interviews with pilots and ground crew by telephone on a no-name basis. The background briefing document continued: "There have also been suggestions that televised interviews with pilots be conducted, but only showing the back of their heads. This approach has been used by our UK allies. All options are in accordance with SACEUR policy."⁸³ No prior plan envisioned allowing Canadian news media access to the pilots in Aviano, because the Canadians were following the NATO public affairs plan, not developing their own. Lt. Cmdr. Agnew explained: "Once you accept it was a NATO operation, we were the Canadian tail."⁸⁴ The sole orchestrated plan for the news media was the daily press briefings at National Defence Headquarters.

Another Canadian journalist representing a major news agency arrived in Aviano about four days after the bombing campaign began. He was shocked to learn that journalists in Ottawa could only talk to a

Canadian pilot by speaker phone while they stood at the gate outside the base. He had convinced his organization that he would have a competitive advantage by spending the money to go to Aviano.

I pushed to go there because that's where the bombing was happening from. We wanted to be close to it so that we could basically be in the neighbourhood in case something bad happened to a Canadian pilot. We would get the information first and we would get it in a timely manner. I mean Canadian military assets are fighting a war. They're dropping bombs. We should be there covering it. It's really that simple.⁸⁵

He discovered, however, that he could reach the base only courtesy of the Americans, who only let journalists in for short periods twice a day. "They had little events for us. They'd take us around in pools to show us planes that we could photograph and the odd American pilot that we could speak to and that was it."⁸⁶ After the Ottawa teleconference took place, he said:

I got a phone call telling me that one of my colleagues in Ottawa had went [sic] to this press conference and got a first-hand account of what it was like to drop a bomb. They put this guy up as sort of like a gimmee. They threw him out to do that. They offered him up to me the next day, one on one, but it had already been out, right? I mean it had been in our paper. Every other media outlet had done it so there was no value to it the day after. I told them basically to stuff it. You guys are wasting my time. I basically ignored the Canadian participation from that point on because it wasn't relevant. There were other countries doing more and there were more interesting stories than how many bombs Canadian planes are dropping on any given day.⁸⁷

Instead, that journalist took a ferry from Italy to Albania and covered the refugee crisis for several weeks, discovering first-hand how dangerous war reporting can be.

We went to the front lines of the Albanian-Kosovo border and I think it was a South American cameraman that got shot in the head—killed by a sniper—a few days earlier. We couldn't really approach too closely because there were snipers several hundred metres away and they could have killed us. A couple of days before that an American pilot dropped a bomb by mistake on the wrong side of the border and nearly wiped out a bunch of journalists and aid workers that were heading out to the same field that I was in. When the border opened, we were able to go into Kosovo. I went in with the German army and we saw atrocities and destruction and interviewed people who'd lived through the occupation. Basically, it was [sic] nothing to do with the Canadian government.⁸⁸

After a week, the lack of media access to pilots and aircrews in Aviano was becoming intolerable, especially since the British and Americans had increased the media's access to pilots both abroad and at home. CTV's news desk in Toronto told Malbon that, given the lack of access, she should travel with her cameraman to Brussels, where NATO's civilian spokesman Jamie Shea was briefing journalists on the campaign's progress. She left Aviano for Belgium. Meanwhile in Ottawa, the lack of information about Canada's involvement in the campaign led Munson to tell viewers on March 31: "The daily briefings make the bombing runs sound like an overnight international courier delivery."⁸⁹

