UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY Press

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

by Bob Bergen

ISBN 978-1-77385-031-3

THIS BOOK IS AN OPEN ACCESS E-BOOK. It is an electronic version of a book that can be purchased in physical form through any bookseller or on-line retailer, or from our distributors. Please support this open access publication by requesting that your university purchase a print copy of this book, or by purchasing a copy yourself. If you have any questions, please contact us at ucpress@ucalgary.ca

Cover Art: The artwork on the cover of this book is not open access and falls under traditional copyright provisions; it cannot be reproduced in any way without written permission of the artists and their agents. The cover can be displayed as a complete cover image for the purposes of publicizing this work, but the artwork cannot be extracted from the context of the cover of this specific work without breaching the artist's copyright.

UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY Press
press.ucalgary.ca

Acknowledgement: *We acknowledge the wording around open access used by Australian publisher,* **re.press**, *and thank them for giving us permission to adapt their wording to our policy* http://www.re-press.org

10

On Body Bags and the News Media

Brig. Gen. David Jurkowski stood behind the podium at the National Defence Headquarters' daily technical briefing in Ottawa on April 20, the day after the Pentagon announced its press policy of identifying pilots by their first name only and withholding hometown information. He revealed why the Canadian Forces would not provide what the news media so desperately wanted: interviews, pictures, and TV footage with the faces, names, and hometowns of the Canadian airmen and women involved in Operation Allied Force. It was day twenty-eight of the aerial bombing campaign, and a journalist again had asked Jurkowski whether he could produce a pilot who had flown on combat air patrol missions to provide his perspective on them. As Jurkowski said, the Forces' policy was to guard the privacy of pilots and their families. But, for the first time, he explained why its policy was so restrictive. Jurkowski said it stemmed from lessons learned about revealing pilots' names during the 1991 Persian Gulf War.

> We had learned some lessons during the Gulf War and some of those lessons relate to threats back to families back at home—telephone calls, harassing telephone calls, body bags on the lawns of wives and kiddies back home in Canada and of individuals who were found to be operating in the Gulf. We learned those lessons and until there is a proper moment to be more open with our pilots and ground crew, to a certain degree we're going to maintain this policy.[1]

In fact, the lessons learned from the 1991 Persian Gulf War were just the opposite, that the Canadian Forces should learn from their Allies and adopt a more liberal public affairs policy about releasing operational information to the news media. The person who wrote the public affairs portion of the 1991 Lessons Learned report, the senior staff public relations officer, Lt. Cmdr Jeff Agnew, knew that. He reviewed the 1991 Lessons Learned report before Kosovo but argues that it wasn't his place to challenge Jurkowski. "Public affairs is a command responsibility. I'm just a public affairs officer. Yes, I want to be as open as possible, but our job is to assist the commanders. As public affairs officers, our first priority is security."[2]

After Jurkowski's explanation, the journalists did not pursue the issue of pilot identification further then, or for the next several days. On April 22 and 23, just how little the Canadian Forces intended to reveal about its pilots' participation in the bombing campaign was underlined. On April 22 the American military released a video of what it said was a Canadian CF-18 hitting a target with a laser-guided bomb two days prior. The journalists wanted to know why they had to see such videos courtesy of the Pentagon. Jurkowski explained that Canadians hadn't dropped bombs on April 20 due to cloud cover. Since other nations were flying F/A-18s, as was Canada, the warplane likely was misidentified as Canadian, but questions were being asked to determine if the misidentification was an honest mistake.[3]

Jurkowski repeated the argument about why Canadians were reluctant to release their own cockpit videos, why any videos that were shown were identified only as NATO videos, and why Canadians were being told little about the air force's participation in the bombing campaign.

> You know our policy, I've stated it before, that we typically don't show our [sic] videos we have. We've shown NATO generic videos, but we don't single out any particular nation. That is our policy and the reason that we haven't been showing too many videos to start with is because of what I've said in past time, that we have a small family of pilots and a small family of Canadian Forces and we're not interested in

> exposing any of our members of the Canadian Forces to any undue threats, concerns.[4]

Some journalists doubted that Jurkowski did not know whether the video they had seen was Canadian, despite his assurances. "That's pretty incredible," remarked one.[5] In fact, Jurkowski's inquiries later that day did reveal that the CF-18 had been misidentified as Canadian. Investigations were able to confirm that the Pentagon video was mislabelled because the Canadian CF-18s' recording format was very different from what was shown.[6] Both the CBC and CTV television networks aired stories that night that showed the video, quoting an American major general as saying: "This is an MUP Army barracks hit by a Canadian CF-18. Very tough target to hit. Potential for collateral direct hit."[7] They also said the CF-18 might have been misidentified, while Canadian officials were angry at the Americans for releasing the video. Similar stories woven into other stories ran in eight major daily newspapers the next day, with one tagline in the *Toronto Sun* mocking the Forces: "Memo to Pentagon from the Chief of Defence Staff: No praise please, we're Canucks."[8]

The next day, Jurkowski sparred verbally with a reporter who asked for clarification on the factors that decided how much people were told, how much is kept secret, and why the Americans had a different set of rules. Jurkowski said he wasn't sure that Americans had a different set of rules, while many facts, if exposed to the public, could have unintended consequences.

> When it comes to video, I think I mentioned a while back that there is certain data on the digital display indicator from which the video is taken that gives examples of altitudes, air speeds, therefore the delivery parameters, ranges, things like that that are not critical but you really don't need to let people know that sort of thing.[9]

Jurkowski repeated that information about which targets Canadians bombed might spark someone sensitive "to do something that we wouldn't necessarily want them to do. That's it basically. We are, we don't want to give an indication of, certainly from the Canadian side, of exactly what

kind of targeting we're doing."[10] Jurkowski's response, including that he preferred to err on the side of caution, didn't satisfy the reporter, who said:

> It seems that Canadians, in a sense, are being kept in the dark about just exactly what the Canadian pilots are bombing and shouldn't Canadians have a better idea of what's being hit by Canada, as opposed to saying: "Well, it's all part of NATO and we're all in on everything." There's an accountability question here that Canadians should be thinking about. You're saying: "Well, we don't want to spur somebody to do something that . . . ," but I mean one of the things that it might spur would be a certain type of debate within Canada about what it is Canadians are doing and that might be healthy.[11]

Jurkowski didn't budge from his position that the Forces were doing their best to be accountable, especially with people's lives at risk during combat, and in concert with the steps they took to ensure that they were bombing only military targets. The line of questioning was dropped as other reporters focused on the refugee crisis. Jurkowski may have been telling the truth when he pleaded ignorance about whether the Americans were playing by a different set of rules than the Canadians. The United States was following NATO rules, which allowed individual countries to decide how much information they disclosed to the media.[12]

One of the first items Jurkowski addressed during the May 6 technical briefing was the addition of a GBU-10 2,000-pound bomb to the inventory of bombs Canada used in the campaign. Slides showed the difference between the GBU-10 and the GBU-12 500-pound precision bombs and the Mark 82 500-pound non-precision bombs Canada also was using. Sanitized in the extreme, it made no mention of the reason for acquiring the GBU-10. Without journalists in Aviano who might have discovered the whole story, journalists in Ottawa could not know the 500-pound GBU-12s bombs failed to take out their targets, or the risks pilots took in delivering them. This allowed Jurkowski to put the best possible interpretation on the shortcomings of Canada's war stocks by illustrating the flexibility

of the CF-18 and the ability to strike a wider variety of targets, which was true as far as it went but was far from the whole truth.[13]

Not until a few days after May 7, when a NATO warplane accidentally bombed the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, were the Canadian media's suspicions confirmed that some American and British journalists could learn more about the air campaign than they could. For example, the *New York Times* identified the errant aircraft as a US Air Force B-2 stealth bomber, which dropped satellite-guided bombs on the embassy, misidentified as the Serbs' federal procurement and supply directorate.[14] It is not clear from that front-page article where that information came from. The United States or its warplanes were never identified, but the *Times* could find that information in a less formal way. When reading press briefings in their entirety, specific nations were never identified with regard to targets. They were always identified as NATO warplanes. But the *Times*' journalists worked around that restriction even when resulting news reports portrayed the US Air Force in a bad light.

The May 15 briefings revealed that NATO warplanes had accidentally killed up to eighty civilians during an attack on a military command post in southern Kosovo. One journalist asked which country had done the bombing. Maj. Gen. Walter Jertz, the spokesman for NATO's Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe, replied that specific countries were never identified, but he challenged journalists to find out which country's warplane it was. He said: "I already indicated to you that it was F-16s, so it is up to you to find out which country it was, and it is always up to the country to announce—if they want to announce it—if it was theirs or not."[15] The *New York Times* reported on the next day that four US F-16s had launched the attack that accidentally killed civilians.[16]

Canadian journalists believed that American journalists and others had superior access to NATO officials and their countries' pilots or ground crews. Still, an examination of the complete war coverage of the *New York Times* and the *Times* (London) from 24 March to 30 June 1999 offers no evidence that American and British journalists published human interest stories identifying individual service members. There were no hometown-hero stories. In fact, two weeks into the air war, the editors and executives from seven American news organizations protested by letter to US defence secretary William S. Cohen regarding the dearth of information:

"On many days, the state-controlled Yugoslav media has been more specific about NATO targets than the United States or NATO."[17] The editors understood the need to withhold information that jeopardized "on-going operations or endanger lives," but argued "the current restrictions go way beyond that need."[18]

In retrospect, Gen. Clark wrote that he realized very early in the bombing campaign that NATO must be more open with the news media, if only to counter the Serbs' superior communications capabilities, particularly regarding civilian casualties. The Serbs were on the ground and able to immediately exploit NATO accidents in the world's news media. They went to great lengths to portray the NATO strikes as targeting civilians. Thus, NATO commanders came under tremendous public pressure to avoid collateral damage. "The weight of public opinion was doing to us what the Serb air defence system had failed to do: Limit our strikes."[19] The lesson to be learned, he wrote, was that military commanders must address the news media because public support is necessary for sustained operations.[20]

Still, in the United States an absence of relevant and timely information about the war caused the media to lose interest in covering it over the long run. Stephen Hess, a research fellow at the Brookings Institution, discovered that the total number of minutes the three major American broadcast networks devoted to Kosovo showed a steady decline. At the end of April and the beginning of May, there was a total of some 215 minutes broadcast that week. It fell the next week to 63 minutes and finally, when Hess stopped keeping track in mid-May, to just 55 minutes in total.[21]

Meanwhile, the Canadian Forces did its best to keep the CF-18 pilots under the news media's radar. Maj. Stéphane Hébert, the deputy weapons and tactics officer for 433 Tactical Fighter Squadron in Aviano, remembers that he was ordered not to breathe a word about the fact that he and three other Bagotville pilots had volunteered to return to Canada with four jets that had reached serviceability fatigue with 300 combat hours' flying time on them. Hébert recalled:

> They didn't want any media to be aware jets were coming back with the pilots and the aircrew. That was done hush,

> hush. Nobody was told. My wife was basically phoned like a couple hours before to say: "Hey, come here at this time." That was it, and so we landed and basically went home. They didn't want to have the whole media circus or whatever. The media were hungry for news and for information because of General Clark and the shift in the whole focus of the war. The decisions were made at a much higher level than I.[22]

Hébert recalled an Internet security threat to pilots that sparked a concern over pilots being identified in the Canadian news media. When the Bagotville pilots first went to Aviano in October 1998, they were encouraged to send pictures of themselves to local newspapers in Canada. One such picture somehow was published on an Internet website. They were identifying people saying: "These are the ones that are killing Serbs." The RCMP had to take it out, but we were told specifically about this website and to keep it quiet and advise our families that they should be on the lookout for anything suspicious.[23] Hébert said the word about the pilots' families needing to be suspicious of things around their homes manifested itself into a scare at CFB Bagotville that was relayed up the chain of command all the way to the commander in Aviano.

> They almost sent me back because somebody had come to my house and had taken pictures of my dog. My neighbours saw him and a bunch of guys, when they tried to stop him, the guy just fled away. So, it looked really, really weird. My wife phoned the military police and the MPs made an investigation with the local police and the city to see if they had sent anybody to the house. After about a week, the city had told them, "Hey, there was nobody hired by us." Then they dug a bit deeper and they figured out that it was a sub-sub-contractor or something who was hired by the city to come and take a look at the meters for property tax or something. That was the end of it, but we were told, like I said, to be very, very conscious of the media and to make sure that we keep our names and faces quiet.[24]

Still, John Larsen continued his efforts to attract Canadian news media to Italy. He called the CBC with the promise of on-camera access to the pilots. Paul Workman, the CBC's Paris correspondent, was called in mid-May by his news desk in Toronto, saying that the military's rules were relaxed and that it was worth going to Aviano with the expectation of getting "a decent story."[25] Workman met up with a cameraman from London, flew to Italy, and drove to the American air base at Aviano. When they arrived, the Canadian public affairs officers were waiting for them with clearance to take them on base, but they discovered that the non-identification restrictions his colleague Neil Macdonald battled almost two months earlier had eased up only marginally. Whereas Macdonald could only film the back of a pilot's head and his hands, Workman's cameraman was able to show half of a pilot's face with his helmet's visor lifted halfway to his nose, revealing his lips. Workman explained his difficulty with that policy from the media's perspective:

> Obviously, a pilot who appears on television is only there for a few seconds—twenty, thirty seconds, maybe of a full report—so it isn't a long period but it can be dramatic. It seems to me that a picture of a pilot with his visor half-open adds more unnecessary drama to the scene than is necessary. These pilots, by and large, had just come back or were just going on missions and we were interested in what they had to tell us about their targets, the activity they saw, whether they had come under fire, their fears and the dangers they might have perceived and what they thought of the conflict. If they could answer those kinds of questions and it seemed to me when you can only see half their face it: a) yes, it adds to the drama, but b) it makes it much more difficult to accept what somebody is telling you.[26]

The one piece that Workman produced during that trip to Italy was the filming of two air force personnel: an unidentified pilot and Col. Dwight Davies. The unidentified pilot talked for twenty seconds about his first combat mission and about thinking about his family. Davies talked about

receiving new, bigger bombs a week earlier, which illustrated how capable the CF-18s were.[27]

Davies' command ended on May 11. He flew immediately to Ottawa, where he appeared with Jurkowski at the May 14 technical briefing before the national press corps. During his presentation on the bombing campaign, Davies used charts and graphs in a slide show to illustrate how many sorties Canadians had flown, their number in Aviano compared to the overall NATO effort, and the targets. But with no numbers on the charts, the journalists could not quantify the Canadian contribution of eighteen CF-18s to the NATO total in any meaningful way. Davies explained: "I've deliberately left the numbers off of the side of the scale. You can, I guess, calibrate it, given that we've provided eighteen. That'll give you some idea."[28] When a journalist asked how many of Canada's bombs had hit their targets and how many had missed, Jurkowski jumped in, saying: "I don't want to get into the exact numbers of weapons we've actually released. I'm not prepared to discuss that, nor is the colonel."[29] None of that empty information was used in that night's television broadcasts or major daily newspapers the next day.

Two things that Davies did tell the media are worthy of note. During his slide presentation, he spoke glowingly about the Canadian Forces resupply system, claiming it was extremely effective for ammunition, parts, equipment, and personnel.[30] That was anything but the case. The supply system was stretched to its limits, draining morale because the troops couldn't get their mail, let alone decent boots and aircraft parts. The ground crews working with borrowed equipment were retooling the dregs of American guided munitions. Trained pilots were in such short supply due to the shortage of FLIR pods in Canada that the system was bordering on collapse.