

THE GHOSTS OF MEDAK POCKET: THE STORY OF CANADA'S SECRET WAR by Carol Off

Random House Canada, 2004. 310 pages, \$34.95.

Reviewed by
Lieutenant-Colonel Wayne Eyre, CD

In late summer of 1993, war and war crimes in the Balkans, despite the presence of a United Nations (UN) peacekeeping force, were far from finished. In a story that has never been fully told, Canadian soldiers from the Second Battalion, Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry Battalion Group (2PPCLI), deployed on an ill-defined 'peacekeeping' mission in Croatia, where they engaged in combat and witnessed war crimes firsthand during the Medak Pocket Operation.

Driven by their desire to claim all of Croatia, as defined by the Former Republic of Yugoslavia, the Croatian military launched an attack on 9 September 1993 in the area of Medak to reduce the Serb-held 'pocket.' As the offensive stalled, the UN, desperate for some form of success in the region, called upon 2 PPCLI to take over the frontline positions of both sides and to establish a buffer zone in the middle. What was to ensue was the most intense combat the Canadian Army had seen since the Korean War, followed by the most detailed documenting of war crimes in the Balkan Wars. Carol Off, a journalist and author of *The Lion, the Fox and the Eagle*, has written an investigative work bordering on oral history examining this operation, the events leading up to it and the fallout both for the individuals and the nations involved.

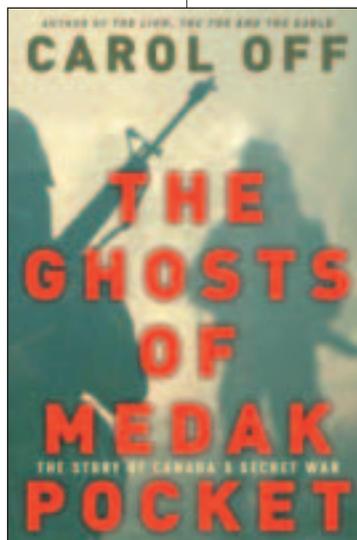
I have to admit up front that I 'carry baggage' with the subject of this book. As the Reconnaissance Platoon Commander for 2 PPCLI during this time, I am intimately familiar with the subject and was somewhat skeptical that the full story would ever be told. This doubt continued when I first saw the book's dust jacket, depicting what appear to be US soldiers in protective gear with early-generation M16s and blank firing attachments – an image related not at all to Medak. Fortunately, the old saying 'Never judge a book by its cover' applies in this case. Once into it, I realized that at last someone has told the story in a manner that more or less captures the essence of what really happened.

Off has succeeded in getting the framework of the tale correct. Aside from a number of minor mistakes in details relating to geography, names, equipment, and military terminology, the larger picture is accurate. The two dozen or so individuals from the battalion she interviewed colours the narrative a certain way, but there is no getting around that. The perspective of the witness limits first-person accounts of historical events, and this operation was no exception. All participants in history see only their part of the event, and those events themselves are viewed through a different experiential lens, while some memories are involuntarily selective. Thus, while the framework is there, events experienced by others go untold. This is the reality of history.

The Ghosts of Medak Pocket begins with a thumbnail sketch of Croatia's move to independence from the time of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and rightly asserts: "Any attempt to draw a clean narrative line through the last few centuries of Balkan history would have to distort the facts." Of great interest in Croatia's independence is the role played by its Diaspora living in Canada, many of them members of the fascist Ustache movement who fled their homeland after the Second World War. Some of these immigrants, such as Gojko Susak, became key figures in fomenting extreme nationalism in their homeland through political and financial support from Canada. Some extremist propaganda was even unwittingly funded by Canadian federal programs. According to the author: "Federal support was naïve and often foolish." By shedding light on Canada's complicity in Yugoslavia's civil war, one cannot help but draw parallels to our current approach to the global war against Islamic militants.

Off's interviews with members of the current moderate Croatian government are insightful and provide good perspective to the 'OPFOR.' She cites a number of good sources for the discussion of the early years of the war, but, for more detail, could have included the excellent Central Intelligence Agency publication *Balkan Battlegrounds*, a two-volume set written by two analysts who worked the Balkan desk during the conflict that also includes a superb map series.

The author hits the key points in the prelude to the Medak Pocket Operation. Second Battalion's preparation for overseas by necessity concentrated on integrating nearly 400 reservists into the unit, mostly



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to the rifle companies who were the training focus in pre-deployment training. She briefly discusses the first five months of the tour, including events in Sector West and the move to Sector South – almost worthy of a book themselves – but misses the point that the cohesion and confidence gained here was essential to the successful conduct of the Medak Operation. Had Medak happened at the beginning of the tour, the outcome might have been significantly different.

The book describes the opening stages of the operation in good detail, especially the Eight Platoon firefight where Sgt Rod Dearing's section accounted for numerous Croatian casualties. Details are scarce, however, on the occupation inside the pocket, such as the move into Licki Citluk. Accounts are lacking from either of the attached French Army companies or from some of the Combat Support Company platoons. Her assertion regarding 'the complete absence of survivors' is incorrect. On 16 September in the Pocket, Lt Al Trainor, Recce Platoon Second-in-Command, detained and hid from marauding Croat soldiers three Serb soldiers who were stuck behind their enemy and who were then returned to Serb lines.

Off gives much focus to the assertions and recriminations of the commanding officer, medical officer and padre regarding the mental state of the unit. This, in my view, boils down to a debate over force protection versus mission accomplishment. The mission must come first. I get irked when I hear a commander overseas state: "My mission is to bring my troops home safely." No, your mission is to do what you were sent over to do. It is your professional duty to do so while minimizing the risk to the greatest extent possible to your troops. One must realize that our profession is inherently risky. If it were easy, somebody else would do it. In this case, it was the determined leadership of the commanding officer, Lieutenant-Colonel Jim Calvin, that overcame doubt and made the operation a success.

The latter part of the book concentrates on the aftermath of the operation – the stress casualties and medical problems, the unwillingness of senior leadership,

both military and political, to acknowledge the fighting that occurred, and the decade of recriminations and investigations concluding with the creation and awarding of the Commander-in-Chief's Unit Commendation. The author also talks about the aftermath in Croatia, where the country would rather forget that the operation had ever occurred. This was apparent to me during a visit to the Medak area in 2000, where the unaltered destruction and desolation are testament to a nation now embarrassed that it unreservedly embraced ethnic war.

Off uses a style that is more anecdotal than scholarly in nature, and, in doing so, covers the human dimension of the story extremely well. She does not reference sources in detail, and the colourful descriptions of key participants provide interesting albeit somewhat exaggerated caricatures. Maps of the Medak area are lacking in key details necessary to assist comprehension, such as significant villages and front lines. Pictures would have increased the impact of the book. That being said, her style allows for a quick and interesting read. To date, this is the best study of the Medak Pocket Operation, one that I highly recommend for those with any interest in Canada's role in the Balkans. The definitive story is still out there, perhaps in the form of an official history, but Carol Off has done a credible job – despite the challenge of contending with the decade of time that has passed.

The situation of 2PPCLI in the Medak Pocket in Croatia in 1993 provides a prime operational example of a peace support operation that degenerated into conventional war fighting, and where only the unit's inherent combat capabilities allowed for mission success. The lesson we must take away is that, regardless of the mission's mandate, our troops have to be able to fight and win. Only the mindset of a professional soldier who is trained and psychologically ready to kill the enemy, whoever that may be, will be the saviour when a mission goes downhill.

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THE GHOSTS OF MEDAK POCKET: THE STORY OF CANADA'S SECRET WAR Reviewed by Scott Fitzsimmons

The *Ghosts of Medak Pocket: The Story of Canada's Secret War* is Carol Off's second effort in the field of contemporary Canadian politico-military history. While her earlier work, *The Lion, the Fox and*

the Eagle, followed the "great person" tradition of history in its profile of three leading Canadians during the 1990s, *The Ghosts of Medak Pocket* reflects a decidedly different focus by illuminating the lives of ordinary soldiers serving with the Second Battalion of the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry (2PPCLI) as United Nations (UN) peacekeepers in the Medak region of Croatia in 1993. The work is an attempt to lift the veil on the most violent Canadian military engagement in the half century between the Korean War and the War in Afghanistan, an event so out of

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synchronization with traditional concepts of peacekeeping that no one has offered a book-length public account of what transpired until now.

A major strength of Off's superbly written book is its comprehensive approach to its subject matter. Early chapters offer invaluable background on the origins of the conflict in Croatia and the UN peacekeeping mission mandated to police it. This section of the book sets the stage for the later discussion of the Medak firefights and their aftermath, which serves as the core of the text by contextualizing the nightmarish microcosm of power politics that all UN forces experienced when they entered the Medak region in 1993. As one of Off's chapter titles appropriately summarizes, the events that transpired in Medak Pocket came to pass because Canadian peacekeepers simply had "no peace to keep."

The descriptions of the firefights between Canadian and Croat forces in September 1993, as the former tried to deter the latter from attacking Serb civilians in villages under UN protection, are both vivid and haunting. The reader is brought right down into the trenches and armoured vehicles with individual soldiers, and experiences the intensity of the events through the eyes, ears, and nostrils of those who lived through them. In a typical example, one soldier describes "the crescendo of sound that went from zero to this amount of noise that I had never experienced before or since, which entirely fills your body, fills your head, fills your chest with the sounds of these rounds being fired at you." Similarly, the author's portrayal of the frantic Canadian search for Serb survivors following the battle, complete with imagery of sights, sounds and smells, virtually impossible to encounter outside a war zone, skilfully conveys the harsh reality of post-Cold War peacekeeping. This is another major strength of the book, for only with such descriptions can readers fully appreciate the gravity of these events and why recounting them is so important.

Much of the latter half of the book details the declining mental and physical health of peacekeepers traumatized by the conflict. The author presents first-hand accounts of rampant substance abuse, depression, breakdowns in military discipline and allegations of attempted murder amongst the soldiers. These accounts, drawn almost exclusively from interviews, illustrate a major theme of the book: the psychological cost of war. In doing so, Off portrays Canadian peacekeepers

as more flawed, and, ultimately, human than any previous work on peacekeeping. Although a true account, Off's retelling of the experiences of 2PPCLI in Croatia sometimes reads like a well-crafted novel, complete with a cast of deeply-nuanced characters capable of vice and virtue, yet willing to give their all in the face of insurmountable danger. For good or ill, this book undoubtedly shatters any remaining notions that Canadian peacekeepers should be considered the world's boy scouts.

For all its strengths, however, *The Ghosts of Medak Pocket* is not devoid of flaws. Most glaring, from the perspective of a scholar, is a total lack of citations. This oversight reduces the academic utility of this work, for readers are ultimately forced to simply take Off's word on arguments and evidence that are nothing if not controversial. Citations would have been particularly helpful in the book's final chapter, which alleges that the Department of Defence waged a ten-year battle to suppress all information about the Medak engagement. As any good scholar knows, it is footnotes, not the author's reputation, that allow the best writing to stand the gruelling tests of credibility and time.

Those interested in a purely tactical focus may be somewhat disappointed in this book. Certainly, only a few dozen pages out of nearly 300 concentrate on the major engagements between Croat forces and 2PPCLI. Consequently, readers hoping for a Canadian *Black Hawk Down* will have to look elsewhere. However, it is clear from the outset that Off did not intend to confine herself to a mere tactical retelling of "Canada's secret war," but sought to provide a multi-faceted perspective of this event that is accessible to a wide audience.

In sum, this work offers the only book-length account of what is certainly one of Canada's least understood military engagements. It is therefore a 'must-read' for anyone interested in the Canadian Forces, peacekeeping, or contemporary politico-military history. Reflecting the full range of the author's skills as a journalist and experienced foreign correspondent, *The Ghosts of Medak Pocket* seeks to cover all angles of an intriguing story, and it succeeds brilliantly.

Scott Fitzsimmons is a doctoral candidate in political science at the University of Calgary.