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Bergen, Bob

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

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Prelude to Censorship: Media, Body Bags, and the Persian Gulf War

The image was chilling and the intimidating thought behind it appalling. The *Vancouver Sun* reported in January 1991 that the wife of a Canadian Forces naval officer had discovered a body bag dumped on her front lawn in Esquimalt, BC. Her husband was among those aboard HMCS *Huron* preparing to take part in Canada's contribution to Operation Friction, the naval blockade of Iraq prior to the Persian Gulf War. The report specifically identified the body bag as the type used by the military but did not indicate how a civilian could have obtained one. The victim's family allegedly was targeted through names published in local newspapers identifying those aboard the destroyer about to relieve others already serving in the Gulf. Canadian Forces spokesmen vowed that no effort was being spared to find out who was responsible for this and other harassment.¹

Reportedly, more incidents occurred, including callers identifying themselves as insurance salesmen advising the families to buy life insurance for their husbands. Others claiming to be military officials phoned military wives to inform them of the death of their spouses.² The following day the Vancouver newspaper took an editorial position stating that the perpetrators "defile the ideals of the peace movement."³ The *Sun* did not indicate how it knew the alleged perpetrators belonged to the peace movement.

The day after the body bag report, on 22 January 1991, Parliament voted 214 to 47 to support United Nations resolutions for the use of military

force to drive Saddam Hussein's Iraqi troops from Kuwait. Iraq had invaded its neighbour some five months earlier.⁴ Canada's military contribution included twenty-four CF-18 Hornet jet fighter/bombers and 700 personnel. Over forty-three days, from January 17 to February 28, the 1991 Persian Gulf War—known as Operation Desert Storm—became the world's first real-time televised war.⁵ Operation Friction was Canada's contribution. Daily—from the comfort of their living rooms, offices, and wherever televisions could be found—audiences worldwide could tune into a war that featured the devastating strikes of laser-guided smart bombs destroying their targets with pinpoint accuracy. How the American military and governments managed the news media during that war and since has been studied extensively.⁶ Little, however, is known about the Canadian Forces' management of the Canadian news media before and during the war, including the reported body bag incident. It is fertile ground for study and explains in large part the security considerations and decisions during the 1999 Kosovo air war.

Five months before the Gulf War's outbreak, Canadian Forces public affairs planners already had developed little-known but elaborate communications strategies for the Canadian news media. It was announced on 10 August 1990 that three Canadian ships—HMCS *Protecteur*, HMCS *Athabaskan*, and HMCS *Terra Nova*—would be sent to the Gulf to enforce UN-mandated sanctions against Iraq as soon as possible. Just five days later, on August 15, a prototype Canadian Forces public affairs plan setting out methods of dealing with the heightened news media interest in the Forces was forwarded to National Defence Headquarters in Ottawa.⁷ Major Canadian news outlets already had submitted requests to accompany the warships on their deployment to the Gulf. The Forces' director-general of public affairs was ordered to assist with the development of a media pool of four national journalists aboard the ships.⁸ The Canadian military clearly saw the impending conflict as a golden opportunity to build popular support for the Forces. "This opportunity to maximize media coverage and encourage popular support for the Canadian Forces must be actively encouraged when viewed in a macro sense vis-à-vis the future of the Canadian navy in particular and the Canadian Forces in general."⁹

To that end, the news media would be accommodated as much as possible given operational considerations. The pre-deployment phase of

public affairs activities was deemed crucial. The news media was directed toward the eighteen- and twenty-year-old ships' upgraded weapons and sensors at every opportunity, and to as many human interest stories as possible. The aim was to reinforce the "boy next door" sentiments of the public so audiences became personally involved in support for Canadian sailors and aircrew.¹⁰

By November 1990, public opinion polls led military planners to conclude that their strategy was working. The general public and the news media had a keen interest in the Forces' operations, planning, and combat preparations. Between 64 and 69 per cent of Canadians approved of the government's decision to become involved in the blockade. The communications strategy was revised to enhance public understanding of and support for Canada's role by nurturing and capitalizing on extant public interest. The military aimed for "maximum disclosure of information consistent with maintaining the operational security of Canada's forces and those of other allied nations participating in the Gulf operations."¹¹ In its after-action report on its public affairs planning, the Canadian military stated it knew that the news media would play an influential role in that communications strategy because they would be the key conveyors of information about, and interpreters of, the war's events to the Canadian public.¹² Military public affairs planners made every effort to inform Canadians proactively.

They sought to take command not only of the news media's agenda but of virtually every sector of society, including its democratically elected institutions. The messages the military wanted portrayed to Canadians included: that Canada's mission was to deter Iraqi aggression in Kuwait and enforce UN sanctions; that Canadian ships and aircraft were fully capable of conducting their missions; that morale was high and personnel were confident; that Canadians would operate under Canadian command and control; and, finally, that the Canadian Forces were participating with appropriate legislative and diplomatic approvals in addition to operational considerations.¹³ Those messages were to be conveyed to nine target audiences (seven external audiences and two internal audiences) that military communications planners had identified.

The first external audience targeted was the general Canadian public, in communication thrusts via news releases, public briefings, the news

media, debates in the House of Commons, and in replies to ministerial questions and inquiries. The second target was the news media, stimulated through background briefings, news releases, query responses, and operational theatre visits. The third audience was elected officials, who would be reached via briefings, questions in the House of Commons, committee presentations, and various elected officials' visits to operational theatres. The fourth target audience was Canadian academics, whom the military planned to reach through background and technical briefings. The fifth audience was defence analysts, who would also be reached through technical and background briefings. The sixth audience was ethnic Canadians, who would be informed through media reports and public briefings. The seventh external audience was international publics that would be reached through foreign missions, briefings, and assistance to international journalists.¹⁴

The first internal public identified was Canadian Forces members, who would be informed through internal information programs disseminated by base newspapers, video releases, and briefings. The second internal public was Canadian Forces members' dependents, who would be reached through command briefings, family support centres, internal information programs, and base newspapers.¹⁵ Although the internal publics are an important constituency from a Canadian Forces point of view and worthy of study, this chapter will focus on the external publics the Forces identified. The common thread throughout the military's attempts to shape public opinion of Canada's role in the Persian Gulf, with all but two exceptions, was the news media. The two external publics in which the news media were not identified to support the military mission were academics and defence analysts. Presumably, they did not need the news media for basic information and had a higher level of understanding of Canada's military role in the Persian Gulf than the general public, parliamentarians, and other government officials.

Given the Canadian news media's high level of interest in the Canadian Forces Middle East (CANFORME) operations, on 9 November 1990 the Forces developed a news media policy based on operational security requirements:

a. Within the scope of operational security, media will be accorded every possible assistance in the preparation and filing of their reports; b. Censorship will not be invoked by DND or by CANFORCOMME. The imposition of censorship can only be derived from censorship policy of the Canadian government. Therefore, it is paramount that a good working relationship with the news media be established to ensure they understand the necessity to voluntarily comply with in-theatre security screening guidelines. Accordingly, media covering the roles, operations and activities of the Canadian Forces Middle East should be prepared to submit their copy for security screening only; c. There will be no suggestion that media expunge critical commentary from their reports unless there is an impact on security of operations; d. Before they are provided access to in-theatre operations, all media are to be provided unclassified briefings about Canadian Forces operations and activities in the Persian Gulf, security considerations and requirements, and what is expected of them while they are visiting CANFORME units; e. Media embarked in HMC ships may use ships' communications resources, when appropriate and available. The Canadian Forces will provide protective clothing and equipment to media representatives when they are embarked in HMC ships; f. All interviews with news media representatives will be "on the record"; g. Journalists will be requested to dateline their articles and reports generically, such as ". . . with the Canadian Forces in Bahrain/Qatar/Persian Gulf." No specific locations will be used when filing stories; h. Media representatives will be assisted by on-site public affairs officers; j. Diplomatic clearances, visa and inoculations will be the responsibility of the media members; and, k. Media who are not prepared to work within these guidelines will not be provided access to CANFORME operations, activities and units.¹⁶

The only negative news reports that emerged from August to December from the deployment involved sailors' morale problems aboard the three ships and questions about their ability to carry out sustained operations.¹⁷ One month later, the Canadian Forces developed a further communications plan for the rotation of three more ships to the Gulf—HMCS *Huron* and HMCS *Restigouche* from the West Coast and HMCS *Preserver* from the East Coast—to sustain Canada's commitments. It aimed to convey the messages that the rotation was the most cost-effective way to maintain operational readiness; it allowed trained personnel to relieve personnel serving since August; the ships' state of readiness was good; and the new personnel were confident they could do the job of the crews they were replacing.¹⁸ To accommodate the news media covering the departure of HMCS *Huron* from Esquimalt, BC, the naval public affairs office was charged with handling all requests for media interviews with members of the ship's company. No direction was given at that time to withhold the names of members of the ship's company.¹⁹

In early January 1991, it appeared that Canada's military effort in the Persian Gulf might be escalating. On January 2, Canadian Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) Gen. John de Chastelain met with key staff to discuss a public affairs policy that envisioned the Canadian military's transition to war. The 9 November 1990 communications plan would remain in effect with the aim of enhancing public understanding and support of the Canadian military's Persian Gulf role. The key elements regarding the news media were: that their activities be conducted within the constraints of operational security; there be no censorship; and that media members must accept the November 9 guidelines to be accredited.²⁰ Events in the Persian Gulf, Washington, Ottawa, and around the world began to unfold rapidly after 12 January 1991, when Congress granted US president George Bush the authority to wage war.

By January 14, the Canadian Forces had developed a new media plan for the war. It called for the organization of a Canadian news media pool that would be assembled, deployed, and escorted by the public affairs office, with careful control of its access to air operations headquarters.²¹ Canadian senior operations offices would hold regular unclassified briefings on the Canadian Forces operations and activities for journalists at Bahrain and Qatar. But Canadian journalists would be largely on their

own if they wished to cover the Joint Allied Information Bureau in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, where the British and Americans were organizing journalists into pools to cover the forward land battle expected in Kuwait. The joint information bureau was located at the International Hotel. The Canadians similarly would be on their own in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, the location of the main American, British, and Saudi headquarters. There, senior US and British senior officers would brief journalists at the Hyatt Regency Hotel.²² As an indication of the priority the Canadian Forces placed on the control of messages it wanted Canadians to receive, on January 15, CDS de Chastelain ordered that only approved spokesmen in Ottawa could comment on Canada's anticipated mission and roles in the Persian Gulf hostilities. The ostensible aim was ensuring consistency with government policy.²³

The next day, January 16, Prime Minister Brian Mulroney rose in the House of Commons shortly and announced that Canada had joined with other UN members in driving Saddam Hussein's troops from Kuwait by force. To do so, Mulroney's cabinet gave de Chastelain full authority for Canadian CF-18s to fly combat missions in the Gulf. Even as the prime minister spoke, the fighter bombers had begun to conduct sweep and escort missions over Kuwait and Iraq, protecting Canadian and allied ships and personnel in the Gulf.²⁴ Their first role was combat air patrol (CAP) missions to protect coalition warships against Iraqi Exocet missiles. The CF-18s eventually flew 770 CAP sorties.²⁵

Ten of the twenty-four CF-18s and about 160 personnel of the 700 who participated in the war came from 416 Tactical Fighter Squadron at CFB Cold Lake, Alberta. The rest came from Lahr, Germany, and Bagotville, Quebec. Retired Canadian Forces Brig. Gen. Ed McGillivray, commander of CFB Cold Lake in 1991, recalls that the news media were never particularly interested in his people before the outbreak of the Gulf War. "When Iraq was attacked, all hell broke loose at Cold Lake. All of a sudden, we had media parked outside the base. Every media in Canada was there, every news agency, TV, radio, even to the point where they had satellite trucks."²⁶

Initially, McGillivray took it upon himself to tell the news media how the 416 Tactical Fighter Squadron fit Canada's contributions to the coalition war effort. The news media wanted more: they wanted access to relatives of the pilots to humanize their stories beyond squadron numbers.

Like many journalists across Canada, they wanted names and faces put to the pilots' families, who could share their thoughts and feelings about their loved ones' involvement in the war.²⁷

Marion Kendall, the wife of Cold Lake pilot Maj. Dave Kendall, agreed to become the unofficial spokeswoman for all the pilots' families for the duration of the war. Kendall talked openly about how difficult it was for her children and other families who had never faced the spectre of war before. McGillivray relates: "She provided, shall we say, good news clips and they followed her, and they interviewed her all the time throughout the war to get her reaction as to how the war was going. Anytime they wanted a news clip, they'd give her a call and, generally, they'd get one."²⁸

Like Americans who revelled in their hometown heroes,²⁹ newspapers across Canada were awash in "boy next door" stories that provided hundreds of local angles for journalists, which bonded Canadians to their military men and women. The Canadians were identified in stories and pictures by name and hometowns as pilots waiting to fly on missions and as medics mentally preparing for the grim potential of combat casualties.³⁰ Such identification is a standard North American journalistic practice, to engage readers and viewers. In most instances, journalists provide sufficient identification of "persons, organizations, places, objects and even the event itself for the reader to orient himself immediately."³¹ Canadian regiments usually are identified by their official hometown or towns.³²

Meanwhile, thousands of other Canadians across the country made headline news in the wake of Prime Minister Mulroney's announcement. Anti-war protestors responded to the news almost immediately. In Toronto, crowds blocked traffic on busy streets, chanting "Get troops out of Iraq" as they headed toward the Progressive Conservative Party headquarters on Richmond Street.³³ Outside the US consulate flags were burned. At city hall, 1,500 people demonstrated for hours. Upward of 500 demonstrators rallied in Halifax.³⁴ In Ottawa, security was tightened following poisoning threats at two water treatment plants and at regional water storage tanks.³⁵ About 200 demonstrators formed a human chain blocking the entrances to the external affairs department not far from the official residence of the prime minister at 24 Sussex Drive.³⁶ Across Canada, police, government officials, and religious groups readied themselves in case of terrorist acts

in reprisal for military actions in the Gulf. Security was increased at Canadian airports and at Ontario's three nuclear power stations.³⁷

In Halifax, RCMP stepped up airport security, as did the Halifax Port Authority.³⁸ In Quebec, the public securities minister boosted security at oil refineries, hydroelectric plants, and vital industrial plants, while local police forces, the provincial police, the RCMP, and the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) prepared a list of names of "persons of interest."³⁹ In Ontario, security at border crossings, Pearson International Airport, and Ontario Hydro was intensified, while the RCMP consulted with CSIS over threats to Canadian security.⁴⁰ In Vancouver, seventy-five demonstrators set fire to Canadian, United Nations, American, and Petro-Canada flags.⁴¹ All the above made national headlines.

Despite the abundance of news related to the unfolding war, all was not well within the ranks of Canada's news media. Unrest began to grow early in the campaign about "censorship guidelines" forced on their colleagues in the Persian Gulf. Defence minister William McKnight set out the guidelines in a letter to the Canadian Press. The *Globe and Mail* reported on January 19 that military censors would review stories by journalists on Canadian ships to determine whether they could inadvertently jeopardize operations or the "security of Canadian or other allied forces."⁴² These were the 9 November 1990 guidelines developed months earlier by the military's public affairs planners.

News of these restrictions sparked debate over the practicalities of such restrictions and limits on the public's right to know. University of Toronto history professor Paul Rutherford argued that censorship of Canadian journalists wouldn't work because America's Cable News Network (CNN) had shown US warplanes taking off from Qatar for missions against Baghdad, effectively contravening the non-disclosure of mission points of origin other than simply land-based or carrier-based.⁴³ It was reported that the Canadian guidelines mirrored US Department of Defense guidelines that prohibited the details of military operations, size, location, or movement of intelligence activities or assessments of enemy camouflage. Prominent Canadian military historian Jack Granatstein argued that Second World War censorship forbidding the release of strategy, tactics, and military movements represented reasonable limits on what could and couldn't be reported in the news media. "Under no circumstances

should the public's right to know jeopardize the life of one serviceman," Granatstein said.⁴⁴

Freedom of press reporting from the Persian Gulf also was discussed briefly in the House of Commons. Prime Minister Mulroney was asked directly if the tradition of press freedom would co-exist with war zone security. Mulroney replied that the journalists had full freedom, subject to military authorities' requirements.⁴⁵ When asked on whose authority—because the Canadian Association of Journalists had complained that the Canadians were subject not only to Canadian military guidelines but to US military censorship—defence minister McKnight took responsibility for setting out the Canadian guidelines but stated he had no ability to guarantee Canadians access to other countries' military authorities.⁴⁶

On the next day, 21 January 1991, news broke about a body bag found on the lawn of a sailor's home in Esquimalt and harassing phone calls to service personnel's families on the West Coast.⁴⁷ The news ripped through the Canadian Forces in other parts of Canada like wildfire. Matching and follow-up reports across Canada—wherever possible with quotes and comments from local military personnel giving the story local angles—fanned the flames. It didn't matter whether local military commanders indicated such harassment was not replicated at their bases. The story was reported anyway.⁴⁸ One news article written from Ottawa exaggerated the report of one body bag to multiple bags left on the doorsteps of several military families, although it said the reports were unconfirmed. The story included graphic quotes of one harassing phone call saying: "I have family in Iraq and if something happens to them I will come and get you."⁴⁹ Another said: "You are murderers."⁵⁰ The only military source for the story was a Canadian Forces colonel who did not state on what authority he could base his comments.

Making the threats universal, Forces commanders in Ottawa confirmed reports of "isolated incidents" of harassment, although there were no specific details, including the base where the reported harassment took place. Lt. Gen. David Huddleston told a parliamentary committee that he could only assume the offensive incidents were related to the war. "The less we discuss this matter the better; every country has its cranks and the more we talk about offensive activities like that, the more cranks get the idea to repeat them."⁵¹

On January 25, the CF-18s flew their first four sweep-and-escort sorties. In the sweep role, one or two pairs of jets flew ahead of coalition heavy bombers aiming to engage enemy fighters. In the escort role, three pairs of CF-18s rode shotgun on the bombers, ahead of, beside, and behind them. Details of those missions were dutifully reported in the Canadian news media in great detail, courtesy of American wire services. Accompanying graphics included separation distances between individual airplanes flying in four-ship formations in the sweep role and the separations between CF-18s and heavy bombers when flying in the escort role.⁵² Across Canada and in the war zone, journalists localized Canadian pilots' involvement in the war effort as best they could. From Kentville, Nova Scotia, a journalist identified Reg Forsythe as the father of Stephen Forsythe, who was photographed by the Canadian Press in Qatar and whose picture accompanied a local story. His family in Nova Scotia had seen Stephen on television numerous times.⁵³ In Qatar, Capt. Doug Carter, of Prince Albert, Saskatchewan, and Maj. Russ Cooper, of Hamilton, Ontario, were identified by a *Toronto Star* reporter in a story saying the pilots were "psyched up" for the war.⁵⁴

When Canadian pilots embarked on the first flights escorting bombers, Captains Arnie Tate, of Orono, Ontario, and Jeff Tait, of Richmond, BC, were reported in the *Toronto Star* as saying they would go back and do it again.⁵⁵ A follow-up story the next day localized that account even further, tracking down Capt. Arnie Tate's father-in-law Gus McNeil in Orono, where Tate lived with his wife, Lisa.⁵⁶ Lt. Col. Don Matthews, who was commanding officer of 439 Tactical Fighter Squadron, led the four CF-18s on their first sweep-and-escort mission. A *Toronto Star* photographer took Matthews' picture after the first mission in Doha, Qatar. The information below the picture indicated Matthews was raising his hands in jubilation upon return.⁵⁷ That was wrong.

Standard procedure is for the pilot, once you've come to a full stop, is to get your hands out of the cockpit. You hold them up high so they're visible to the ground crew. That is the signal for the ground crew to go under the airplane and safe up your missiles. They don't want to be under the airplane if the pilot has his hands in the cockpit. Unfortunate-

ly, it was reported in a lot of newspapers and a lot of pictures that the colonel raises arms in victory after first mission into Iraq. Actually, the colonel was raising his arms so that the ground crew would trust him not to drop a bomb on their heads.⁵⁸

Several days later, a follow-up news report in Montreal on January 28 indicated that Canadian Forces officials in Qatar had asked the media to break the convention of identifying service personnel by their hometowns. It said the servicemen had asked for that restriction, fearing harassment of their families. At that time, the main concern was harassing telephone calls. In the same report, the body bag incident was downgraded to a garbage bag made to resemble a body bag. The article reported that the Calgary parents of a Canadian pilot had received crank telephone calls.⁵⁹

The same day it was reported from Qatar that Canadian pilots' wives in Germany had been evacuated from their homes as a result of a bomb threat that later proved to be false. There was no threat made. At that point, it was said that the Canadian pilots were turning their backs on the news media, possibly fearing harassment of their families.⁶⁰ Also, the issue of harassment of the Forces' families had taken on a life of its own. Even as the prime minister and his cabinet attempted to boost the Forces' morale with high-profile visits in February 1991, a reference to the harassing phone calls was reported from Ottawa as fact in the *Globe and Mail*.⁶¹ The unattributed reference included an extended time frame. It stated as fact that on February 5, naval personnel in Esquimalt had been receiving threatening or nuisance phone calls not on an isolated basis but systematically since the outbreak of hostilities on January 16.⁶²

The Canadian Forces commanders in the Gulf reportedly took matters into their own hands. They took the family harassment issue a step further by advising CF-18 pilots to refrain from giving their names and hometowns to journalists. The information was only voluntary: servicemen and women were free to give their hometowns if they wished. They provided some details of the harassment, including that families in Canada were being harassed by crank telephone calls. Being identified by name was described as "not a very bright thing to do."⁶³ The restriction was said to be the result of anonymous harassing telephone calls being made to military

families and an incident in which a garbage bag was made to look like a body bag used to ship home servicemen's remains.⁶⁴

Ignoring for a moment that references to hometowns may have been put on hold as a voluntary policy, a qualitative sampling of newspaper headlines reveals a larger story of operational censorship. The news media was denied basic information about the Canadians' operations in the Gulf. Military commanders would not even disclose the number of airplanes taking part in missions or if escort runs had been carried out or aborted, or even how withholding such details would reduce the risks.⁶⁵ The media was becoming frustrated with the amount of information—or lack thereof—that they were receiving from the Canadian Forces. “Shh . . . there’s a war on,” read one Calgary headline, and “Canadian journalists say they are frustrated by censorship,” read another in Vancouver.⁶⁶ The overall sense of irritation was palpable: “Getting details of what Canadian soldiers, sailors and flyers are doing in the Gulf war is almost impossible. The Canadian military basically limits its answers to: Soldiering. Sailing. Flying.”⁶⁷ Most journalists in Riyadh who had not managed to get into the American-military-arranged news pools simply were stuck in their hotels, although those prepared to rent vehicles and lie at US army checkpoints could get close to the allied ground forces if they wished.⁶⁸ The Canadian journalists in Qatar covering the CF-18s found themselves largely stuck in hotels “waiting for phone calls from press officers to say they can come on the base for carefully arranged interviews.”⁶⁹

The Canadians were not alone in this development. Doubts were emerging in the United States about the completeness of information Americans were receiving about the bombing campaign. Although the video images of a guided missile repeatedly shown on television striking its target over and over again were flashy, the Center for Defense Information in Washington said it was suspect. Describing the video as obviously the “best of the best” in the US military’s catalogue, one analyst said that 100 per cent of the missiles launched could not be striking their targets dead centre.⁷⁰

In Canada, one week into the bombing campaign, frustrated Liberal opposition MPs complained their only source about the campaign was American television. Concerns were raised publicly that even the government, including the minister of national defence, was getting its war

information from television.⁷¹ Journalists laughed cynically over the lack of information they received from military briefers. When they asked where Canadian jet fighters had flown escort missions, they were told the mission took place “over a Kuwaiti-Iraqi land mass.”⁷² The Canadian military couldn’t provide any detailed information because it had no control over allied intelligence data and couldn’t release allied data.⁷³ By February 20, the Canadian Forces’ public affairs personnel had had more than a month to study restrictive news media guidelines developed by the American and British militaries. As result, the Canadian military developed a new set of written guidelines combining those developed for the Canadian navy and by the American and British militaries for the Canadian news media briefings in Bahrain and Qatar. The guidelines were ostensibly “to provide the greatest permissible freedom and access while at the same time protecting the safety and security of Canadian and other allied forces. The Canadian Forces wish to be as open and candid as possible. However, operational security will and must take precedence.”⁷⁴

In the guidelines developed by the Canadian Forces, the following subjects could not be reported:

- a. For military units, specific numerical information on troop strength, aircraft, weapons systems, on-hand equipment or supplies (e.g. radars, missiles, trucks, water), including amounts of ammunition or fuel moved by support units or on hand in combat units. Unit size may be described in general terms such as “company size,” “squadron,” or “naval task group.” Number or amount of equipment and supplies may be described in general terms such as “large,” “small,” or “many”;
- b. Any information that reveals details of future plans, operations or strikes, including postponed or cancelled operations;
- c. Information, photography and imagery that would reveal the specific location of military forces or show the level of security at military installations or encampments or information on defensive equipment capabilities.⁷⁵

One day later, on February 21, the new guidelines were put to the test after the Canadian government ordered CF-18 crews in Qatar to begin dropping bombs and firing rockets on the Iraqi military. A *Globe and Mail* correspondent in Riyadh was denied access to the CF-18 pilots for interviews. The best he could do was quote, by name, a CF-18 pilot reached by telephone in a recruiting office in Hamilton, Ontario. The pilot, who was friends with the Canadians in Qatar, had an inkling of what the Canadians would be doing in their new role but couldn't divulge it. He could only say that the pilots felt good to be taking on the new combat role, because they had felt like poor cousins flying escort to other coalition warplanes.⁷⁶ Five days later, the journalist who remained in Riyadh still could not obtain any information whatsoever other than that the Canadians had dropped iron bombs on military targets. Some reporters in Qatar were shown CF-18 bomb loads before four jets took off, but that was the extent of their access.⁷⁷

A qualitative review of selected English language newspapers' war coverage revealed that the journalists best able to report on the war were based either at Qatar or Bahrain. In Qatar, the journalists independently assessed the CF-18s' activities without military briefings. While they weren't learning specific details about the missions, they learned the frequency and number of jets in the air by watching and counting. Over time, they began to know the pilots' names.⁷⁸ With the historical benefit of having both the military's media guidelines from 1990 and 1991 and the news coverage that followed, the best that can be said is that the guidelines were applied inconsistently. When two CF-18 pilots attacked an Iraqi patrol boat believed to be armed with Exocet missiles, they were identified by name. Some news reports contained the exact locations of the enemy encountered, the armaments used, and the weapons and defensive capabilities of the CF-18s—all specifically prohibited by the guidelines. One pilot named was Dave Kendall, the husband of Marion Kendall, who had taken on the high-profile role as spokeswoman for the CF-18s crew members' spouses at CFB Cold Lake.⁷⁹ The pilots' names were repeatedly published in follow-up stories. Depending on the newspapers read, the pilots either were reprimanded for firing on the Iraqi ship⁸⁰ or commended for firing on it.⁸¹

The voluntary prohibition put on the use of service personnel's names and hometowns was not always invoked for non-combat personnel. Many women were identified by name and hometowns in one feature story on what it was like to work in a male-dominated environment in Qatar.⁸² Some of the very women who should have most worried about navy service personnel's spouses being harassed didn't seem to care about the issue. In a Canadian Press news story datelined Esquimalt, several sailors' wives were identified by name, as were their husbands, after they travelled to Esquimalt to be with their spouses before the HMCS *Huron* departed for the Gulf.⁸³ When the Canadian CF-18 pilots' combat role in the Persian Gulf was changed from flying sweep-and-escort missions to an offensive ground attack role on 21 February 1991, pilots were identified by name in pictures and the body of one Halifax newspaper.⁸⁴

One also possibly can develop a sense of the media restrictions' inconsistent results after the CF-18s' role was changed to bombing missions. A *Globe and Mail* correspondent in Riyadh reported that military officials in Qatar refused to make pilots available to talk about their new role.⁸⁵ His difficulty in obtaining information was highlighted in a report several days later that said Canada had joined America, Britain, and France in imposing a total news blackout on air operations to avoid jeopardizing land war offensives that had begun in Kuwait.⁸⁶ While the *Globe's* correspondent struggled for information about the Canadian air operations, the *Toronto Star's* correspondent in Bahrain, aided by the Canadian Press, identified pilots who took part in the first bombing run by name, hometowns, targets, and flight durations.⁸⁷ The *Chronicle-Herald* in Halifax shows that a Canadian Press correspondent in Qatar was briefed by military officials who, despite the news blackout, identified the lead pilot by name and his Owen Sound, Ontario, hometown.⁸⁸

Covering the air war from Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, when the Canadians were based in Doha, Qatar, put the *Globe* correspondent at a disadvantage. His report could only be as complete as the information he received. While the *Star's* correspondent was in Manama, Bahrain, his editors may well have been able to incorporate the Canadian Press report into his work in a way that the *Globe* editors could not. All that can reasonably be concluded is that the readers of all three news sources would have differing perspectives on that day's events, while those who read both the *Toronto*

Star and the *Globe and Mail* could be forgiven for being a little confused. The question is: Why?

That confusion likely started from a problem identified in the Canadian Forces' after-action report on public affairs activities in the Gulf War. There were two coalition media centres in the Gulf. American, British, and Saudi Arabian officials had joint headquarters and a joint information bureau in Riyadh, while another was established in Dhahran for journalists attempting to cover the land forces on the Saudi-Kuwait/Iraqi frontier. Given the single-entry visa available to the news media in the Gulf, journalists could not move from one country to the next, restricting their ability to report. Where they arrived at the beginning of the war was where they had to remain for its duration.⁸⁹ Access to information is everything to journalists. Without information they have nothing to base their work on. Geography coupled with restrictive military information policies made war correspondents' work difficult at best and nearly impossible at worst.

On February 20, defence minister William McKnight announced that Canada would switch to a more offensive role: Close Air Support (CAS) sorties or bombing missions. They eventually flew fifty-six CAS sorties.⁹⁰ The only problem after the announcement was retrofitting the CF-18s for the bombing campaign and training for the new role. Matthews explained:

We went through a period there where I was told that I was going to have to bomb. OK, no big deal. We have bombs. We know how to do that. The only thing was we spent all of our careers preparing to fight in Norway, the plains of Northern Germany or the rolling hills of southern Germany. We were very, very good, one of the best NATO contingents for dropping bombs from low level, from a low-level attack.

In the Gulf, we were going to be asked to drop our bombs, to roll in at 30,000 feet in a six-degree dive, or drop them from level flight at 35,000 feet. We'd never done that, never trained for it, had no concept. The only guys that had even thought about it were the fighter weapons instructors and they did that on their Top Gun course. So, I was told in total confidence, in total secrecy, that this was going to

happen. I said, “OK, we can handle this. What we’ll do is we’ll fly some training missions here in Qatar just so that we know how to point ourselves in a six-degree dive and drop the bombs without killing ourselves or friendly troops.” We managed to get a few people trained with eight bombs for high-level delivery before the actual first day of bombing.⁹¹

Just four days passed between the announcement that the Canadians would begin a bombing role and their first missions. All the while, Matthews said the Canadians continued to fly sweep-and-escort missions and combat patrol missions. “I mean we had jets flying twenty-four hours a day. We had a minimum of two F-18s airborne throughout all combat. We flew night; we flew day; we flew escort; we flew combat air patrol; and then, during the land offence—which was only about three days—we flew bombing missions.” The Canadian news media never was told what the bombing targets were or any other details about the Canadians in combat. For the first time since the war began on January 17, Canadian military officials in Bahrain suspended its media briefings.⁹² Nonetheless, Matthews says the main focus of their bombing missions was the so-called “Highway of Death.”

After US ground troops flooded into Kuwait, annihilating Iraqi troops in their path, Iraq announced it was withdrawing its forces from Kuwait but refused to acknowledge UN sanctions. Iraqi tanks, armoured vehicles, trucks, and troops by the thousands fled the allied onslaught. In doing so, they formed huge queues on the road north from Kuwait to the southern Iraqi city of Basra. High above them, the allied forces launched a devastating bombing campaign on the fleeing troops, killing thousands.⁹³ Matthews recalled Canada’s involvement on the final days’ bombing missions: “I think we dropped 100 tons of bombs in about three days, but, you know, as it turned out, the weather was terrible and all of the smoke from the oil well fires. We ended up dropping most of them from level flight at 30,000 feet on convoys that were five kilometres long. It was carpet bombing.”⁹⁴

The Canadian military’s assessment of its news media policy after the war identified three issues: journalists’ pools; providing journalists with military personnel’s hometown information; and the release of operational information. Regarding pools, the Canadian military had no influence

over issues negotiated before the war by the media in London and Washington. Canadian journalists in theatre could not negotiate their way into them. One solution was that Canadian pool membership should be negotiated before future outbreaks of hostilities.⁹⁵

Secondly, the after-action report said the release of operational information to the news media was problematic because public affairs officers operated under two conflicting imperatives: a political imperative of openness and operational security. In hindsight, the report acknowledged that the Canadian Forces were more reluctant to divulge operational information than their allies. The British eagerly made available information on air-mission targets and released videos as proof. Canadian headquarters forbade giving out similar information, but public affairs officers in the field could not explain why the British could release such information and they could not.

Also, the news media in Qatar could readily obtain operational information simply by looking out their windows and observing CF-18s taking off and landing. Over time, the news media became familiar with CF-18 armaments, their numbers, and whether their missions were combat air patrol, sweep and escort, or close air support. The Canadian Forces only had one Boeing CC-137 air refuelling tanker, which the media could see whether it was flying or not. The after-action report said: “It was therefore ludicrous to not confirm such details, but to do so often conflicted with direction from higher headquarters. Recommendation: We should standardize with our allies who have had more operational experience than we have and adopt their more liberal release of info policies.”⁹⁶

The third lessons-learned issue was the release of military personnel’s hometown information. Without being specific, the report said it proved to be hazardous, causing “a few instances of harassment of family members in Canada that resulted in an unwillingness of some members to be interviewed at all.”⁹⁷ The difficulty was that the Forces had provided such information readily before hostilities began and the news media could not understand why such information was withheld after hostilities began—until after the harassment received publicity.⁹⁸

For example, several days after the body bag story broke, it was reported from Ottawa that Canadian Forces women had been ordered to wear civilian clothes in unidentified parts of Canada to avoid abuse. At

the same Ottawa briefing where that development was announced, the deputy chief of defence staff, Lt. Gen. David Huddleston, confirmed that harassing phone calls had been made to the wives of husbands serving in the Gulf, who were told their husbands had been killed.⁹⁹

On the same day, it was reported in Toronto that military police were probing threats made to military families in Victoria. The language shift from the original story was subtle, but the story said the military would not confirm that body bags had been left on the doorsteps of some military family homes, nor how many threats had been made, against whom, or where.¹⁰⁰ There is a substantial difference between military police having no physical evidence that harassment had taken place and a statement that they would not confirm incidents. The implication was that the military had information it would not divulge. The other detail of note was that body bags were left on doorsteps, not on lawns. Although numerous news reports perpetuated the story of harassment of military family members, what was not widely disseminated through the media was information in a follow-up *Globe and Mail* story indicating that civilian police in Victoria and civilian and military police in Esquimalt had not received any physical evidence about the alleged harassment.¹⁰¹

The news reports and the military's after-action report on the harassment never offered proof that the most egregious incidents, the alleged dumping of a body bag on the lawn of a naval home in Esquimalt and harassing telephone calls to wives, ever happened. The military's recommended procedure for dealing with such incidents was to make the military police aware of them. The police found no evidence to support the allegations.¹⁰² A complete search of Department of National Defence records from August 1990 to 31 January 1991, for military police records involving the alleged dumping of a body bag or a threat analysis, found nothing.¹⁰³

A search of the origins for the 1991 *Vancouver Sun* story about harassment of naval spouses from Esquimalt ran dry in Victoria, BC. None of the wives were quoted either by name in the story or in any of the numerous follow-up news reports. The 1991 source about the body bag being an actual type used by the military was a sub-lieutenant who was not part of the Canadian Forces public affairs structure. All attempts to reach him through the Canadian military or public resources—beginning with the CFB Esquimalt public affairs officer at the time who knew him—failed.¹⁰⁴

Paul Seguna was the public affairs officer at CFB Esquimalt who was quoted in *Globe and Mail* and *Toronto Star* stories about the harassment.¹⁰⁵ In the *Globe* story, Seguna said there had been roughly a dozen complaints and in the *Star* story about six.¹⁰⁶ Both military and civilian police were reported to be investigating the incidents, asking families who had received threatening messages to turn them over to police as evidence. Seguna was quoted at the time saying women had received calls from people claiming to be senior military officials, stating their husbands had been killed in action, even though their ship, HMCS *Huron*, was not even going to the Gulf. Astonishingly, without facts to back it up, Seguna told the *Globe*, although he was not quoted directly, about allegations that one wife found a crude imitation of a body bag on her front lawn.¹⁰⁷ Families were told to keep evidence and turn it over to police, but Victoria and Esquimalt police received no such evidence.¹⁰⁸

To the best of Seguna's recollection, he first heard about the incidents not from military family members but from a CHEK 6 television news report in Victoria. A search of the television station's archives revealed no evidence that such a story was ever aired.¹⁰⁹ Nonetheless, Seguna felt duty bound to meet military spouses at the military Family Resource Centre in Esquimalt. He told them that, having let the cat out of the bag to the news media about the alleged harassment, they must deal with the media and should verify facts. "In essence, we made it clear, you know, that once you've opened the door you just can't shut it."¹¹⁰

Brig. Gen. McGillivray, commander of CFB Cold Lake in 1991, knew there were war protests taking place in Canada. But there was or were no incident or incidents of a body bag or body bags thrown on the lawns of air force personnel in Cold Lake.¹¹¹ The only other place the CF-18s fighting in the Gulf came from was Baden-Soellingen, Germany. Lt. Col. Matthews, who flew in the war, was commanding officer of 439 Tactical Fighter Squadron based in Baden-Soellingen. Although armed guards stood around the military homes in Germany and on the base's school buses, there was no concern about attacks in retribution on fighter pilots' family members. His wife remained in Germany while he was flying missions in the Gulf, and she was in constant contact with military families in both Canada and Germany. The biggest concern among the families was in Canada and not in Germany, a striking observation in that pilots' wives

in Germany were once evacuated from their homes in a false bomb-threat incident.

She thought the Canadian perspective was a little bit overblown. I mean, she actually had armed guards at her front door and everybody in Canada was much, much more afraid than she was overseas. She was taking care of the families in Germany while we were off fighting. They were calling from Canada and they were just terribly concerned. My wife was saying: “Well, you know, I’m here and I’ve got an armed infantryman in my yard and I’m not nearly as concerned about all this as you appear to be back in Toronto.”¹¹²

Given the far-ranging effect on Canada’s democratic institutions years later of an urban myth, the body bags, its origins are worth pursuing. The *Times Colonist* in Victoria, on 2 January 1991, reported on the Greater Victoria peace organization’s plans to protest the departure of HMCS *Huron* for Halifax. Its crew was slated to relieve the crew of the HMCS *Athabaskan* in February. The two last sentences at the bottom of the story suggest that the myth may have its origins in a protest that took place 31 December 1990, outside the gates of CFB Esquimalt.

Meanwhile, members of the Greater Victoria Disarmament Group, some dressed in homemade body bags “linked hands for peace” at the Canteen Road entrance to CFB Esquimalt on Monday. The body bag dress was to dramatize the possibility members of the Persian Gulf force will come home in body bags—something that does not need to happen if sanctions and mediation continue instead of war, the group argues.¹¹³

The departure of 280 servicemen aboard the *Huron* for Halifax via the Panama Canal was big news for the *Times Colonist*, which dispatched a reporter and a photographer to spend three days aboard the supply ship HMCS *Provider* accompanying the *Huron* on its first leg to Long Beach, California. They planned to spend one night on the *Huron* writing stories

about and taking pictures of the local men and women headed for the Gulf via Halifax. On 4 January 1991, the newspaper published the names and ranks of all 280 crew.¹¹⁴ The first news story that reported that harassing phone calls made to military families was published in the *Times Colonist* on January 16. It contained a body bag reference. A military wife whose husband was on the HMCS *Huron* said: "Some of the wives have had phone calls saying their husbands will be the next ones in those body bags," she said. "Others are just vulgar calls, the 'if you're lonely just call me,' calls," she said.¹¹⁵ One spokesman claimed harassing calls telling women their husbands were dead had come from a man identifying himself as a Canadian Forces lieutenant colonel. He spoke during a rally of military wives and girlfriends in front of the legislature in Victoria to support their spouses.¹¹⁶

Following the UN-sanctioned attack on Iraq, security was tightened at CFB Esquimalt. The base information officer, Lieutenant Seguna, declined to comment to the *Times Colonist* about the security measures or whether they were in response to a terrorist threat.¹¹⁷ The tension was raw. The same day, military personnel were evacuated from HMC Dockyard following a bomb threat that turned out to be a hoax.¹¹⁸

The next story about harassment appeared in the *Times Colonist* on January 19. It was focused primarily not on military family members but on Victoria's peace activists, who claimed they were being harassed with calls for harassing military wives and throwing garbage on ships in Vancouver. Toward the end of that story, the harassment of wives was said to take the form of people claiming to be insurance agents attempting to make appointments with women whose husbands were aboard a ship.¹¹⁹ An insurance official with London Life Insurance reported that bona fide insurance agents required both spouses to be present for an interview, but such calls could be made by accident to such a solitary military spouse. The way to avoid that, the insurance company official said, would be to circulate the list of HMCS *Huron*'s crew members among insurance companies and agents indicating their families were off-limits.¹²⁰ Two days later on January 21, the *Vancouver Sun* wrote about a navy wife who had an actual military body bag on her lawn and harassing phone calls.

The *Times Colonist* followed up on the *Vancouver Sun* story six days later. On January 27, it quoted base information officer Lt. Seguna saying

the military wives were reluctant to make complaints to military police. Whereas Seguna previously had told the *Globe and Mail* there had been roughly a dozen complaints and the *Toronto Star* about six, when asked again how many complaints there were, he would only say: “Several—I don’t want to give a fixed number.”¹²¹ Seguna said, for all he knew, all the harassment could have been the work of one person. “One person can create a lot of havoc, which is why we need these women to get the reports into the police.”¹²² By then, readers would have found it difficult to separate fact from fiction. The story reported: “Families of men on HMCS *Huron* were the focus of national media attention after some women reported being phoned by a man purporting to be a senior officer telling them their husband was dead, or of having body bags strewn on their lawns.”¹²³ One of the spouses—April-Ann Hamilton, wife of Leading Seaman Harold Hamilton—was identified by name. She did not confirm the body bag story. What Hamilton did, however, was put her finger on the nature of the problem. She said second- and third-hand reports of the harassment were made public before police could properly investigate them, and the rumours started flying.¹²⁴

The military wives formed a media committee to shed positive light on their experiences, but it was too late. The nation’s news media weren’t getting their information from them anymore. They were feeding on themselves, cutting and pasting various versions of the story’s most appalling angle into their own reports. Some of the *Times Colonist* story was focused how some of the harassment incidents had been overblown. But second-hand accounts of phone calls saying that husbands would be coming home in body bags on January 16 had become body bags strewn on lawns by January 27. In years to come, two things happened whenever Canadian CF-18s were called upon to take up a combat role. First, the Gulf War lessons-learned report recommending that the Canadian Forces should learn from more operationally experienced allies and adopt more liberal policies regarding the release of operational information to the news media were either forgotten or ignored. Second, the half-remembered images of body bags strewn on the lawns of naval family members in Esquimalt took on mythical proportions.

Murray Edelman writes: “The word ‘myth’ signifies a belief held in common by a large group of people that gives events and actions a

particular meaning; it is typically socially cued rather than empirically based.¹²⁵ Myths simplify a complex world and promote conformity to a pattern of thought and behaviour.¹²⁶ With profound consequences for Canada's democratic institutions, that socially cued body bag myth became burned into the memories of Canadian Forces members, some of whom assumed higher command years later. The 1991 myth rose like a Phoenix when Canadian CF-18s soared into combat in the skies over Serbia and Kosovo in 1999.

