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2019-02

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University of Calgary Press

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

ISBN 978-1-77385-031-3

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Homecomings

On 9 June 1999—day seventy-eight of the NATO bombing campaign—it was announced that NATO had signed an agreement with the Yugoslav military authorities to end hostilities, for the withdrawal of Serbian forces from Kosovo, and for the return of Kosovar refugees to their homes. United Nations Resolution 1244 (1999), adopted June 10, called for the immediate and verifiable end to the violence, the safe and free return of all refugees, and an international security presence endorsed and adopted by the United Nations.¹ Historians, political analysts, and diplomats, it is said, remain puzzled as to why Slobodan Milosevic agreed to a proposal brought forward by Russian envoy Viktor Chernomyrdin and Finnish president Martti Ahtisaari that ended the conflict on less favourable terms than the ones Milosevic had rejected in Rambouillet. Even worse, he was a war crime suspect, indicted by the Hague Tribunal, and ultimately ended his days in a cell undergoing trial.²

Although the ceasefire was agreed to ten days earlier, Lt. Col. “Billie” Flynn still was in Aviano on June 20 when Prime Minister Jean Chrétien and his wife, Aline, stopped there on a return flight to Canada from a G-8 meeting in Cologne, Germany. Defence minister Art Eggleton, Chrétien’s aides, and a handful of MPs and top-ranking military personnel also were in Aviano during the prime minister’s visit. Flynn told some key dignitaries that he thought it would be a good idea if a dozen pilots could conduct a CF-18 flypast over Parliament Hill during the upcoming Canada Day celebrations in Ottawa on July 1. Flynn explained:

I asked the prime minister's chief of staff whether he thought it was a good idea, then I asked Madame Chrétien if she thought it was a good idea and I asked a couple of MPs. By then everybody had already talked to the prime minister and then I asked the prime minister and he said: "What a great idea." About 10 minutes later, he [Chrétien] looked over to the chief of defence staff and said: "Hey, this guy [Flynn] said we could have twelve airplanes over Parliament Hill on the 1st of July, what a great idea. Make that happen." Well, to the chief of the defence staff [Gen. Maurice Baril] and his deputy [Lt. Gen. Raymond Henault] this was American showboating. They thought there was no reason for these guys to fly over Parliament Hill, it was total American bravado, as opposed to saying: "Wow. They just went into combat. All these Canadians who are proud of them would like to see them over Parliament Hill. What a great way to come home."³

The July 1 flypast did take place, but only after a dozen CF-18s and their pilots endured the gruelling return trip to Canada without American or French air-to-air refuelling tankers. They "island hopped," with all the risks of shutting down their engines and flying at low altitudes to accommodate Canada's lumbering C-130 Hercules air-to-air refuelling tankers. The CF-18s departed Aviano on June 27 in three sections of four. They flew over Scotland on their way to Keflavik, Iceland, where they spent the night. Two Hercules from 435 Squadron in Winnipeg, pre-positioned in Keflavik and Gander, were in the air the next day to fuel the CF-18s as they made their way to 4 Wing in Cold Lake and 3 Wing in Bagotville.⁴ Six CF-18s remained in Aviano to support the NATO-led Stabilization Force operation until 23 December 2003.

On Canada Day, twelve CF-18s led by Flynn flew over the Peace Tower. The pilots who participated in the flypast and the follow-up activities have mixed opinions about the public relations exercise. One Bagotville pilot who flew seven missions explained:

They said: “Come on guys, it’s a way to thank you.” It was not. It was just us being dogs and ponies there in front of people. We were a circus. We went to sign autographs, to please the crowd, which is fine. I know it’s part of my job, but it was not “OK. We’ll host you and thank you.” It was like: “OK, we’ve got a schedule for you, the Museum of Aviation, the Museum of Civilization, you’ve got autographs to sign here, and autographs to sign there. Do this. Do that.” It was strange.⁵

On the other hand, one Bagotville pilot who flew nine missions and had twenty missions cancelled due to inclement weather, thought the experience was terrific. He said:

It was a thrill. I think that all the pilots were proud of what we had done over there. Everybody believed in the cause, that we had done a good job. Now it was time to show the flag. It was good to sign autograph for kids and adults, knowing that we had their support and that they were proud of us. After all, I mean, we put our lives on the line and I was happy to do it for my country, and Ottawa was a small token of their appreciation.⁶

But the twelve pilots involved in the flypast were a minority among the sixty-nine pilots involved in Kosovo. Most recalled there was no public recognition for their work, for how they had gelled as a combat team and how they had improvised and innovated on the fly to overcome a litany of equipment and supply deficiencies. There were no police-escorted welcome home processions up boulevards flanked by hundreds of trees bearing yellow ribbons and cheering crowds. For some Canadian Forces members who served in Aviano, the war ended long before June 10. During the normal course of rotations, many who flew and fought with distinction returned to Canada long before, with no fanfare.

One pilot, who was on the first bombing mission March 24, recalled his last days in Aviano before returning to Canada on April 20 after flying six missions.

I remember Colonel Davies just screaming to try and get people sent home because he knew guys like myself had been there for a long time, probably getting tired, and needed to be sent home. I didn't want to get sent home. I wanted to stay there for as long as I could because this is what we're trained for, but we were tired. We flew home on the Canadian Forces airbus, as far as I remember. The airbus parked on the tarmac outside wing Ops, my girlfriend was waiting for me with a lot of the other wives and that was it. We went home.⁷

Some of the Canadian pilots who continued to fly combat air patrol missions for a few days after the bombing campaign ended had a similar experience. Capt. Travis Brassington's last combat mission was June 4, but he continued flying until June 13, three days after the war's end. While one pilot flew more missions (thirty-one), Brassington compiled some 135 hours in the air on twenty-seven missions. He remembers his Cold Lake homecoming compared to others he had seen.

I remember during the Gulf War, there had been an incredible outpouring of support for the Canadian military. For us the "Hail the conquering hero" kind of thing—that didn't happen. I came home at 11 o'clock at night, to the airport. My driver who was supposed to pick up me and about four or five other guys was about an hour late. We loaded our stuff in to the back of the van, we drove home and he dropped me off at my house. That was my homecoming.⁸

Capt. Kirk Soroka was one of nine Canadians who flew twenty or more combat missions. After Soroka compiled eighty-six hours in combat—fifty-nine of which were at night on twenty missions—his return to Canada was inglorious. He also didn't participate in the Ottawa Canada Day flypast because he was medically repatriated on June 1, suffering from kidney problems due to chronic dehydration, the result of long hours spent in his CF-18's cockpit. He and another pilot landed in Edmonton around 11:00 p.m. "A corporal in a van met us. We got in the van and they drove us

back. We got out of the van at our home and that was it. I remember looking up at the same night sky I had seen over Serbia and thought that was interesting. That was the end of our war.”⁹

What the Canadians achieved flying the CF-18s out of Aviano through their iron will was remarkable. The Canadian commitment of eighteen CF-18s represented a little less than 2 per cent of the nearly 1,000 allied aircraft involved in Operation Allied Force. Nonetheless, the Canadians flew in nearly 10 per cent of the bombing missions, considered the most dangerous of all the missions flown. Bombing missions, combat air patrols, and other close air support missions amounted to more than 82 per cent of the Canadian air effort.¹⁰ By the time a ceasefire was agreed to on 10 June 1999, the Canadian Forces had rotated the task force’s personnel three times. Over the course of the campaign, the CF-18 pilots flew 684 combat sorties in 224 missions and flew 2,577 hours.¹¹ They dropped 568 bombs representing nearly 500,000 pounds of high-explosive munitions. Of them, 171 were Mark 82 500-pound dumb bombs, 262 GBU-12 500-pound precision-guided bombs, and 128 GBU-10 2,000-pound precision-guided bombs.¹²

They had done their duty.

The Korean War has been called Canada’s forgotten war that Canadians don’t know much about or care about.¹³ The Kosovo air war could be called Canada’s non-existent war, because the Canadian government refused to call it a war and then let its warriors go unrecognized. Of the sixty-nine Canadian pilots who served in Aviano, twenty-two were recommended for Meritorious Service Medals. Just two, Col. Davies and Maj. Rob Parker, received them. Davies, promoted Brig. Gen. Davies, was awarded his for leadership during the task force buildup and during forty-eight-days of combat when the Canadians flew 370 sorties without mishap.¹⁴ Parker, promoted Lt. Col. Parker, was awarded his medal for flying thirty-one combat missions, planning missions for more than forty aircraft at a time, and for his role in the training and qualification of Task Force Aviano personnel.¹⁵ Some ground crew members were written up for medals but none was awarded.¹⁶ Unlike in any of the other three wars to which the government consciously sent its armed forces, the Canadian government didn’t acknowledge its warriors with a campaign medal and battle honours. By comparison, Second World War veterans were eligible

to receive twelve medals, including the War Medal (1939–1945). Korean War Veterans received the Korea Medal. The 1991 Gulf War veterans received the Gulf and Kuwait Medal.¹⁷

Years after the Kosovo war ended, the ground crews and pilots say it wasn't the lack of public accolades that most grated on them, it was the absence of a war medal and battle honours. Some Canadian pilots initially received a NATO medal with a Kosovo bar and ribbon. Originally, the medal was to be awarded for twenty missions, but the allies wanted to reduce the criterion to ten missions. NATO finally decided the pilots could receive one if they flew a minimum of fifteen missions. Those who flew fourteen or less were out of luck. A NATO medal with the former Yugoslavia bar and ribbon was available to the pilots, the ground crews, the cooks, and other support personnel who served in Operation Allied Force for ninety days outside of Kosovo. But many who received them saw those NATO medals on their chest as an injustice. Both are considered peacekeeping medals, awarded to anyone who served with NATO in the former Yugoslavia. Some 10,000 have been issued since the mid-1990s. In terms of precedence, their medal ranks behind the Bosnia administrative peacekeeping medal.¹⁸

Soroka, who flew twenty combat missions, wasn't eligible for any medals when he left Aviano in June 1999 because his length of service in Operation Allied Force was not considered eligible for the Canadian Peacekeeping Service Medal. Soroka was sent back to Aviano in October 1999 and by November became eligible for the NATO former Yugoslavia Bar, with 160 days in theatre. He received his without ceremony in the orderly room. When the Kosovo medal criteria were decided upon, the pilots were allowed to trade the Yugoslavia medal for it. In 2003, Soroka said about that level of recognition:

We're four years now. Four years that the Canadian government hasn't bothered to cut a campaign medal or a battle honour for us. This is just something that tears us apart. None of us joined to be rich men, we all joined for a higher calling. But you know, if a country doesn't recognize their warriors, wants to park them out in the woods somewhere, make us bleed in peace time and call us out when it's time,

you know. I tell the boys: “Bleed in peacetime or in war.” I mean we bleed all the time. The big thing that tears me apart about that entire experience in Kosovo—not so much that I risked my life and my family’s well-being and my kids growing up without a dad—what tears me apart the most is that, when we came back, we got no medals. Canada didn’t bother to recognize us.¹⁹

Soroka was not alone. Master Cpl. John Edelman, who received NATO’s Yugoslavia medal, said a military medal is far more than just a bauble. They afford their recipients recognition among their peers. Edelman said: “I guess you should take some solace in what you do but the only way that you can demonstrate what you’ve done in the military is to walk away with these \$10 or \$15 medals on your chest.”²⁰

Capt. Brett Glaeser, who flew seventeen missions and received NATO’s Kosovo medal, said that it was “kind of weird” that the Canadians received essentially a peacekeeping medal for dropping bombs in Kosovo.

I think when you’re dropping 2,000-pound bombs on Serbians in Kosovo and they’re shooting back with SAMs and triple-A, maybe the politicians don’t want to call it war but for the fighter pilots that went there and for the ground crew that were there, it was a war for sure. Maybe if we lost an airplane or a pilot somewhere in there, I don’t know, they’d probably call that peacekeeping, too.²¹

One Bagotville pilot, who flew nine missions and had twenty missions cancelled due to weather, didn’t qualify for the Kosovo medal. Being awarded a medal never crossed his mind when he was flying into combat, but:

I think it’s something that catches up with you afterward. I don’t think you realize the real potential of dying or being shot down until you’re actually over there and you look down and you see people that are shooting at you. I firmly believe that people that crossed the line of fire and put their lives on the line for the country should be recognized. We

were sent there by our Canadian government and should be recognized as much as the people did in World War I, World War II, and the Gulf War—either in the air or on the ground.²²

Jim Donihee thinks that the Canadian government needed to award the Canadians who were in Aviano with a medal. Without being specific, he argued the American government recognized some Canadians.

I know for a fact that some of our Canadian pilots led in proportion a greater number of mass formations than any number of our NATO allies and were held in great respect and were mentioned in dispatches elsewhere. As Canadians, we seem loath to recognize them. I just think it's a failing on the part of our government. Quite frankly, I don't understand why we are loath to recognize men and women who dedicate their lives to the service of their country and do so, so professionally.²³

Lt. Col. Sylvain Faucher was awarded a chief of defence staff commendation for his role in commanding Bagotville's 425 Squadron at the beginning of the air campaign. He thinks everyone in the campaign should be recognized with a medal.

Every one of the folks that I had the honour to work with and I'm saying everyone, the technician on the ramp, the admin support, the doctors, the engineers, the lawyers, they should all be recognized. They made sacrifices to go there and they were involved, some of them directly, some of them in support. A medal is a very, very little thing to give for that contribution.²⁴

"Hooker," awarded the Meritorious Service Medal in November 2000 for his role in Operation Allied Force, knew the hard feelings among his colleagues over the issue of a medal. He said:

I can tell you that amongst the guys who flew in theatre, there's a certain amount of bitterness. We've encountered an awful lot of resistance to having the government cut a medal for Operation Allied Force, whereas medals for other things have happened it seems overnight. Something seems different and whether it was a function of us not dying or whether it was a function of a lack of UNSCR resolutions and the whole legality issue behind it and the whole political dirtiness associated with it, I don't know. Other operations seem to have been better sold to the public at home for whatever reason. Perhaps it is a function of the fact that we did our jobs well and brought everybody home, but you know, I would rather have it that we brought everybody home than we lost somebody and got patted on the back for it.²⁵

David Jurkowski and Billie Flynn have both strong feelings about a special medal for the Kosovo campaign and some insight as to why such a medal has not been struck and why just two Meritorious Service Medals were awarded. Flynn, who wrote the twenty-two Meritorious Service Medal recommendations, thinks the air force did a poor job of making its case for awarding more than two them.

The air force had a hard time articulating to those who were on the boards to decide why this was any different than just flying another mission. I mean, how hard is it? These guys drop bombs every day; they went and dropped bombs, what the big deal? No one understood the difference between day-to-day operations and this so-called combat. If you said these Canadian pilots planned the entire attacks and led seventy jets into a combat zone and brought them back safely that meant nothing to an army guy on an awards panel.²⁶

Jurkowski, who was a National Defence Headquarters insider during the medal consideration medals, corroborated Flynn's version of events. The

Kosovo medals issue became mired in a swamp of interservice rivalry and politics in Ottawa.

The process, as far as I'm concerned, is or was flawed. I had been part of that process previously. Gosh, someone on the board made a strong recommendation to present medals for the Oka crisis. I'm sitting on this board and I said: "Excuse me. This is in our own country. You want a medal for a military operation in your own goddamn country?" I would have no part of it and they were never given. There are a number of people roaming around who are on honors boards. They include the Governor-General's staff, for one thing. What overrides everything is: How is this particular conflict judged in the context of Vimy Ridge, in the context of WWII, in the context of the Korean War? Does giving a medal to this individual match the same kind of standard? So, there is a levelling and that's valid. I believe.

But I still say that there were little cabals against issuing medals to our pilots. All they did was fly the planes you know, drop bombs, did what they were trained to do.' I got so pissed off I asked the chief of the air staff if he wouldn't mind appointing somebody to go ahead and independently judge whether or not his guys should get medals. I was for them quite frankly but I couldn't succeed. I mean you can't talk fast enough because an army guy will not understand the context of sitting there at night being shot at, ensuring you hit your target and trying to find your lead on radar. They think: "Well, that's what you're trained to do isn't it?" I couldn't talk fast enough to convince them so I said: "Take it out of my hands. Let the chief of the air force assign somebody independent in the air force and decide whether or not those medals should be requested and honors should be granted."²⁷

Gen. Ray Henault was deputy chief of defence staff responsible for the Canadians' participation in Operation Allied Force and appreciated the

controversy and the hard feelings in the air force over the absence of a made-in-Canada Kosovo medal. He explained:

I'm very conscious of that issue as you would imagine. There is a tremendous amount of work that's been done to pursue that. There are recommendations that have been made to Government House to provide appropriate recognition for the campaign. I can't comment a whole lot more, to be perfectly honest, because it has been forwarded to Government House. But I can certainly attest to the fact that I'm aware of how strongly this recognition is felt and warranted from the fighter pilot community.²⁸

Somewhere in an office at the Chancellery of Government House in Rideau Hall Ottawa sits a document of about 100 pages that contains the military's arguments for and against striking a medal for those members of the Canadian Forces who participated in the Kosovo air war. They are not available for inspection to ordinary Canadians because they are exempt from disclosure in their entirety under section 21 of the *Access to Information Act*.²⁹ That section exempts from disclosure consultation, deliberations, advice, or recommendations developed for a government institution or a minister of the Crown or positions or plans to be carried on by or on behalf of the Government of Canada if the record came into existence less than twenty years prior to the request.³⁰

The Chancellery's director of honours, Mary de Bellefeuille-Percy, confirmed their exemption in writing:

Regarding the striking of any new medal, I must first advise you that the process for developing new awards is considered "Honours in Confidence." That means that the entire process, from its initial proposal phase to its conclusion, including discussion and consultation with partners, is handled by the Chancellery of Honours at the Office of the Secretary to the Governor General and is not subject to release under the *Access to Information Act*.³¹

On 7 July 2004, Governor General Adrienne Clarkson announced that Queen Elizabeth II had approved the creation of the General Campaign Star and the General Service Medal that were to be awarded in an inaugural presentation ceremony at Rideau Hall at a later date. Veterans had to apply for it, but the star would be awarded to those deployed into a defined theatre to take part in operations in the presence of an armed enemy. The medal would also be awarded to those deployed outside Canada who provided direct support on a full-time basis, to operations in the presence of an armed enemy. The star had a 12-millimetre red stripe flanked by 2-millimetre white stripes and 8-millimetre green stripes. The medal had a 12-millimetre green stripe flanked by 2-millimetre white stripes and 8-millimetre stripes. On paper, that appeared to be a good solution to the medal issue eating away at the Balkan Rats and Balkan Bats war veterans. They finally appeared to have an alternate to the peacekeeping medal. The Government of Canada, however, lost an opportunity to create a medal specifically for Operation Allied Force, as opposed to one for general service. Canadian Forces veterans who served in Afghanistan in the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) qualify for the General Campaign Star and General Service Medal.³²

The only difference between the Allied Force campaign medal and the ISAF campaign medal was the bars on their ribbons signifying the campaign. Meanwhile, the standards for the ISAF version differed from those imposed on Kosovo veterans. The fighter pilots and airborne warning and control system crew members were awarded the Star and Allied Force Bar if they flew at least five sorties. Ground crews were awarded the Medal and Allied Force Bar if they served at least thirty days cumulative in direct support of Allied Force. The same stars and medals, but with a different ISAF bar, are awarded for thirty days' service in Afghanistan. The feelings among the Balkan Rats and Balkan Bats were mixed. Some were glad to have anything other than the Canadian Peacekeeping Service Medal; some were proud to wear the medal; some were sick and tired of the fight and have moved on; some were disillusioned, and some were bitter—very, very bitter—that they risked their lives and the government had been chintzy in return.

A Lieutenant Colonel, who was with 410 Fighter Squadron, initially was among those who thought they should have their own Allied Force

medal but had given up. “We’ve beaten a dead horse long enough. It’s time to move on to the next fifty dead horses,” he said. “I’m happy with the medal. It recognizes that we are getting the same kind of medal as the guys getting shot at by the Taliban in Afghanistan.”³³ Now retired commander of 441 Squadron Col. Flynn said he doubted that the Balkan Rats and Balkan Bats would ever get the recognition they deserve with their own medal:

It’s a lost battle. It was never going to happen. I could go into the apathy of the Canadian Forces and, by default, the Canadian government. We don’t care until years and years later. I took on everyone I thought I could. I burned every bridge and got nowhere. Five years later we got the Campaign Star and that was as good as we were going to get. After all, it couldn’t have been that hard; no one got killed. Now the army has lost guys in Afghanistan. It’s hard to imagine that we could get people to rally behind our cause.³⁴

As with most of the pilots and ground crews, there was no Rideau Hall ceremony for Flynn’s Star presentation. He received his in the mail in May 2005 from the office of National Defence’s Director of History and Heritage, which noted: “Sincere congratulations accompany this award, as well as our appreciation of your service to your country.” Recipients of the campaign star or medal had to return their NATO peacekeeping medal, because they may not wear both medals. “Rambo”—now Lt. Col. Soroka, who had the star, said in 2004 he knew pilots who still were wearing the NATO medal because, having to apply for it, any lustre it might have had for them has worn off. “Quite honestly, it took so many years to get it, we don’t even care anymore.”³⁵

Another serving pilot saw a simple solution that would avoid the disillusion among the very people the government thought they were honouring. Instead of bars, all that was needed were different ribbons on the star and the medal to acknowledge that Operation Allied Force was different from the ISAF mission in Afghanistan. The ISAF medal would have its own distinctive ribbon, as would Operation Allied Force. “That’s what they did in World War Two for the different theatres of operations; four or

five different campaigns. The Star was a brilliant idea, but they took a good idea and screwed it up. They just put different bars on it to save a buck.³⁶

On 14 September 2007, Governor General Michaëlle Jean approved the creation of the Kosovo theatre Battle Honours for 441 and 425 Tactical Fighter Squadrons. This decision ought to have caused a celebration for the men and women in both units, but it did not. For 441 Squadron, Kosovo was added to the Battle Honours awarded for the Defence of Britain 1945; Fortress Europe 1944; Normandy France and Germany 1944-45; and Arnhem Walcheren. For 425 Squadron, Kosovo is added to the Battle Honours for the English Channel and North Sea 1942-1943; Fortress Europe 1942-1944; France and Germany 1944-1945; Biscay Ports 1943-1944; Ruhr 1942-1945; Berlin 1944; German Ports 1942-1945; Normandy 1944; Rhine Biscay 1942-1943; Sicily 1943; and Italy 1943 Salerno. As a result of their long histories, soldiers revere their regiments, sailors their ships, and air force members their squadrons, but there was no cause for celebration among the 441 and 425 Tactical Fighter Squadrons' aircrews. In the summer of 2005, the crews of 425 and 433 Tactical Fighter Squadrons were amalgamated to form 425 Tactical Fighter Squadron, the sole fighter squadron in 3 Wing at CFB Bagotville. The bitterness created in Bagotville by one fiercely proud squadron being disbanded while the other survived was wretched.

To avoid that fate at CFB Cold Lake, it was decided not to favour one squadron over another. Both 441 and 416 Squadrons were disbanded in July 2006 and amalgamated into 409 Tactical Fighter Squadron. Leave it to the Canadian Forces, however, to shoot itself in both feet, rather than just one, to make things better. As a result, one of two squadrons awarded the Kosovo Battle Honour—441 Squadron—no longer exists. Its colours have been laid to rest at city hall in its affiliated city, Sydney, NS. As if that weren't disheartening enough, as a result of the Battle Honours Committee taking so long to recommend allocation of the Kosovo Battle Honour, many—if not most—of the members who served with distinction in Aviano are out of the Forces.³⁷

Finally, on 31 March 2010, Governor General Jean, on the recommendation of Prime Minister Stephen Harper, wrote a new ending to the sad saga of the Kosovo medals for the pilots and ground crew. It was announced that any pilot who flew five missions or more would qualify for a



12.1. 441 Squadron's Colours with Kosovo Battle Honours. Photo courtesy of the Department of National Defence.

General Campaign Star with their own Allied Force ribbon. The ground crew qualified for the General Service Medal with the Allied Force ribbon.³⁸ The Allied Force ribbon has a 12-millimetre light blue stripe flanked by 2-millimetre white stripes and 8-millimetre red stripes. With their own distinctive medals, as cheerless as the story is about the Battle Honours, the air force men and women who toiled in Aviano and fought over the skies of Serbia and Kosovo finally were recognized for earning their rightful place in Canadian history.

