



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

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Friction and Iron Will

Along with the fact that combat required pilots to kill came two other sets of problems. First, as commander of 425 Tactical Fighter Squadron, Lt. Col. Sylvain Faucher, said, some pilots arrived in theatre with an overly aggressive mindset. He had to move to settle that down in short order.

Most of the fighter pilots that we had in the inventory at the time—we were at about forty some odd fighter pilots in theatre—you can imagine some of those guys were a few years' young in the job. Guys like me were many years' old in the job, but some of them—and I'll use the term some of them—showed up in theatre with a knife between their teeth, i.e. “We want to destroy things. We want to kill something. Let's go.” I had to quiet that down fairly fast.¹

Faucher and Lt. Col. Jim Donihee did so by putting an emphasis on keeping people on the ground safe.

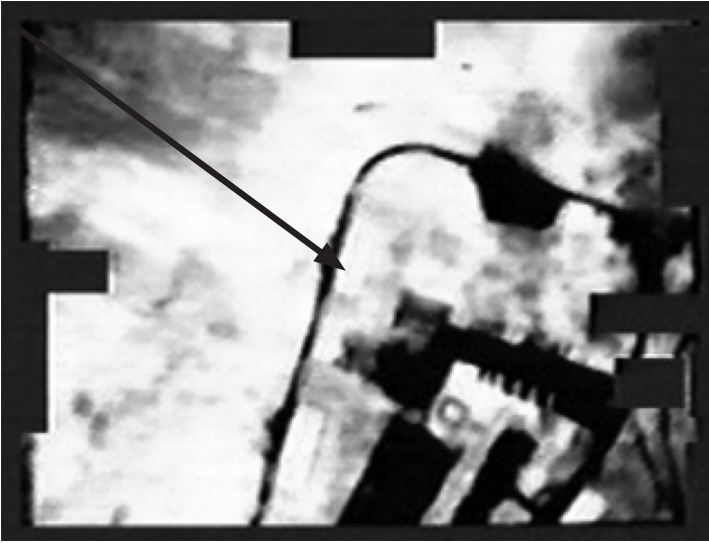
I'm thinking of the civilian population. Believe it or not—and it may come as a surprise—a lot of our own military personnel flying didn't know why we were there. And if people don't know why they're there and why they had to accomplish a mission or the mission they're given, you've got a problem. I used an audio-visual presentation to brief my folks. I used pictures of all the folks and all the—we call

them atrocities but they were fairly close to that—happening to the civilian population in Kosovo.

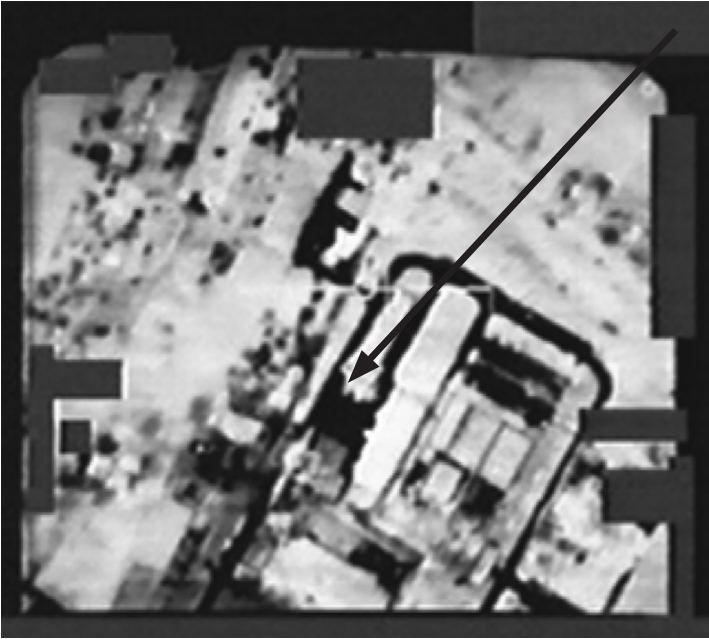
So, I used a bunch of slides that we used in Aviano the rotation before. I inserted in those the military flags we were using, whether it's the armourer, whether it's the admin folks, day-to-day training/operation issues or operation events. I think I put in a musical background with Alanis Morissette singing "Thank you." You could have heard a fly in the audience of about 200 because people looked at what happened there. They looked at that job you can do to help these people and they fairly quickly realized why we were there. As I was saying, guys were coming to theatre to, some of them were coming in theatre to shoot something and bomb something. I had to quiet that down fairly quickly and I think we were successful. The pilots who came back with their bombs because they couldn't identify their targets are pretty good examples of that.²

Second, although some pilots found ways to deal with the shortcomings of their search-and-rescue training by joking about it or their lack of night-vision capability, most found killing people no laughing matter. Deep inside, they all found ways to deal with the fact that they were dropping bombs that were maiming or killing people or that had the potential to do so. Some distanced themselves psychologically by thinking about targets as inanimate objects. Faucher said:

You think nothing. I'm not killing anyone. It's because of the nature of our job, it's highly technological. I'm looking at a screen and I have to put a dot on a certain shape on the screen and that's my mission that night. I don't have in mind the personal issue, the human factor issue and the consequences. My job is to do this and I think most of the pilots that's how they treat it. Their job is to ensure a bomb that reaches the time of flight in seconds and that the bomb makes it to the designated point they've studied for the last hour or two or three.³

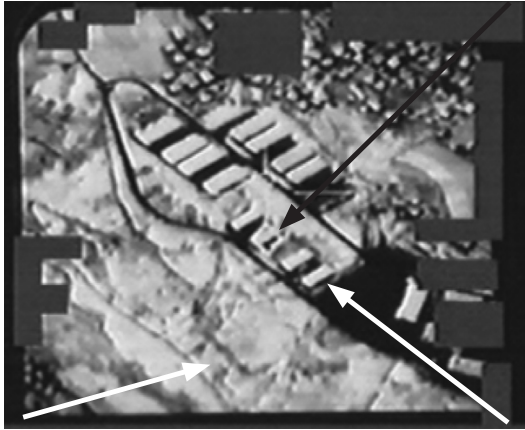


9.1. CF-18 cockpit targeting imagery—ammo storage. Photo courtesy of the Department of National Defence.

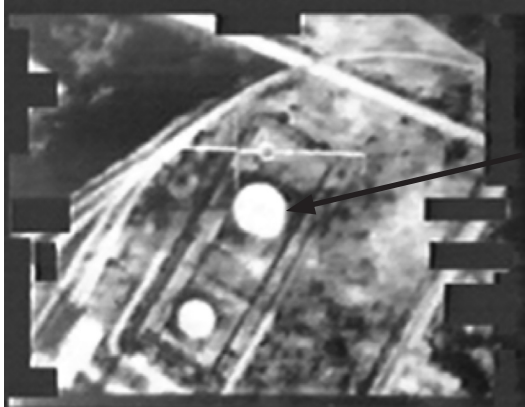


9.2. CF-18 cockpit targeting imagery—radio relay. Photo courtesy of the Department of National Defence.

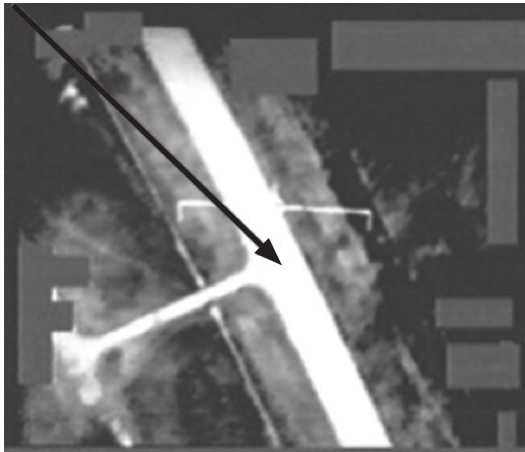
9.3. CF-18 cockpit targeting imagery—
army barracks.
Photo courtesy of
the Department of
National Defence.



9.4. CF-18 cockpit targeting imagery—
industrial site.
Photo courtesy of
the Department of
National Defence.



9.5. CF-18 cockpit targeting imagery—
airfield runway
Photo courtesy of
the Department of
National Defence..



A Cold Lake pilot said:

Nobody really dwells on the fact you're shooting missiles at people or you're dropping bombs on people. That's kind of something that's in your hind brain, but it's not something you'd concentrate on. For us, we're taking out airplanes, we're taking out facilities and we're taking out vehicles. The fact that there's people in these things is secondary really for us. Most of what we were tasked to take out was buildings, munitions facilities, armoured vehicles, things like that. It was always assumed to be a vehicle, a building, something that we were tasked to take out. At the same time, though, there were certain targets you knew that there were people in those targets, and that's something you put in your hind brain and you just did your job.⁴

A Bagotville pilot disconnected himself from the possibility that people might be working in the bomb dumps and the buildings he was bombing.

As a pilot, you have a good idea that there's nobody sitting there. You've gotta believe that there's not 100 workers in that building or, even if it's one single building, even if you're at night, that there's no night janitor working or anyone doing any kind of work there. I had a lot of ammo dumps and things like that, which should be nobody there. It was not bad that way, but, no, it's not the greatest feeling. It's not something you dream of hoping to kill people in your lifetime, unless you're the type of guy that wants to just do that. You do it because you're told to do it and it's your job, right? If you don't want to do it, you're in the wrong business.⁵

Others thought about the humanitarian purposes of their mission. One pilot said he found moral comfort in one particular aspect of the American news media's coverage of the war.

I had some reservations initially about the whole thing just because it was not a unified global approach, i.e. there wasn't a United Nations resolution. It was strictly a NATO decision to go and use force to try and end hostilities. I kind of thought about that back and forth for quite a long time and I remember specifically watching CNN one day. The German foreign minister, and I don't remember his name, was on CNN. He said something that made it very clear and morally correct for me to go. It just kind of clicked into place that the war or Allied Force—the NATO action to stop the war in Kosovo—was a war against old European nationalism and hate and lack of understanding of other religions and people's beliefs. It was that versus the spirit of unification that was going on in Europe at the time and compassion and understanding and co-operation. When I looked at it like that, it became very clear to me that this was the right thing to do. I was eager to go because my moral dilemma had been resolved by him expressing it all like that. It made clear sense to me and because I was a tactical leader on the squadron, I wanted to be there leading the guys into combat.⁶

Beyond that, this pilot was more than willing to kill Milosevic and his followers.

All of us are trained to understand and respect the Law of Conflict and whether or not Canada declared war, we were flying combat operations so any target that was military was relevant. For me, it easy to accept because even though I thought: "Hey, I'm going to be killing people here, I'm killing those people for a reason. I do not want to see a nationalistic dictator—whose population is working for him to repress other races and religions—succeed in this day and age. I'm willing to kill him and the people working for him to try and promote a unified and co-operating Europe or world."⁷

As hours turned into days, days into weeks, and the weeks into months, the aircrews in Aviano settled into a routine—a hectic one, but a routine nonetheless. 441 Squadron pilot “Midas” explained the routine he and one of his best friends and a fellow pilot developed, because they flew most of their missions during the day.

We lived on the same floor in this hotel. We’d wake up in the morning, meet in the hallway say “Good morning,” go downstairs, have breakfast, plan our mission, eat again and fly the mission which was generally between six and nine hours. You can imagine the day’s quite long, so you get down, you debrief, you’d go get something to eat, maybe have a drink, go back to the hotel, and go to bed. Then you’d do that all over again. We did that for two months.

We became quite close, closer than we had been obviously when we had started over there, but it became such a routine. I came back to Canada after doing that every day for two months straight. I just got so used to being around this guy, and I was lying in bed one morning, I don’t know, around three o’clock in the morning. I woke up in the pitch black and I was completely disoriented, I didn’t know where I was. But because I spent so much time with this guy I said: “Flash, why is your arm on my shoulder?” My wife said: “What the hell was going on over there?” I was so used to spending time with Flash and not with my wife. We spent every minute of every day together. But that was essentially it. It was routine, a very structured routine.⁸

Capt. Kirk Soroka remembers the routine the night pilots developed, because they also planned for both the night and day missions.

The night-strike guys, we planned all the missions because the ATO [Air Tasking Order] came out at midnight. We would start the initial planning of all the missions, get the maps out, show the routing to the marshalling area, put the diamond on where the target was, and put the SAM rings

in. When they [the day pilots] showed up when we were leaving, they would be flying within five or six hours.⁹

That nighttime schedule left little time other than to eat “Marine breakfasts” in the US Marine mess tent on the base, travel back and forth to their hotel rooms, and sleep. Soroka explained:

The work schedule was twelve hours on, twelve hours off. We would show up at seven o'clock in the evening and leave at seven o'clock the next morning. The night guys we ate breakfast twice a day, for lunch and supper. Our breakfast was at seven o'clock at night so it was spaghetti or steak or whatever we could get our hands on to eat. Then, the next time we would have an opportunity would be about between two and four in the morning. That would always be scrambled eggs and bacon, sausage and pancakes, same thing every time. Before we went back up the hill for our twelve hours off, we had supper which was scrambled eggs, bacon, sausage, syrup and pancakes. The same thing for forty-eight days straight.¹⁰

One Bagotville pilot illustrated the differences between the experience for the first set of pilots who arrived in March and those who arrived in late May. He described the contrast between his idyllic living conditions in an Italian resort area during the day and bombing targets in Serbia at night as surreal. He explained:

You had a little room with a single bed and I think there was a shower and a little bar fridge to have a couple bottles of water and a snack in and that was it. But that was fine, you know. You look out the window you're in an Italian ski valley in the middle of summer. I would get up at seven p.m., or so, go down the hill, walk in, get my mission materials and brief. We'd fly a five or six-hour mission, dropping weapons somewhere in Serbia, fly back as the sun was coming up and land in Aviano, go to the marine tent and

have a big army breakfast, go up the hill and sleep for five or six hours. Then if you weren't flying a mission that day, you could go to the gym, go play a few holes of golf or go to the beach. You know you'd be sitting on a beach in Italy watching half-naked women running around and eating seafood salad. It was just unbelievable. I'd sit there and think: 'How can I be doing this during the day and, you know, going to war at night?'¹¹

One Cold Lake pilot arrived in early April to discover no room at the inn where the other Cold Lake pilots were staying, and a relentless work schedule.

They'd rented an apartment downtown by the old town of Vicenza and they had two of us living there, hot bunking. He'd sleep there in the night, I'd sleep there during the day, share a fridge, share a car and we'd drive back and forth from work. It was twelve hours on, twelve hours off for really the first month or six weeks. It was relentless, no time off, and I was night shift the whole time. Basically I didn't see a lot of daylight other than just before coming into work and sleeping during the day. It was pretty stressful; I ended up losing about twenty pounds during the first six weeks. It felt like we were eating a lot, but times we were so busy we didn't realize we were hungry, right? Under the stress your hunger seems to be somewhat muted. I went in about 210 pounds. I was probably down to 188 by the end. And again, it was simply the stress, the pace.¹²

One Bagotville Major said there was no telling how pilots who had trained for years in Canada would react under the stress of combat. Some handled it well, some didn't.

Until you physically get involved in a live mission, that's when you see if somebody's going to do the job or somebody won't. We saw the whole spectrum of people starting

on day one. Some were doing a superb job; we saw other pilots take a few missions to get used to it. Some pilots had to be returned to Canada for further training. A lot of it is dealing with stress and that's probably a big part of [it], dealing with the stress, dealing with the fact, yes, you could be shot down, be a POW, and be thinking about the wife and the kids, and mom and dad.¹³

The major difference in the performance of Canadian pilots during the bombing campaign was the result of more than just stress; it was the outcome of an extremely sensitive issue that doesn't appear in any of the publicly available after-action reports on the air war. According to retired Col. Jim Donihee, the Canadian air force's war-fighting capabilities in Kosovo—individual combat capabilities—were directly affected by erosion in the flying and combat training of the CF-18 pilots since the end of the Cold War.¹⁴ Spending had been in a downward spiral since the end of the Cold War, but that trend was accelerated by the Chrétien government in 1994.¹⁵ Hence, the pilots' combat capabilities generally were residual capabilities from bygone eras.

In 1990, Col. John David, director of flight safety at National Defence Headquarters in Ottawa, explained that CF-18 pilots flew 240 hours developing their flying and combat skills every year.¹⁶ After the demise of the Soviet Union, pressure to cut those flying hours mounted. The issue was money, pure and simple. The cost of flying a Hornet was said to be about \$1,070 an hour.¹⁷ David Jurkowski said that pilot skills were directly related to the number of hours they flew. The more pilots fly, the better they get.¹⁸ A two-year study of jet fighter programs in twelve NATO nations backed Jurkowski's claim. "Flying time seems to be the bottom line. If you don't spend the money on flying time, you're going to be spending more money to buy new airplanes or going to funerals."¹⁹

Over the years leading up to the Kosovo war, shrinking defence budgets caused the average number of pilot flying hours in the CF-18 to drop from 240 annually to 210, then to 180 hours.²⁰ As Donihee explained:

A lot of the senior people on the squadrons were folks who had grown up in that era of the 240 hours or the 210 on



9.6. Two United States Navy EA6Bs take off while a CF-18 waits on the tarmac. EA6Bs flew a Suppression of Enemy Air Defences (SEAD) cover mission for Canadians when they bombed a Serbian MiG-28 air base at Batajnica northwest of Belgrade. Photo courtesy of the Department of National Defence.

the CF-18 and so the experience levels were quite high. But some of them, the very junior folks, had just come through the training mill and were trying to reach the capability levels of some of the folks that had a much deeper well of training and background to fall upon. We also had very, very limited exposure to the precision-guided munitions.²¹

Some claim there isn't necessarily a straight line between the dollars being spent on national defence and pilot capability. "Hooker," 441 Squadron's weapons and tactics officer during Kosovo, was one of them.

There might be a straight-line relationship between dollars available and pilot flying hours, and that really is for the senior leadership to decide. The point I make was there isn't

necessarily a straight line or linear relationship between dollars available and capability on the line. The reason that I say that is because when the service is placed under pressure, financial pressure, often times we find some way to work smarter and more efficient ways to train to try to make up the difference. I think as a community we have gotten much better in terms of the way we train our guys with the hours we have available than perhaps we did ten or twelve years ago when there was more time.²²

He said that the average of 180 flying hours per year is just that, an average.

Some pilots fly more and some pilots fly less. The issue is that it was generally the pilots with the least experience who did the least amount of flying. The fact of the matter is that there are different levels of qualification of fighter pilots. There are guys who are our new guys or relatively unqualified in the airplane and there are older guys who are more experienced and who have a lot of qualifications in the airplane. As you would expect, the experienced guys train the inexperienced guys. Because some people have experience and because they have qualifications and because they are needed to train other guys, often times they may get a little more than their allocated 180 hours. Your experienced guy might get 205–210 hours while your inexperienced guy, who really would actually need the flying time, would only get 170, well, 160 hours possibly. So that's an issue.²³

Flying in combat is much different from flying during training or on exercise. As “Hooker” put it, “At the end of the day, it was just that much more difficult when you're in a combat zone. Finding yourself in a situation where you're getting shot at tends to reduce your grey matter a little bit.”²⁴

Lt. Col. (retired) “Billie” Flynn explained how putting pilots into combat in those circumstances manifested itself during the air war.

This is a sensitive subject for some people to talk about—how people performed—but I’m happy to chat about this. I would have still chatted about it candidly had I had a uniform on, because it’s important for people to learn. Pilots got sent home, got kicked out of theatre. Some pilots spent their whole time on what we call probation and other pilots spent their whole time under supervision or spent a significant portion under supervision.²⁵

Although at its peak Task Force Aviano had thirty-two pilots available for missions, over the course of the 78-day war, sixty-nine pilots were rotated through those thirty-two positions. Of those sixty-nine, five were on probation and another ten were under supervision. Someone under supervision is an unknown quantity, while someone on probation is known to be a liability. Flynn explained:

Under supervision, I’m not sure how you’re going to do. You’re thought to be not as strong coming into combat. As a result, you flew with senior tactical leaders until you’re established; you’ve proved your competency. A guy on probation is someone who has either made some mistakes or who has failed to demonstrate competency in the air in combat. They were put with a standards evaluation pilot and then they flew together from there. In one case, after ten missions it was determined this pilot couldn’t handle this, couldn’t handle combat, and he was sent home.

It happens all the time that strong leaders have to take weaker, less experienced people with them. That’s how you mentor and train in the fighter-pilot world. I was one of these guys who had weak pilots with me in my cadre of day pilots. I had some pretty strong aviators that were forced to take some pretty weak pilots along with them. When you have a weak guy, if he’s dangerous, you’re just not going to let him fly. You’re going to send him off to a ground job. Well, when we got to that point in a couple of cases they were grounded and sent home.²⁶

The problem was not having questionable pilots flying with more senior pilots, Flynn explained, but the number of the questionable pilots.

You're talking about fifteen guys, which is almost one-quarter of the guys who are under supervision at any given time. It means that in every day and night shift, you're carrying a couple of weak guys. We consciously did not document any of this because, and I regret that now, we believed that in such a small community, everyone was a known quantity and that the commanding officers would be able to take care of this and decide what their futures would be. In the end, not all commanding officers had the same philosophy of how this should be done and, basically, it just got washed out, got forgotten. One guy who got sent home for fatigue, he could fly an airplane, but he should have just not gone into combat.²⁷

Because the issue of pilots' training and their competency in battle was so sensitive, it was purposely never documented. Flynn said it was still a significant issue, despite assurances to parliamentarians by defence minister Art Eggleton that the Canadian Forces in Aviano were well trained. All the pilots were trained, but the minister's assurances were misleading. The real issue was combat performance, which was seriously compromised. Flynn said: "Remember, you're talking about the Minister of National Defence. He has no idea what the point end of a CF-18 looks like. He is not a credible source of our competency."²⁸

Other problems involving the war-fighting skills of even the most competent of pilots developed as the war stretched from a few days to months. Pilots got tired. While the war effort was ramping up, pilots typically stayed in Aviano flying patrol missions over the Balkans for about three months before returning to Canada for one of two reasons. Flying—even in a relatively benign theatre—is stressful. Pilots simply needed a break. Second, flying a warplane like the twin-engine CF-18 into combat or potential combat is both a skill and an art.

The first of the 138 CF-18 Hornets acquired by the Canadian Forces arrived at CFB Cold Lake, Alberta, in 1982. As a flying platform, the CF-18



9.7. The CF-18s twin General Electric turbo-fan engines are put on afterburners for takeoff. Photo courtesy of the Department of National Defence.

was a technological marvel. Its twin General Electric turbo-fan engines propelled the warplane to almost twice the speed of sound.

It climbed 20,000 to 30,000 feet per minute with a maximum combat ceiling of about 50,000 feet. However, its superb performance places enormous physical stresses on its pilots. The lightning-quick turning and climbing ability that makes the CF-18 ideal for combat manoeuvres can exert nearly seven times the force of gravity on the pilots who fly it. That can cause them to black out or to experience vertigo and hallucinations. If they black out momentarily, they are trained to put absolute faith in their plane's instruments when they come to. At such rates of climb, the hairs in the pilots' inner ears can make them feel as if they are tumbling backward or doing a back-flip. The pilots also must operate their flying controls and weapons systems despite gravitational forces that make it feel like they are carrying nine kilograms of lead in each hand.²⁹

Moreover, because they were flying only two kinds of missions—bombing and combat air patrols—their overall war-fighting skills were deteriorating. Capt. Neil McRury explained:

In laymen's terms, if you're painting fences all day, you're going to get real good at painting, but you're not going to be as proficient doing carpentry. It's a finite art to fight in an aircraft. You need the knowledge of the aircraft, its weapon systems, the feel of it when it's doing certain manoeuvres and knowing when you can capitalize on your opponents' mistakes. That takes training. We actually had to come home and do some dog fighting to brush up on some skills.³⁰

Over the 78-day war, whenever a cadre of pilots was rotated out of Kosovo, fully trained replacements were required. This need posed massive training problems. At the beginning of the war, there were about twelve pilots in Aviano. When the number of CF-18s doubled to twelve, the number of pilots rose to twenty-four. By the time the final six CF-18s were committed, the number of pilots was increased to thirty-two. Yet there were only about seventy-four combat-ready pilots in Canada's four tactical fighter squadrons. By the war's end, almost half of the combat squadron pilots in Canada were in Aviano, though one also could draw on a cadre of another twenty-five instructor squadron pilots.

Wings in Cold Lake and Bagotville oversaw training sufficient pilots to replace those rotated back to Canada every two months to rest, and to brush up on their training. However, the dearth of Forward Looking Infrared (FLIR) pods came back full circle to haunt them. There were just three FLIR pods in Canada to train thirty to forty pilots who could be rotated into Aviano. As Donihee explained:

We were very short of spares, very short of people. We were funnelling all the very best people over there. At the same time, we were doing everything we could to support the people who were actually in theatre. 3 Wing in Bagotville was nipping at our heels because they needed equipment to start regenerating their pilots in case this went on for a

longer period of time so that they could be ready to go in behind us. Basically, you've got three mouths to feed with barely enough equipment to nourish one.³¹

Canada's purchase of just thirteen FLIR pods damaged the war effort. As "Hooker" said:

There's no question about that. We have long said that having thirteen pods total is not the way forward. The good news is you put those pods you had at home on three or four airplanes and you fly those airplanes time and time and time again with different pilots in the airplane so they can get their training done. Ultimately that's just the way it got done. We were training up probably twenty or thirty guys to ready and had to do it with three or four pods. It was certainly made more difficult and more challenging by the fact that there was so few available, but it's what we had to do and it's what ultimately we did do.³²

Donihee is far more critical of the training problems he was expected to solve:

I mean we were flying all hours of the day and night in order to make the very most use you could of two or three serviceable pods that you might have. Every pod became absolutely critical to your ability to train the pilots to go over and meet the rotations. A lot of these folks had virtually no experience on the pods whatsoever and so it was quite critical that we give them some exposure or some refresher using the pods before they went back overseas. I mean the lineups to get your hands on the training equipment were just unacceptable.³³

The Canadian Forces' own lessons-learned assessment of the dire situation it faced stated:

Over a short period of time from twenty-four March 1999 to 11 May 1999, the TFA grew from 130 to 250 to 300 personnel. It grew to twelve and then eighteen CF-18s, and increased operational tempo from four to sixteen sorties per day. This surge impacted on 3 and 4 Wing's ability to train for new and additional taskings, conduct national surveillance and complete domestic operations. The bombing campaign ended on June 24, 1999, before the shortfalls in the CF-18 Wings could fully manifest themselves. However, the CF came close to being challenged in the ability to maintain a training pipeline while still fulfilling national, domestic and Alliance commitments.³⁴

In other words, the Canadian air force had its back to the wall from training and operational perspectives and came perilously close to suffering from the shortcomings. However, the destruction Canada and the NATO allies wreaked on the Yugoslav military was catastrophic. Although weather affected pilots' ability to acquire their targets on fifty-four of the seventy days, the Allies still pounded the Serbs' air defence network, military barracks, ammunition production and storage facilities, and command centres and airfields, leaving them in smoking ruins. NATO warplanes dropped or launched some 20,000 missiles and bombs, 99.6 per cent of which hit their targets.³⁵ They destroyed 100 airplanes, hit four army brigades on the ground, nine main airfields, most of the surface-to-air missile sites, bridges, communications facilities, mortars, artillery, tanks, and armoured personnel carriers.³⁶

Post-mortem evaluations of NATO's bombing campaign reveal that its tactics at the outset of the war were deeply flawed. Because the NATO goal was coercive, to force Milosevic back to the negotiating table, insufficient resources were marshalled to achieve a decisive military victory. The 350 warplanes that launched Operation Allied Force were only about one-third of the number that was eventually necessary to win the war.³⁷ The role that the United States played in the air war is telling. America's NATO allies contributed just over one-third, 327 planes in total, of the war effort. Canada and the European allies dropped just 20 per cent of all bombs and 20 per cent of the precision-guided bombs.³⁸

One of the greatest military thinkers in history, Carl von Clausewitz, identified the things that could go wrong in war as “friction.” He wrote:

Everything in war is very simple, but the simplest thing is difficult. The difficulties accumulate and end by producing a kind of friction that is inconceivable unless one has experienced war. . . . Countless minor incidents—the kind that you can never foresee—combine to lower the general level of performance, so that one always falls short of the intended goal. Iron will-power can overcome this friction, it pulverizes every obstacle, but of course it wears down the machine as well. . . . The proud spirit’s firm will dominates the art of war as an obelisk dominates the town square on which all roads converge.³⁹

The Canadian mission in Kosovo was plagued by friction from start to finish. Transportation to and from accommodations, shortfalls in equipment, the lack of radios and deficiencies in those that existed, the lack of night-vision goggles, along with heat, rain, exhaustion, injury, stress, and pilot performance represented just the tip of it. The iron will and proud spirit of the Canadian Forces dominated and kept the mission moving forward.

