



NATIONAL DEFENSE UNIVERSITY

# STRATEGIC FORUM

INSTITUTE FOR NATIONAL STRATEGIC STUDIES

Number 154, January 1999

## NATO's IFOR in Action

### *Lessons from the Bosnian Peace Support Operations*

by Leighton W. Smith

#### Conclusions

- Peace support operations are difficult and future military leaders must understand the complexities and dangers of these so-called military operations other than war.
- Most peace support operations have essential military, civil, and political elements which entail difficult and distinct responsibilities.
- In Bosnia, the Implementation Force (IFOR) successfully met the military provisions of the Dayton Accords because of its robust force, its rules of engagement, and its resolve to use force when necessary. Yet peace has not yet been secured because of civil and political problems.
- On the civil side, the UN High Representative has been unsuccessful in coordinating the work of private and non-governmental organizations because the Dayton Accords did not give him the requisite authority.
- On the political side, the five states still talk in divisive, not conciliatory, terms. There remains little agreement concerning the Dayton Accords.

Three elements—military, civil, and political—seem to be the essentials of the operations in Bosnia; and, these elements probably apply to all peace support operations. Each element has difficult and distinct responsibilities. Yet they are interdependent to the degree that overall success in achieving peace in Bosnia is a function of each element working in harmony with the other two. Regrettably, despite great efforts on the part of many, progress in the civil sector has been slow; and among the political bodies, nearly nonexistent. That is why Bosnia has an absence of war rather than the peace the Dayton Accords sought to establish. And that is why there will be little progress unless and until the political leadership there demonstrates a willingness to work together to create the conditions for peace.

## Military Success in Bosnia

Historians will likely judge that the military provisions of Dayton were successfully implemented. One important reason is because of the pre-Dayton dialogue between the military (charged with carrying out the mission) and the political leadership (responsible for providing guidance to the military). The comprehensive Military Annex, drafted in Dayton with considerable input from the military leaders both from NATO and the U.S. Joint Staff, avoided assigning missions to the military for which it was not appropriately trained. Moreover, specific events were laid out in a timeline so that progress toward success could be measured. The annex, as drafted, was implemented successfully by IFOR.

As the IFOR commander I was pressured from many sides to "expand" the mission, to take on additional responsibilities and/or to read more into the military role than was actually there. Even so, the harshest of critics familiar with the tenets of the military annex admit that the military mission was tremendously successful and provided a secure environment in which the other two pillars should have been able to work to achieve their difficult and challenging tasks. We were able to make immediate progress in our military tasks because of what I refer to as the "Three R's of Success." These are a *Robust Force*, the right *Rules of Engagement* (ROE), and the *Resolve* to convincingly use the first two when and where necessary.

The force was much more robust than its predecessor, the United Nations Protection Force (UNPROFOR). IFOR was robust because we were well-trained, well-disciplined, well-equipped, and well-led even at the most junior levels. We were also sized to the job at hand and given the right ROE. In Bosnia, our ROE were quite broad and robust. Because of that we were able to use the professional forces assigned to us quickly and convincingly. This allowed us to set the stage in the early days of IFOR's existence and, later, to gain control of situations which might have otherwise gotten out of hand. The resolve that was needed was not just that which we demonstrated after deploying into Bosnia. It included the actions we had taken prior to Dayton in support of the UNPROFOR. Those pre-deployment actions essentially set the stage for, and made easier, our entry into one of the most complex situations any commander could ever face. Three vignettes underscore the Three R's and provide useful information for future operations.

**Aircraft Down.** The first example began on June 2, 1995 when I was handed a note that read: "aircraft down over northwest Bosnia, no further info at this time." Within a few minutes, we learned that the aircraft was a U.S. Air Force F-16 out of Aviano, Italy, that it had been shot down by a Serb surface-to-air missile, and that another pilot saw the missile hit the aircraft just aft of the canopy. The witness saw the aircraft break in two, but did not see the pilot eject.

I sent a message to the UNPROFOR commander, General Bernard Janvier, to tell him to contact the Serbs with the following message: "You have shot down one of my aircraft, I am coming after the pilot and I will kill anyone who attempts to impede us in our mission." The message also said that I intended to attack the missile site that had brought down our aircraft if it could be located. To his great credit, Janvier not only delivered the message, but wished me luck and any help he could provide in a rescue.

More than 500 missions were flown during the next five days in an exhaustive search to locate the downed pilot. I ordered the USS *Kearsarge* to take up a position off the Croatian coast as near to the scene of the search effort as could be safely executed. The *Kearsarge* had a Tactical Recovery of Aircraft and Personnel (TRAP) Team on board. I knew we would be expending a lot of effort in searching for the downed pilot, and that there was a constant danger of losing another aircraft. I wanted to provide those conducting the search with the best possible chance of a recovery should one of them be

forced to eject over enemy territory.

Lieutenant General (now General and Chief of Staff of the U.S. Air Force) Mike Ryan and I were in almost constant communication as we tried to sort out the sporadic reports of beepers, sightings of coded signals, and so on. We also had to argue against those who had, by the second or third day, made the decision that the pilot had not survived. Ryan and I had both spent considerable time flying in Vietnam and we knew of aviators shot down and declared Killed in Action only to show up on the front page of the news days later.

Finally on June 8th, Ryan's telephone call woke me up. His transmission was very short: "Boss, Basher 52 has just checked in, we have good comms." I came out of the bed like a shot thinking "rescue, rescue, rescue." Ryan and I agreed on a few initial steps and then we both headed for our command centers.

My first call was to the Amphibious Force Commander, Captain Jerry Schill, onboard the *Kearsarge*. (Ryan and I had agreed that the TRAP was the best initial choice to attempt a rescue. We had a very capable Special Forces group in Brindisi, Italy, but distance and time were a factor.) I ordered him to have Colonel Marty Berndt, the commander of the Marine Expeditionary Unit onboard, prepare the TRAP team, but as one would expect, Berndt had already begun doing so.

Over the next couple of hours we gathered as much information as we could and continued to assess the situation. I weighed the risks, including the obvious physical and mental strain on the pilot, the condition of his radio battery, the weather (it was marginal but better than it had been in days), and the fact that the media would get wind of all the activities that had already occurred and make the obvious connection, thus increasing the risks associated with a delay in the attempt. I decided to attempt the rescue.

Almost immediately I learned that we could not get fixed wing air cover into the area before daylight. These would be the jets that would suppress any enemy air defenses and/or provide close air support should the rescue force come under attack on the ground. I called Berndt and told him of the choice: go in darkness without the jets, or wait on them and execute the mission in daylight. He conferred with his people and came back with his decision to wait for the jets. I agreed and gave him the order to execute.

Later that morning, 4 hours and 37 minutes after first contact, the Marine TRAP team radioed one word that made me as proud to be an American as anything in my life. That word: "pickup."

While the saga of the rescue of Scott O'Grady is an interesting story, the operation itself conveyed two significant messages. The first was that our forces could execute a very complex and dangerous mission with near perfection. I believe that was extraordinarily important because I am not convinced that the North Atlantic Council, the NATO political arm, understood that NATO air forces could pull off such a mission. That it did may have been an important factor in events that followed in July and September of that same year.

The second message was to the Serbs (and to the Bosniacs and Croats as well) and that was the value we place on the lives of our people. After going into Bosnia as the IFOR commander, I had several high ranking Serbian officials ask why we made such a big deal out of the O'Grady affair. Why, they asked, did we expend so much effort to rescue just one pilot? And why, they asked, was his safe return so important? I told them that we place a very high premium on the welfare and safety of our forces. That, I said, is why we will use the force necessary to carry out our mission and protect the lives of those we are asking to do the job.

**Srebrenica and Sarajevo.** In July 1995, the Serbs began closing in on the safe area of Srebrenica. The brutality of that attack, and the fact that UNPROFOR did not halt the attack (nor could they have, realistically), finally galvanized the international community into accepting that force was really the only currency the Serbs would respect. I was given authority to use NATO air forces to bomb targets that were much more extensive than had been contemplated. My mandate was to launch attacks should the Serbs threaten or fire into any of the four remaining safe areas.

On 28 August, a mortar shell landed in downtown Sarajevo, killing dozens of civilians and injuring many more. After a series of phone calls between the UN commander in Sarajevo and me, he cleared the way for attack operations to begin. The skill and professionalism of our crews, in planning and executing the series of attacks against the targets we were authorized to strike, was the single most important factor leading to the Dayton Peace Accords. The Rapid Reaction Force deployed after the hostage-taking incidents of May 1995 was also an important factor, as were the Croatian-backed offensive by Federation Forces that followed our bombing operations and the Tomahawk missiles which we fired in late September. But, had our crews not delivered their weapons in the responsible and precise way that they did, there would have been collateral damage, possibly resulting in orders to cease and desist. However, there was almost no unintended damage, thus our efforts to deliver not only bombs but also the correct signal to the Serbs was successful. The Serbs yielded, not so much because of the damage we inflicted but because of demonstrated resolve to apply the powerful military at our disposal.

**Relieving UNPROFOR.** Finally, the manner in which we deployed into Bosnia was a major factor in our success. Lieutenant General Sir Michael Walker, Commander of the Allied Command Europe Rapid Reaction Corps (ARRC), in my opinion the true hero of IFOR's successes, and I had agreed that early demonstrations of our will to carry out the mandates we had been given would be extraordinarily important. As ground commander, Walker devised a number of ways to do this. One event was the destruction of six checkpoints around the Sarajevo airport. Within minutes of my relieving UNPROFOR's General Janvier, Walker's men were bulldozing the checkpoints. Despite moderate resistance, the mission was completed within moments, and with full respect for our "even handedness;" he had knocked over two Serb, two Croat and two Bosniac checkpoints. All of the factions were equally angry that we had "encroached" on their "sovereignty." All had learned a valuable lesson—IFOR was different from UNPROFOR.

Those who might have opposed IFOR saw a strength and a sense of purpose that had not been part of the UNPROFOR makeup. The difference was clear: we had a mission with an appropriately sized force, authority to use that force, and the resolve to use it without hesitation.

### **The Absence of Peace**

If the military aspects of Dayton were a success, why do we not have peace in Bosnia? I believe it is, in part, because there was a failure to recognize the important and complex role of the civil "pillar" and to provide the UN High Representative (HR) sufficient authority to "implement" his mandate. Finally, there was an assumption that the political leaders who signed the Dayton Accords would actively work to enforce its provisions. That has not happened.

**Civil Problems.** On the civil side, Carl Bildt, the first HR, was given an impossible task. His challenge was to coordinate the work of hundreds of private volunteer organizations (PVO) and nongovernmental organizations (NGO), very few of which wanted any part of being told what to do. Some were small, some large. But they all had three things in common: their own governing bodies, their own bank accounts, and their own egos. I recall receiving representatives from several large PVO/NGOs, each of

whom made it clear that they were not beholden to Bildt, nor would they subordinate their organizations to his office. This issue was not completely resolved when I departed six months later.

And, Bildt had no staff and no plan. He said to me one day, "Admiral, you had a year to plan for this operation, a huge staff, and the requisite infrastructure to get you into theater, set up and supported. I started out with a cell phone in a parking lot a few weeks before we were to begin operations." And, his task was far more complex and difficult than ours.

Moreover, Bildt lacked authority. He was given a job envisioned to include good faith negotiations by political leaders who would be willing to take personal risks and compromise on hard line positions for the good of their country. Regrettably, the leaders were not only unwilling to negotiate anything in good faith, they tried at every turn to hinder progress. Even simple issues became complex. A good example is the construction of roads and bridges. If IFOR saw a need for a bridge or a road to be repaired or built, we took the necessary action. If challenged by the local authorities or the central government, both of which were routine events, we simply said that these were militarily essential and pressed on. The HR had no such authority and was reduced to negotiating endlessly on every little project.

The lesson is clear. If peace support operations are to succeed there must be a full appreciation of the importance of authority (read power to enforce) for those charged with implementing the civil side. And, we cannot make the assumption that the leaders of former warring factions are going to sit peaceably at the table and agree on how to apply the considerable resources made available by those who are trying to "jump-start" the economic redevelopment of their country.

**Political Divisiveness.** In Bosnia, the third pillar, the political element, has shown itself to be the weakest. Simply stated, until the power brokers in Bosnia begin actively leading their people toward a lasting peace, a true peace will be a dream unrealized. They must talk of reconciliation, not divisiveness; they must gain control of the state police apparatus and hold it to acceptable standards of conduct; and they must embrace improvements offered by a world anxious to help but turned away by petty squabbling over insignificant issues.

None of the five Presidents (of Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia, the Bosnian Serb Republic, or the Moslem-Croat Federation in Bosnia) with whom I met were seriously devoted to the Dayton plan. They all had their own "interpretations," their own "requirements," their own "conditions." There was precious little agreement among the leadership in Bosnia on what had been agreed in Dayton.

So why is this important to the military leaders of the future? Because there will be future Bosnias and Rwandas and Somalias and Haitis and each will require a military element to help resolve the crisis. Having the same "Three R's" as I had in Bosnia is absolutely essential. Potential commanders should never accept anything less than what they think is needed to accomplish the mission.

All peace support operations will be different, yet each will be similar. A constant in all of them will be the inseparable link between the military, the civil, and the political pillars. Understanding these links will be paramount in developing successful working relations among those who will be charged to successfully implement negotiated settlements.

These are not easy issues and there is much work being done to outline "doctrine" on how to succeed in these complex operations. Despite this work, success remains, in large measure, in the hands of those placed in charge and will depend on how well they understand the environment in which they must lead.

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He assumed command of the NATO-led Implementation Force (IFOR) when it relieved the UN Protection Force (UNPROFOR) in December 1995. This paper is an abridged version of the Hofheimer Lecture Admiral Smith presented to the Armed Forces Staff College, Norfolk, Virginia, October 1, 1998.

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## INTERNET DOCUMENT INFORMATION FORM

**A . Report Title:** NATO's IFOR in Action

**B. DATE Report Downloaded From the Internet:** 09/24/01

**C. Report's Point of Contact: (Name, Organization, Address, Office  
Symbol, & Ph #):** National Defense University Press  
Institute for National Strategic Studies  
Washington, DC 20001

**D. Currently Applicable Classification Level:** Unclassified

**E. Distribution Statement A:** Approved for Public Release

**F. The foregoing information was compiled and provided by:**  
**DTIC-OCA, Initials:** \_\_VM\_\_ **Preparation Date** 09/24/01

The foregoing information should exactly correspond to the Title, Report Number, and the Date on the accompanying report document. If there are mismatches, or other questions, contact the above OCA Representative for resolution.