

"Sounds Like Canada", July 21, 2003

S - Sheila Cole

E - Evan Dyer

(Recorded excerpts)

F - Alain Forand

L - Andrew Leslie

C - Jerry Caron

S Hello, good morning and welcome to "Sounds Like Canada" for Monday, July 21. I'm Sheila Cole, sitting in for one last week for Sheila Rogers.

S When we think of the war in Yugoslavia, the images that come to mind for most people are of Serb massacres. But for many Canadian soldiers who lived that war, the defining memory is of Croatian atrocities. Eight hundred Canadians went as peacekeepers to Croatia in 1995. They ended up as witnesses to an orgy of killing and looting. Now, they want to testify about those crimes at The Hague. The CDC's Evan Dyer has been talking with some of the soldiers, and he joins us now from our studio in Ottawa. Good morning, Evan.

E Good morning, Sheila.

S Well, let's go back to 1995, and set the scene for us. What was happening in Croatia at that time?

E Well, that vicious civil war between Serbs and Croats was in its last year. The war in Bosnia, of course, still going very strong. But the Croatian war had been pretty much dormant for about two years. However, the Croats had never given up on the idea of reconquering the Serb-held areas of Croatia, where the Canadians were based. Most of all, they wanted to take back the Krajina, which was a strip of land which for centuries, really, has been mostly Serbian. And the Canadian Army had been there since about 1992, over three years, trying to defend the people of the Krajina, both Serbs and Croats. I talked to Major-General Alain Forand of the Canadian Army. He was the commander of the UN forces in the area, and he says the world didn't have a lot of sympathy for the Serbs that he was protecting.

F We should remember those days, you know, the bad guys was the Serbs. CNN was not in Croatia. There was almost no news, you know, coming out of Croatia, and whatever was coming out was, "They got what they deserve." And all of a sudden, you know, they lose the little that they had, and they are sent to one of those godforsaken places in Serbia, with nothing left. And what's their hop, you know, for life? It's almost nothing. But, "Well, it's the Serbs, they deserve it, to hell with them." Everybody forgot about it very quickly.

E You know, this plan to expel the Serbs was code-named Operation "Storm." It's the operation we are talking about. Essentially it was a "shock and awe" type of blitzkrieg operation, very aptly named, because it began with this, just ferocious by all accounts, artillery bombardment which far exceeded what anyone thought the Croats were capable of. And that barrage rolled right over the UN line of separation and the bunkers of the Canadian forces.

S Now, the Canadians are talking about war crimes. What was it they saw?

E Well, the first war crime actually is the shelling itself. And I spoke about this with Major-General Andrew Leslie. Now, he's off next week to Afghanistan, actually, he's going to be the commander of the Canadian forces there. But back then, in 1995, he was a Colonel in the Krajina capital of Knin.

L I'm a gunner. I'm an artillery officer, a professional, so I can comment on it with some degree of validity. This was deliberate targeting, on a massive scale, of residential areas. Why? Because, I believe, it was targeted to break their will to resist. And, by the way, it worked. It killed a lot of civilians, and we'll never know the exact number. But estimates – estimates range from ten to twenty-five thousand dead.

S Twenty-five thousand. And this is absolutely indiscriminate, we're talking, from small children to old people here?

E The shelling was aimed basically at houses, and it moved across the town from one end to the other. A hospital also, everything in the town. But not just in Knin, in every town in the Krajina.

S Yes. And what about the people who left?

E Well, when they fled their homes to escape the shelling, of course – the Croats actually left an escape route out of the Krajina, and people clogged that road – and then they hit those refugee columns again with artillery and with air strikes, despite the no-fly ban. And most of the people who died actually died in the shelling and the bombing. And today they're all gone. There's almost no Serbs remaining in that area.

S What did the Canadian soldiers do?

E Well, of course, they were being shelled like everyone else. And they couldn't really retaliate. They didn't have any heavy weapons to resist. Also, of course, they had to deal with that huge civilian population in a state of total panic. Most of them had gone, actually, by mid-morning the next day. They fled. But about twelve hundred Serb civilians sought refuge with the Canadian Army in the Canadian headquarters. And that was immediately surrounded by the Croatian Army, who demanded that General Forand

hand them over. And, of course, he refused. And then there was a three-day standoff. Finally, at the end of that, the Croatian Army allowed those twelve hundred Serb civilians to leave under escort. And, you know, it's hard not to conclude, Sheila, that those people's lives were saved by giving them refuge for three days, when you look at what happened to the ones who weren't able to flee.

- F We were prisoner in our camp for three days, and as soon as I was able to get out, I was — I sent a patrol to try to find out what was going in my sector. Because there was all kinds of looting and burning, and, I mean — I didn't have too much respect for the Croatian soldier. Was old people that either they had been shot in the head, or their neck had been severed, these type of things. All the crop were burned. The animals, you know, were killed. The looting went on for, I would say, a month and a half, two months after the troubles, you know, were finished.
- E And the Croats, in fact, had total control of Krajina within about four days. But, as the General says, the killing didn't end there. And, in fact, it was really just getting started. And General Leslie says that he saw Croatian police afterwards going house to house and killing anyone they found.
- L There were a variety of organizations that then swept into the former Serbian Krajina. There were Special Police teams, wearing their very distinctive blue uniforms, who were engaged in hunting and killing, in the mountains, of Serbian civilians. And I saw dozens and dozens of farmhouses and even villages burning many, many days, in some cases months after the initial assault had taken place.
- S Yes. So they did succeed in getting some documentation. And, of course, there's what they saw, their accounts. What happened, or, what is happening with their depositions to The Hague?
- E Not very much, actually. There's not really enough happening. There has been one indictment, but there's been absolutely no arrests. And the Canadians are quite frustrated about it. Here's General Forand.
- F Well, that's the sad part, in a sense, you know. That I made a deposition, you know, on what I had seen, that people were dead, and the looting, and all these things. So I made that deposition. Lo! and behold, seven, eight months after that, another group came from the Tribunal, because they told me that they had lost my deposition. So I made another one. And would you believe, they came back a third time, another group, because somebody within that organization again had lost everything I had made. So I made a third one, and I said, "Well, this time you better keep it, because otherwise don't come and see me again." But I never heard from those people. I'm still waiting for news. I don't know.

- S And he must be dealing with an incredible level of frustration as well.
- E After eight years, yes.
- S So who are we talking about? Who are these alleged war criminals?
- E Well, two of them are dead. President Franjo Tudjman is one of them. He died in his bed. So did the other general named in the indictment. But one remains alive and in hiding, General Ante Gotovina. I should tell you about this guy, he's got quite a history. General Ante Gotovina is a former Foreign Legionnaire, French Foreign Legionnaire. Commander of Operation "Storm." One of the only Croats in the Croatian Army ever to be indicted, but the Croatian government has been very reluctant to hand him over, and actually just went out and hired him a lawyer, in fact. And the fact that General Gotovina remains unpunished continues to annoy Canadian officers like General Leslie.
- L Well, I can't see how anybody could survive for so long in a relatively small chunk of ground, which is what Croatia is — I mean, we have lakes that are bigger than Croatia, for goodness' sake — without assistance from the local population. There's a good many Croats who believe he is a national hero.
- E In fact, that's no exaggeration. There are posters of General Gotovina up all over Croatia, with the word "hero" on them. And he's got a group of admirers who just built him a free mansion, on land donated by a major Croatian city. In fact, just a couple of weeks ago, General Gotovina started sending messages through intermediaries, offering to come in to The Hague if the charges against him are dropped. And now the spokespeople for the Tribunal have started to talk about just that, really, saying that the case against him is circumstantial. You know, he's not in deep hiding. This is not a Mladić or a Karadžić type of character. We have an indicted war criminal who gets the keys to a major Croatian city like Zadar in a public ceremony given by the Mayor, in front of a large crowd, and yet the government says he can't be found.
- S And why hasn't the West been more aggressive in his pursuit?
- E That's a good question. Because, of course, the West put crushing sanctions on Serbia to force it to turn over its war criminals. And now it's aggressively pursuing them. And, you know, it sent one over just in recent weeks. But Croatia, on the other hand, is on the short list to join the European Union, to join NATO. Now it's going to Iraq. It's very close to the United States. I think, you know, the answer is that the world is not putting pressure on Croatia partly because the West in 1995 was on the Croatian side. And, you know, everybody at this point had identified the Serbs as the problem. And, you know, they had committed terrible atrocities just before "Storm", in Bosnia. Srebrenica was just a few weeks before. And once you identify the Serbs as the problem, it was a short step for some countries, like the U.S. and Germany in particular, to identify the Croats as the



solution. One of the ironies of Yugoslavia is that peace, when it finally became possible, it was possible partly because the ethnic cleansing had been so successful. And the Croats weren't going to make peace as long as the Serbs remained in control of Krajina.

S So, are you talking about actual assistance from the West?

E Well, it's, you know – the West was definitely aiding the Croatians, in the sense that they were getting vehicles from Germany, artillery from Argentina, training from the United States. And every officer that I spoke to believes that the Croatian Army received foreign assistance, mostly directly, in Operation "Storm." Because they believe Operation "Storm" was too good, too professional, really, for an army run by a bunch of former Croat policemen. Here's General Leslie.

L The coordination of the fires, the psychological preparation of the battlefields, had to have been done by people who really knew what they were doing. I can't see where they would have pulled off the expertise to get it done.

S So who are these people who really knew what they were doing?

E Well, there's a company in Alexandria, Virginia called Military Professional Resources, Inc. – MPRI. And it's always been very open about the fact that it was training the Croatian Army. Before "Storm", significantly before "Storm." It's currently grooming the Croatian Army now, for NATO, in fact. MPRI is a company that's very, very close to the Pentagon. And the President of MPRI, Carl Vuono, is none other than the former Chief of Staff of the United States Army. General Vuono was in Croatia with the Croatian General Staff in the days immediately prior to "Storm", just a couple of days before. And we know that MPRI at that point was training the Croatian Army. I think the question a lot of people in the Canadian Army are curious about – and I have to say that no one here that I spoke to claims to know the definitive answer to this – is, how directly did MPRI and the U.S. help with Operation "Storm"? For example, you know, did they provide intelligence? Did they go so far as to help draft the actual plan of attack? You know, the Americans had satellite and aerial images of the battlefield. Did the Croatian Army use those to target the refugee columns, for example? I know there's a lot of Canadian officers who think that the answers to some of those questions, at least, is "Yes."

S Yes. And I wonder if those questions ever will – they'll never be answered, will they?

E Well, not unless somebody writes their memoirs.

S Yes. So what happens now? I mean, we know, I guess we have an idea of what these soldiers would like to see happen. But what happens now with all of this?

- E Well, you know, all three officers that we heard from today have actually gone back on their own to the Krajina. And, of course, the people they were protecting have disappeared. They don't know how many of them are in refugee camps, how many of them are dead. And it's what happened to those people that continues to bother people like General Forand.
- F Those that are at the top always manage, you know, to get by. The politicians, the generals, like always. Who suffers? It's the civilian population. They're the one that all the time, you know, get shot at. You know, they get displaced, they lose all of their possession. And who gives a damn about it? Nobody gives a damn about it. Think about it. You know, eighty thousand that used to live in Sector South, there was two thousand left when I left in November of '95. I mean, where is their story? Where is the story of what happened in Sector West? Where is the story of the people that were, you know, in Sector North?