

the peacekeepers from Bosnia's three eastern enclaves:

We have little time ahead of us. We must take measures which allow us to limit the risks incurred by our forces.

Let us be pragmatic and above all honest, especially toward those whose security we hold in our hands: without lightning rods, stay out of the storm.^{317 318}

Janvier seemed not to be alone in his assessment, and, for all of the rhetorical threats in the UN resolutions and warnings, it seemed that all the knowledgeable authorities—the UN, the Western governments, even the Bosnian Serb commanders—understood that a massive NATO air campaign was simply out of the question. Everyone, it seems, but Lieutenant Colonel Karremans and the Bosnian Muslim leadership within the enclave—who, more than anyone else, needed to know that there was no airstrike in the cards that had been dealt them.

11 July: The Enclave Falls

The morning of 11 July dawned heavy with anticipation. The Dutch peacekeepers thought that NATO airstrikes might come as early as 0600. In their morning summary, the UN Military Observers reported that, "The situation this morning has been unusually, but creepily, calm and quiet . . . The usual hail of shells that have been greeting our mornings is surprisingly absent today. We view this as a positive change in the current circumstances, which undoubtedly have come from the NATO ultimatum . . ." ³¹⁹ Even the Muslims, traditionally skeptical of UN promises, were able to believe that NATO airpower was going to save them. After conferring with the civilian leaders of the enclave, acting 28th Division commander Becirovic had even pulled his troops back from the "zone of death" in which Karremans and he believed NATO warplanes were going to devastate the Serb forces.³²⁰ Throughout the enclave, expectations of the UN and NATO were high.

The drama of the NATO Close Air Support mission continued on its farcical way toward its unscripted, tragic conclusion. Still assuming that a NATO bombing package was being worked up, Dutchbat had faxed another formal request for Close Air Support at 2200 the previous night, followed by an updated target list dispatched to UN Sector Northeast in Tuzla at about 0500 that morning. At Tuzla as well as Srebrenica the UNPROFOR commands seemed confident that NATO air action would soon be on the way. After the fog lifted around 0800, the Dutch filed yet another formal air support request (the battalion's fourth) with the UN Sector Northeast headquarters.

The Muslim commander, Becirovic, had by now wholly entrusted the future of the enclave and his command to Lieutenant Colonel Karremans, the United Nations, and its NATO airpower. Overruling the advice of some of his staff, Becirovic gave strict instructions that the UN peacekeepers among them were not to be harmed, threatened, or taken hostage; that the weapons were not to be removed from the UN weapons collection point; and the 28th Division's own heavy weapons were not to fire for fear of undermining the enclave's safe area status.

Both Karremans and Becirovic were completely wrong, however, about the prospects for NATO air action. No planes were on the way; none had even been approved. While the Dutch on the ground believed that the severity of their situation and their repeated requests for help had already provided adequate justification for NATO Close Air Support, UNPROFOR's higher headquarters did not believe the Dutchbat had met the rigid criteria for CAS in self-defense, since no UN positions had yet come under direct Serb attack that morning. UNPROFOR had yet to share this reasoning and General Janvier's decision with the beleaguered force in Srebrenica.

After another hour had gone by without any sign of NATO warplanes, Dutchbat Deputy Commander Franken again radioed UN Sector Northeast in Tuzla

to ask what had happened. At this point, the saga of NATO air support crossed the line from the confused to the surreal. Speaking with the acting Chief of Air Operations in Tuzla, a Pakistani colonel, Franken learned that the battalion's request for air support had been denied because it had been submitted on the wrong form. The Dutch had filed a request for *air-strikes*, not *Close Air Support*. Before their request could be considered, they would have to resubmit the request using the proper Close Air Support form along with yet another updated target list.

To keep in touch with the situation, another scout force of two UN APCs had been sent southward to find the frontline using the now-familiar method of blundering into it. At the hairpin turn in the road less than a kilometer south of the town, the two YPRs discovered a Serb tank and several trucks. Turning around as fast as the vehicles would move, the UN APCs managed to flee the scene without being hit by Serb fire. At about 0930 the scouts reported that the Serbs had advanced to within a kilometer of the town. If the UN ultimatum had been intended to force the Serbs to withdraw to the original borders of the enclave, then the threat was clearly not producing the desired effect.³²¹

With the scout force having established beyond all doubt that the Serbs were indeed still violating the terms of the UN ultimatum, the Dutch refiled a Close Air Support request on the required form at about 0945. Then they resubmitted the request two more times, since the UN headquarters in Sarajevo objected to the target list they had attached. After a secure fax line broke and was repaired, an acceptable Close Air Support request form and target list could finally be passed on for consideration in Sarajevo.³²²

NATO warplanes had in fact been in an aerial parking orbit since 0600, and now they had run out of fuel and been ordered back to base. Two more hours would pass before they were refueled and ready to launch again.

The "correct" Dutch request for Close Air Support reached Janvier's desk. He was still not ready to give his approval, partly because UN reporting—incomplete, occasionally inaccurate, and nearly

always behind the events of the fast-breaking situation—had not persuaded him that Srebrenica was in imminent danger or that the Serbs necessarily even intended to capture the town.

At about the time the Dutch air support request reached Janvier, the Bosnian Serbs began attacking several of the UN OPs with artillery, mortars, and heavy machineguns. OPs Hotel (just east of Srebrenica) and Mike and November (both on the northern edge of the enclave) in particular came under fire. The Serbs may have been trying to divert attention to the north (they had attacked OP Mike before, perhaps as a distraction) as they prepared to launch their final assault on the town, or they may have been trying to tie down the UN peacekeepers in the OPs that had not been captured to keep the UN headquarters guessing. UN peacekeepers pinned down by fire could not effectively locate Serb heavy weapons or help NATO aircraft target them.

Janvier's reflections were interrupted when news of the attacks on OPs Mike and November arrived, but he continued to think for a few more minutes before consulting with UN Special Representative Akashi. Finally, just after noon, Janvier and Akashi approved the Close Air Support request. Shortly after Janvier signed the papers, NATO aircraft were leaving their runways in Italy, bound for Bosnia. It would take them almost two hours to get there.

At the same moment when the UN finally decided to send NATO aircraft to defend Srebrenica, the Bosnian Muslim leadership appears to have concluded that help would never come. In Srebrenica, acting commander Becirovic—with his enemy only hours away, no plan to cope, not enough fighting men, and entirely inadequate weapons—appealed to his higher headquarters in Tuzla for instructions. The ARBiH 2nd Corps was in no position to help Becirovic, however. The 2nd Corps had just exhausted itself in the failed and bloody effort to break the siege of Sarajevo, and it lacked the means to mount a relief attack toward Srebrenica—especially in the next couple of hours, during which time the enclave would surely fall. The 2nd Corps command had never felt able to get weapons or ammunition to the beleaguered and desperate

defenders, and it was even less able now. It could not even give Becerovic any real guidance on what he was supposed to do. The bleak reality of the 2nd Corps' inability to give any help to its doomed 28th Division was a bitter pill for the defenders of Srebrenica, and the taste would linger for years among the survivors, poisoning the past and the future with allegations of conspiracies, secret deals, and sellouts by Sarajevo.³²³

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While Becirovic and the 2nd Corps staff in Tuzla desperately discussed what to do about the Serbs' final push, the Bosnian Army's defense of Srebrenica was already beginning to unravel into a confused tangle that made the sequence of events difficult to reconstruct. At about 1300, when the VRS advance brought enemy troops into the immediate vicinity of the town, it appears that the thousands of refugees clustered in Srebrenica's center made a wholesale dash northward. The UN peacekeepers decided to retreat with them, trying to stay ahead of the advancing Serbs and between the VRS and the fleeing civilians. The retreat was given further impetus at 1340 when the UN compound took two direct hits from Bosnian Serb mortar rounds. As both the refugees and the UN fell back, the defense of the enclave's eastern boundary unhinged, and the ARBiH 283rd Brigade swung around to join the northward retreat of the 282nd Brigade. The stream of refugees had become a torrent. Soon as many as 25,000 Muslims were huddled around the UN compound at Potocari.

Of the 18 NATO aircraft that had assembled over the Adriatic Sea in preparation for making their way to Srebrenica, not all were capable of striking Serb ground targets. The downing of an American F-16 on 2 June had brought a tightening of NATO rules for combat operations over Bosnia. The so-called ground attack package thus had a substantial air defense component of two EF-111 Suppression of Enemy Air Defenses (SEAD) aircraft, two EA-6B electronic warfare aircraft, fighter escorts, two AWACS radar and airborne command and control aircraft, fighter escorts, and two tankers to keep the force in the air. This caravan would keep the ground attack planes much safer in hostile Serb airspace, but it also meant that only a handful—six, actually—of the 18 planes in the air were detailed to hit the Serbs on the ground.

Running somewhat behind their schedule, the NATO aircraft appeared in the skies above Srebrenica at about 1430. Serb soldiers from the 1st Zvornik Brigade and its Drina Wolves unit, the 10th Sabotage Detachment, the 2nd Romanija Brigade, and the 1st Birac Brigade had already entered the southern part of the town and were picking their way through its abandoned buildings. Guided by one of the four specially trained forward air controllers, two F-16s of the Royal Dutch Air Force swooped down to attack the Bosnian Serb vehicles advancing up the road just south of Srebrenica. The woman pilot of the first plane dropped a bomb on or near what looked like a tank. A few minutes later, the other Dutch warplane dropped its high-explosive bomb nearby, and that was it. Fully five days after the Dutch battalion's first request for Close Air Support and six to eight hours after the Dutchbat had expected a vast NATO air armada to create a "zone of death" obliterating all Serb heavy weapons in the area, two planes had dropped two bombs and departed.³²⁵

While the Dutch planes made their attack runs, two American F-16s looked for Serb targets south of Srebrenica. Visibility was poor, and they gave up after failing to locate anything. Two other American F-16s then took up the search, hunting for the Serb artillery pieces that had been targeting OPs Mike and November in the northwestern part of the enclave that morning. They, too, failed to find any suitable targets and took off after a Serb soldier loosed an antiaircraft missile from his shoulder-fired SA-7 launcher.

The actual damage inflicted by NATO's ground attack package is difficult to assess, but the first bomb probably at least damaged a Serb tank, and the second may have damaged some of the soft-skinned vehicles nearby. The practical results were even less impressive, especially to the Bosnian Serbs, whose damaged vehicles may not have been part of the advance attack wave. (They may have been parked south of the town because their occupants had dismounted and were already inside Srebrenica.) Militarily speaking, the practical effect of the NATO airstrikes was approximately zero.³²⁶

Having tried and failed to affect the Serb operation with their first aerial attack, the UNPROFOR commanders had to decide whether to launch another and perhaps larger air operation to make the point clearer; they might even hope find and destroy some Serb heavy weapons before nightfall made this too difficult. The decisionmaking process jumped a track only minutes later, however, when an important message from the Bosnian Serbs was relayed by radio through the Dutch battalion headquarters in Potocari. Briefly but very clearly, the VRS explained that, if the UN did not immediately put a stop to NATO air operations, all of the 30 Dutch prisoners—now hostages—in Serb custody would be killed. More immediately, Serb artillery pieces were zeroed in on the UN compound in Potocari, which had become the focus of throngs of Muslim refugees. If another airstrike was made, the VRS stated, the guns would open fire to slaughter peacekeepers and civilians alike. From the UN's standpoint, the choice was not a choice. The NATO warplanes were called off.

About an hour after the VRS threat to kill the hostages, Bosnian Serb Army troops strode into the abandoned UN compound at the extreme north end of Srebrenica. Between 1,000 to 1,500 Bosnian Serb troops had traversed and occupied the entire town in defiance of the pale blue flag with its one-world imprint.³²⁷ Not long past 1600 on 11 July 1995 the noble experiment of the UN's first guaranteed safe area had fallen.

The Serb operation and the UN responses had progressed with a rapid mechanical precision that had seemed to numb the participants to its implications. Now there was left a profound sense of shock and amazement in UNPROFOR, the United Nations, and much of the Western world. Stunned statesmen first had to grasp what had happened and then wonder what to do next. What the Serbs had been able to do seemed unreal, almost unimaginable, a bad dream played out in a distant land. The nightmare was just starting, however.

Chapter 84 Srebrenica: After the Battle

What would the Bosnian Serbs do with 40,000 Muslims?

—Rhetorical question by a senior UN official on 10 July 1995³²⁸

Clearly with respect to the protection of this particular eastern enclave, it has not been a good day.

—White House Spokesman Michael McCurry, 11 July 1995³²⁹

It doesn't take a rocket scientist to understand what is happening . . . The Serbs won a military victory and now they want to ethnically cleanse the territory they captured. The sad fact is that there isn't anything much we or anyone else can do about it.

—A UN official in Zagreb, 12 July 1995³³⁰

The Muslim enclaves in Bosnia are no longer viable and have to disappear. If not we will take them by force . . . What's happening is not ethnic cleansing, it's ethnic displacement—people who want to leave.

—Bosnian Serb President Radovan Karadzic, in an interview for El Pais³³¹

No one will do you any harm.

—Gen. Ratko Mladic, patting a Muslim boy on the cheek on Serb television³³²