

Operation Deliberate Force

BY WAYNE SHAW

Thirty years ago this month, over the skies of the former Yugoslavia, a coalition of NATO air forces were flying in Operation DELIBERATE FORCE (ODF) to prevent primarily Serbian-backed aircraft and their crews from furthering the “ethnic cleansing” going on below by various factions in the patchwork of newly independent republics. ODF started on the night of August 29–30, 1995, but most of it took place in September 1995, with most (but not all) of the land-based airpower launching from Aviano Air Base, Italy. There were also US Navy carrier-based aircraft (from USS *Theodore Roosevelt* and USS *America*) that contributed to ODF’s success. Also, there were aircraft from NATO nations France, Germany, Italy, NATO E-3A AWACS, the Netherlands, Spain, Turkey, United Kingdom (UK), as well as the US. We all flew over a new republic referred to as Bosnia-Herzegovina – or simply “BH” to those who were there.

ODF is worth remembering by AOC members because early on, the General/Flag officers involved decided, based on the robust air defenses of the Bosnian Serbian Army, that no aircraft should fly into BH without Suppression of Enemy Air Defenses (SEAD) support. Indeed, on Day One of ODF, a French Air Force Mirage 2000N K2 (call sign EBRO 33) was shot down by a Serb man-portable air defense system (MANPADS) missile, highlighting the sacrifices of the French in particular, and by extension, international partners, in this effort that was a NATO operation conducted in support of United Nations (UN) peacekeeping efforts on the ground centered on the Sarajevo Airport.

AOC’s international chapters can take pride in their country’s electromagnetic warfare contributions to ODF. From

the US Air Force, there were EF-111s, EC-130H Compass Calls, RC-135 Rivet Joints, and U-2Rs; US Navy aircraft included EA-6Bs and EP-3Es; from the UK, there were RAF Nimrod R1s; and from the French Air Force, their C-160NG Gabriels, as well as their ELINT DC-8. A harbinger of the future was also airborne in the skies over BH as the General Atomics MQ-1 Predator logged over 150 hours over BH. In fact, on September 5, 1995, the joint NATO and UN decision by ADM Leighton Smith (NATO CINCSOUTH) and Gen. Bernard Javier (UN Protection Force) to resume bombing (after an initial pause to give the Serbs a chance to show they were withdrawing their heavy weapons from the Sarajevo safe area), was based on video from the Predator showing that no movement was in fact occurring. This heralded a new aspect of warfare in which drones were starting to prove their value.

Thanks to Flag Officer insistence on EW/SEAD coverage any time there were manned aircraft in the skies over BH, EBRO 33 was the only aircraft shot down in all of ODF. A total of 60 High-speed Anti-Radiation Missiles (HARMs) were employed by NATO air forces: US Navy F/A-18s fired a total of 33 pre-emptive HARM shots (EA-6Bs, 10; F/A-18Cs, 2; F/A-18Ds, 4; F-16s with the HARM Targeting System (HTS), 9; and Spanish Air Force EF-18s, 2).¹ These reactive shots were only allowed if the aircraft were operating over BH or what was called the Croatian Restricted Zone with the other rules of engagement standard for that time (i.e., positive indication of a hostile act or dual correlation of hostile intent). This number of HARM shots, both pre-emptive and reactive, tended

to keep the number of surface-to-air missile (SAM) engagements with an active SAM radar to a minimum. It also caused the Bosnian Serb Army to move their lethal SA-6s around frequently. We never really knew where they were despite the best efforts of NATO intelligence professionals. This was a bit disconcerting for those of us flying over BH on jamming platforms!

The use of air power employing almost entirely precision-guided munitions – enabled by NATO employing their AEA and SEAD aircraft to synergistic effect – to enforce UN Security Council Resolutions was primarily about protecting the safe areas. It ended up coercing the Bosnian Serbs to seek a diplomatic solution.

As NATO air forces quickly worked their way down the ODF Target List, a “kabuki dance” went on between the diplomats and the flag officers as to keeping up the bombing as long as possible to coerce the Serbs to negotiate while at the same time quickly running out of targets. By November 1995, the Serb delegation was being welcomed at a banquet on the floor of the National Museum of the USAF, surrounded by examples of air power, and the Dayton Peace Accords were signed shortly thereafter.

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1. *Operation Deliberate Force: A Case Study in Effective Air Campaigning, Final Report of the Air University Balkans Air Campaign Study*, edited by Col Robert C. Owen, USAF, Air University Press, 2000, p. 266.